

Angel City Review



Foreword

The first line (and change) of the first poem of this issue reads “have you ever tried to yell at each other in front of the / ocean at night?”. The poem is wonderful (thank you, Mike), and you definitely should read the rest of it, but that opening has engraved itself onto my consciousness. More and more as of late, it feels as though we are all yelling – at each other, past each other, for each other – only for it to be lost in the noise. Many of us need to yell. It is our only chance at being heard, at making others aware of our existence. Many of us need to stop yelling, those of us who have had our voices amplified at the expense of others for far too long, those of us who are starting to panic because we can’t tell the difference between loss of privilege and real persecution.

I hope this issue finds you and yours well. We live in an age of relentless exploitation and daylight abductions, so I understand that this is a tall ask. But it is a sincere one. I’ve said before that the purpose of art is, at its most basic and vital, an exchange of perspective, the closest our species can come to the connection of consciousness. We here at Angel City will always believe in the value of literature, whether as a balm and example of humanity’s creative potential, as a vehicle for profound introspection, or as a marrow-deep call to action. In that spirit, this issue is meant as a reminder that such connections are still being made.

As you peruse the poems and stories here, take your time. Remember that each text is a communication to you from a real person, an artist who has taken on the insane task of trying to express their beautiful mind in the form of the written word. These pieces are each defiant, unique points of resistance against the tide of A.I. slop, each earnest songs of identity for a time when authenticity lies behind paywalls. The very fact that you have opened this issue in the first place says to me that you wish for a conversation with honest depth. Here, I believe you will find such a thing, as well as others like you.

And whether you are a curious reader or one of our brilliant contributors, we deeply appreciate you sharing your time and perspective with us. It is an honor and a joy to do this work, to share it with you all for free, and to know that there are already many fascinating submissions that have been sent in for our future issues.

From all of us: speak truth to power, love one another, and keep reading.

- John D Venegas

Featured Artist

Vega Vosbek



Artist bio and statement:

I am a jeweler, fashion designer/producer, community steward, arts educator, and lifelong organizer based on unceded Ohlone land in Oakland, California. I began creating adornments in 2017 as a means of self-expression/actualization. Since then, I have exhibited work in Oakland and NYC, stewarded collective arts spaces, and produced fashion shows and community events. I am currently teaching courses as the Jewelry Department Head at Studio One.

It is a deeply human experience to adorn our bodies. I believe in the power of this, especially as trans people whose bodies are constantly violated both physically and rhetorically. My work emerges from the in-between places we know so well. It's an act of love-making for my community and all those who experience the violence of destructive extraction. Sometimes it's utopianism. Sometimes it's camp. Always it's a product of the world.

Cover image: Tributary 1. Models: Rai Dang & Luz Barranco. Photographer Theo's Archives

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John Venegas: Prose Editor

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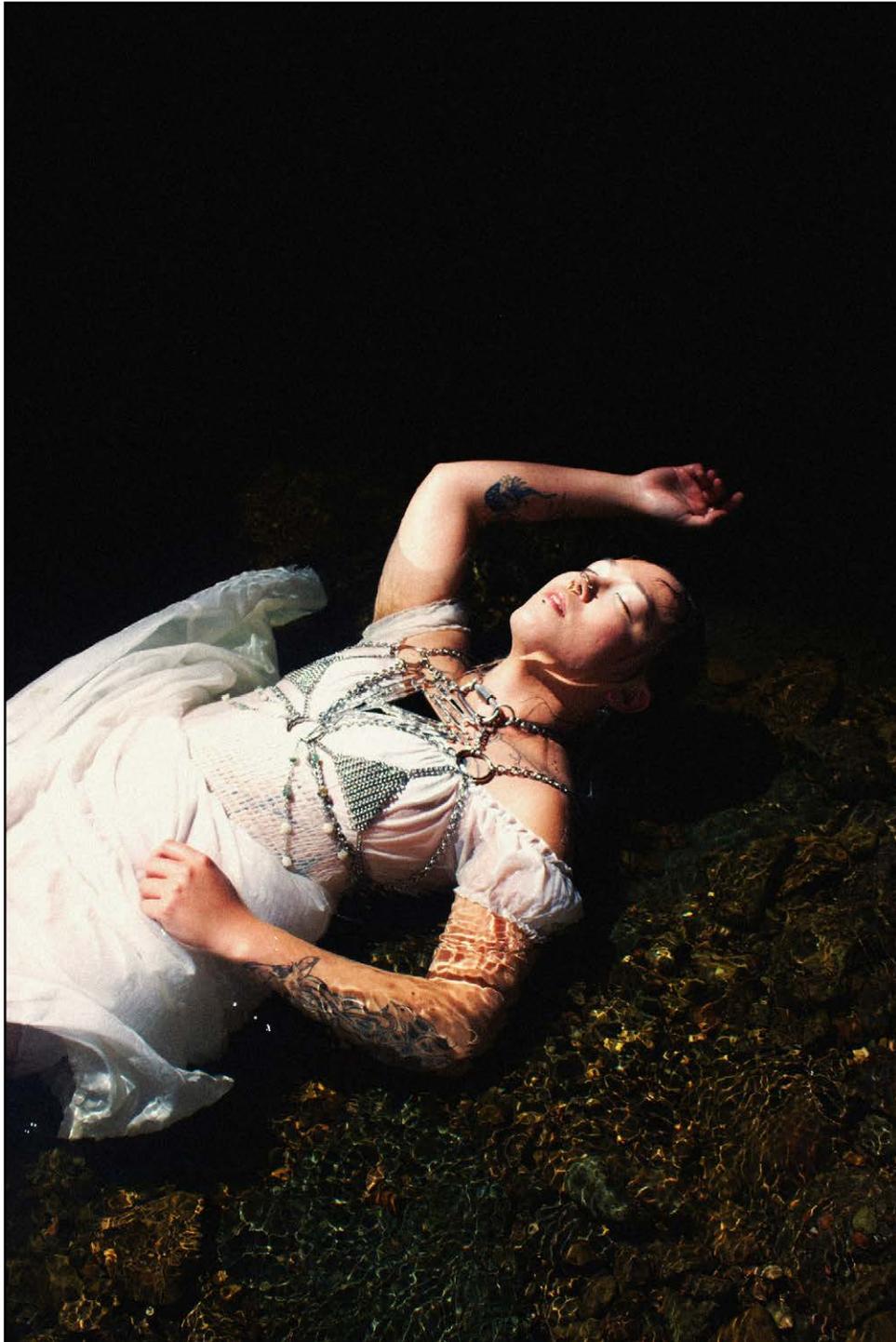
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Tributary 3

Model: Rai Dang

Photographer Theo's Archive

The Drowning Scene in the Long Goodbye (1973)

BY MIKE URQUIDEZ

have you ever tried to yell at each other in front of the ocean at night? have you ever tried to yell at someone in the water with their arms down while the waves eat them? the dulcet lapping a sad-sad seeks for calm. for quiet. for peace. for status. is actually a roar. yeah no shit. malibu must've been something else back then. a place of both healing and euthanasia. but with more public access. we won't admit it. same way an early and silent arnold remains uncredited in his one shirtless scene. or the way that these LA noir movies are always a bit racist toward mexicans. i wonder if it's even my job to point this out. this late in the game. like a clever detective. like elliott's marlowe. except there's no real mystery. nothing to figure out except already known truths. worth no more than a visit to the HMO therapist for a survey and a copy of a copy of a worksheet. so watch a more recent film. better yet. a future one.

Ground Swell

BY MIKE URQUIDEZ

old water. pitcher pump. red rusty. hand powered. squealing hinge. decayed decor. ground well. non-existent. in this era. on this lawn. where town we live. near the fields. near the fruit. and it moved. migrated throughout our backyard. so moved.

call him kid anxious. of what. of use. of play. of pretend. of a 100-year near seized mechanical arm. thinking wherever placed. water exhumed. ghost roots. parched veins. squeezed and let. last droplets. from any parcel. but we must save. for the real drought. beyond tomorrow.

pitcher pump. too perfect. metaphor of. the past. this poem. better the invisible water. under in. over among. left longing. for every salty body. but hovers. in limbo. swollen. our penchant. to reserve. to hedge. against growing aridity. arriving to shrink the soft tissues. and leave us. like old salditos. on a stone table. next to an uncut. ripe lemon.

Strawberry Octopus

BY MIKE URQUIDEZ

young
i believed
the cellophane wrapped
winter fields of CA to be
shimmering lakes
stretched between
dirt frontage roads
and brush hills

so one day
i dived in

i used to imagine
under the surface
a seascape
where a strawberry octopus
and dedicated campesinos
nurtured the roots
settling in the coldest layer
of dusty water

instead i found:
frayed straw hats, floating
torn leather work gloves
two dozen or more
paisley bandanas
like paralyzed eels
slowly twisting
in the murky light

pickled soil runs aground
sweat and tears forging
these shallow trenches between rows

drip irrigation feeding
already saturated dirt
and it will still be

decades

Mike Urquidez is a poet, writer, and educator living in Northeast Los Angeles. He is a graduate of the creative writing program at San Francisco State University and former fiction editor of *Fourteen Hills: The SFSU Review*. Recent work has appeared in *Stick Figure Poetry*, *Moria*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on a full-length collection of poetry, as well as a mystery novel set in the San Fernando Valley.

Hey! You!

BY IRENE HERNANDEZ

Hey! Coyote trotting southward on Berkeley Avenue! Where you headed?

Oh, you don't feel like talking? I know you hear me.

I don't mean to be a pest, but this is not a safe place for you. At least, it's not a good time of day for creatures such as you, the pet-eaters, to be in plain sight.

Please don't get me wrong. It's not that I don't think you belong here. Because you do, certainly more than any of us humans, and maybe even more so than the peacocks; lords of the neighborhood though they are, they were brought here and were soon enough abandoned, maybe even by some of the same people who came here, admired your ancestors' humble domain, then smothered it with concrete.

Do you know that there is a school only two blocks east of us? Even those who'd know that you pose no threat would not welcome the sight of you, animals as we are, and therefore compelled to protect our newest members. So, don't go that way.

You understand.

If I may be honest with you, Coyote
My heart slipped into my throat a little to see you,
More than at the novelty of it, for sure.

When you crossed Rose Villa, I slowed to admire you and it was not embarrassing because to look at your colors, shapes so closely was like being visited by the timeless San Gabriels themselves.

You're meant to blend in with your environment, aren't you?
I wonder if it's frustrating when you don't.
If it helps, the profit-forward house you just passed tries valiantly to blend in, but isn't pulling it off nearly as well as you.

I envy the "I'm not thrilled I'm here, either" angle of your satellite ears. You are giving "ope, just passing through; don't mind me, but don't try me" energy; highly relatable, very impressive.

There is nothing to make me believe this, but I imagine that the movement of your days is governed by the path of the sun; as you cross Oakdale and continue south, paw prints appear on a map in my mind, Indiana Jones-style, as you eventually head west, then northward and on to your secret home, perhaps in the canyon, where I hope we will never reach you.

Irene Hernandez is a poet, screenwriter, and novelist. The first in her family to attend college, she holds Bachelor's degrees in American Studies and English, as well as a Masters in writing from the University of Southern California. Irene is a work-from-home mom in Pasadena, California, where she lives with her wife and daughter.

Adonis Blue

BY KIMMY CHANG

*“And Tamar put ashes on her head...
and went on crying”
—Samuel 2*

In the six-mat tatami room
where the old dog and gray kitten
are sleeping,

Pa sits on a worn cushion,
a table napkin elaborately draped
around his neck.

I sit beside him,
whisk matcha in the *chawan*,
pour us tiny cups.

We avoid each other’s gaze,
stumble through small talk,
try not to mention Ma.

“Caffeine always makes me sleepy.
Is it the same for you?”
“Yes—” But as I answer,

I notice it: along the arc
of Pa’s neck
something shaped

like a blue butterfly.
but isn’t—bites
that my husband calls *love bugs*.
My breath catches

as Pa catches me noticing.
He clumsily adjusts his napkin,

I pretend I didn't see.
“—I don't understand how people drink coffee.
But I'm glad we don't, with the way tariffs are!”

I try to rescue the conversation ,
but it fizzles,
and my anxiety builds.

Pa's phone rings.
He says it's important,
walk-runs into the hall.

I sit alone,
eyes stinging.
He says it's work-related—

“runaway processes”
he needs to fix on-call.
He exits,

cutting another tea short.
Alone, thinking of Ma,
all the laughter only

one year past,
I walk to the altar,
light an incense stick,

watch the ashes curl,
smoke twisting upward
like a butterfly;

and in the quiet, I cry—
softly, silently,
Adonis-blue.

roots and petals

BY KIMMY CHANG

for cutie

root-bound, i yield to wind—
cradling mahogany beneath
an oak, ablaze in ochre.

i remember the bluebonnet festival:
toes brushing blossoms,
tiny paws thrumming,
camera click-clacking.

first christmas—
pine needles snarled in my hair,
tinsel glittering the carpet.

then: tumbling free—
a pink-knit bundle,
fox-tail fluffed,
yips echoing.

“cutie!” i blurt,
when ma asks her name.
“like baby oranges,” she smiles.

now, whispering again—
“cutie”—
into a too-small box.

air siphons.
my heart splits—
blue licking orange leaves.

i whisper three lines:

roots and petals
her paw prints
starlight.

Where the Bluebonnets Sing

BY KIMMY CHANG

It feels wrong
to call my dog kin,
yet I say it anyway,
letting the words rasp my tongue
while wind lifts sand burrs
from field thistles.

Kneeling, I pick one
from a frayed shoelace
as yesterday returns:

What about her pink sweater?

Fold it, keep its warmth.

Her bed warmer?

Yes, its scent is still breathing.

The mangled carrot toy?

It still squeaks—and was her favorite.

& I remember her
curled in a drift of
bluebonnets;
the air stirring petals
one settling on her lopsided,
dry tongue.

& spring lifting its voice,
praising this small blossom
with open palms of wind
as I tuck her ashes

beneath that trembling choir,
where bluebonnets sing.

Kimmy Chang is a Pushcart-nominated writer. Her poetry has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *trampset*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *ONE ART*, and more. She lives in McKinney, TX with her husband and works as a Computer Vision Engineer.



Tributary 2

Model: Luz Barranco

Photographer Theo's Archive

Chicago to LA to Chicago

BY ROCIO FRANCO

A flight attendant on break next to me
eats a sandwich smeared with cream cheese.
She watches *Everything Everywhere All At Once*
on her iPad, and I wonder how it is to bounce from city to city.

How it all must be a thrill at first—perhaps
Then it becomes routine, becomes work.

But as travelers, we're eager for the plane to touch down.
So we can shoot over stars etched into floors.
So we can stuff palm trees in our suitcases; to make
it through snow and seasonal depression when they sweep in.

Graffiti scrawled on walls and chipped bars
on windows remind us of the heat back home.
Walk into a bookstore on Larchmont Blvd,
and even on vacation, we recognize gentrification.
But it doesn't stop me from searching for
my favorite poets. Still smitten by their language
and line breaks, even if they sit on my shelves in Chicago.

In a bright-blue bakery, sun-kissed faces blur
into sparkle-dusted sand and the overlap chatter
become ocean waves. I cradle a chocolate croissant
in my hands. My first love sits across from me, enjoying
the biggest everything bagel I've ever seen.
And it's funny and ironic and funny again.
He who has been everything to me
in every poor, sad, sick moment is here eating
an everything bagel, and it's not one
of those poor, sad, sick moments.

I bask in how we have endured and integrated

all the moments that have almost killed us
into this ridiculously lucky moment of bliss.
How ridiculously lucky I feel to float this lightly
in a world cruel like concrete in hundred-degree heat.
How it all feels ridiculously tender. My heart

can't hold it. Never gets stale when it happens.
Never less surprising when I encounter it. How I fall
in love again over hibiscus coconut ice cream, discussion
of my favorite films, and raccoons clinging to backs.

It never gets old this ridiculous splendor.
My heart brimming with centos, soundtracks
belting out *no one is going to fool around with us*
Driving up and up narrow streets, amazed at how
different the descent is. How two truths can hold
the same weight. How two places can be adored.

The last stanza contains a line from "Angeles" by Elliott Smith

El Vaquero

BY ROCIO FRANCO

Your face was a gentle haze
as we walked home from school.
All I recall
is your cowboy hat outlined in the sky
and your sturdy hand against mine.

But then came the bleeding, the coma,
and the stillness
of your left side.
Distressed by genetics,
you were frustrated by your fate.

You were unbreakable until— you saw yourself
broken. Most days, you lamented
your heaviness,
but determination sometimes propelled you
into giant steps.

Once, you overturned the table with— the hand
that safely cupped mine. Angry,
you wanted to run free as you did before
the rupture, but your arm and leg couldn't
time travel back to when—we ran so fast

I fell and scraped my knees, a shock
for my five-year-old body.
You picked me up effortlessly,
cradled me in your sturdy arms, and—I remember
your face for a few seconds, but then vanishes.

All I can do is stay
suspended in the moments
where you seemed untouchable,

your limbs something else but phantoms—
a god in denim and boots.

Forty-Two

BY ROCIO FRANCO

forty species of butterflies
flutter in their greenhouse
unencumbered
they dart from bloom
to rotted fruit their wings
miniature engines
don't grow weary
from their work
the blue hue of a morpho
pries my attention away
from the others it descends
upon my breast
and opens its wings
in welcome i marvel
at how peaceful it rests
on the fabric of my blouse.
i have nothing to offer
except my wonder
another birthday arrives
and I fly further away
from what
shackles me
at forty-two i feel
untethered by the years
grounded by my beloveds
i remove myself
from the hands of time
and suffering

like the butterfly
i laid alone in my egg
and found sustenance

as a larva
emerging
from my chrysalis
ready to search
for warmth
and safety from predators
as each of my wings
unfolded
fields of milkweed waited

Rocío Franco is a Chicana poet born and raised in Chicago. She holds fellowships from The Watering Hole, Roots Wounds Words, and Periplus Collective. The following organizations have supported her work: the Frost Place, The Lighthouse Writers Workshop, VONA, and Tin House's Summer Workshop. She is a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. Her poems have appeared in *The Acentos Review*, *Exposition Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *L@tino Literatures Journal*, *AGNI*, *december magazine*, and others. Her debut chapbook, *Where the Monarchs Never Die*, won the 2025 Arcana Poetry Press Chapbook Contest. You can connect with her work on Instagram at @chio_la_chingona and on her website, rociofranco.com.

CIRCUMBINARY

BY KEN HAAS

What seems like long ago, the planet of me
had a singular sun that I rose and set with,
that ebbed to an umber of which I could feel
the heft but no longer see, the sky always late
to its own gloaming, until a far-off blaze,
drawn into the loss, became a second sun.
For a while, the wild stars, one spectral,
one manifest, measured each other and I circled
their circle, until we found useful distances,
the chaos of motions imagined a kind of future
and our eclipses cast more welcome shadows.
This trinity of orbits remains delicate though bound,
by inadmissible needs. And the planet dreams
of a concert beyond accommodation, a day
when the browned sun has burned moon gray,
collapsed to a celestial cinder whose story
grips like a ruin that once had no likeness
or peace, and on whose gifts the new
one and only sun bestows a lifelike face.

Ken Haas lives in San Francisco, where he works in healthcare. His first book, *Borrowed Light*, won the 2020 Red Mountain Press Discovery Award, as well as a 2021 prize from the National Federation of Press Women. Ken has been nominated for multiple Pushcart Prizes, has won the Betsy Colquitt Poetry Award, and serves on the Board of the Community of Writers.

(a+fugue)

BY COREY LA RUE

(a) note against (a) note

—

lone/long/house/stone/home/flower/sour

lone/long/house/hour/stone/flower/sour

hour/wait/gain/scent/gain

lone/long/house/hour/flower/stone/sour

taste/feel/touch/sweet/sweat/sour/hour

stone/sour/fugue/note/gain/scent/gain

lone/long/house/stone/far/way

home/lone/waits/gain

lone/long/note/sound/taste/sour/stone

scent/lone/fugue/gain/note

pain/gain/loss/note/gain/gainst/stone

wait/gain

gainst/wall/wait/stone/flower/sour/gain

scent/gain

lone/long/house/stone/sound/note/gain

lone/long/house/stone/sour/flower/hour

gainst/house/body/rests/gainst/wall

stone/waits

lone/long/house

stone/flower/sour

Corey La Rue is a Los Angeles painter based in East Hollywood. His current painting practice is engaged in a critical dialogue with colonial and pre-colonial histories pertaining to the Americas and, most specifically, to Southern California where he lives and works. The artist looks to painting's history and conception in order to evade inherent dichotomies that exist within painting. Corey is also a disabled artist, losing the function of his right arm and hand due to a near fatal motorcycle accident he endured in 2023. Corey is also a poet, focusing on poetry that leans into sound over meaning. Corey writes as though composing music, with an emphasis over the pronunciation of words versus their inherent meaning. Corey holds his BA from UC Davis in Philosophy, with an emphasis in the Philosophy of Language and independent studies in Art History/Critical Theory. Corey also has his MFA in Painting from Boston University, and his MPS in the Business of Art and Design from MICA.

The Mundanities

BY LAURA HOGENSEN

Spring catches me like an ambush
The trees are a riot of pink and green
I raise my head and straighten my shoulders and set my eyes forward like I'm facing down an enemy volley

Lately, I've been shrinking from punishment
Curling in upon myself
Kneeling in empty bathrooms, keening, with my face in my hands
Leaving salty puddles spattered on the floor

Grief is a season I've discovered
It's a place - Eliot's wasteland - unreal and underwater-silent

It's where I've made my home
A creature of hollow cheeks and ragged nails,
I tread trackless sands, black depths
A city of woe, of sparse winter light

My bed is narrow
My meals are meager, and the taste of ash fills my mouth

Yet the vernal call reaches me, buried as I am
The sunlight, dropping down like gold coins, glimmering in dark water
Above, the earth is verdant, stirring

One day, we'll sit in the soft sunshine and you'll ask me what I lost
I'll take your palm and put it to my chest
Covering up the hole that the spring breeze blows through

It was here, where your hand is now
I had it all, right here

Pygmalion Redux

BY LAURA HOGENSEN

I've memorized the line of your jaw, your neck, your shoulder
When you're turned away from me, gazing elsewhere
That sharp gradation, the jut of your clavicle, the severe planes of your face
In dim light, or in the TV's glow - modern phosphorescence

At rest, I loll and sprawl
Spilling across the blankets
My body slack and loose and pliable

You, upright, unsmiling
Not angry but remote

You possess the old beauty
Elemental and adamant and detached
The way that stars are - cold, distant, brilliant

Your face is familiar
I've seen its lines carved into a sculpture - centuries old
A family's household god, perhaps
Placed on an altar in a well-lit corner of the house, far away from the mess of life

Wet footprints on the floor in search of a towel, a flash of skin, a riotous body streaking by your
niche where you sit in aloof observation
Raucous dinners down the hall, wine stains on a white tablecloth, and bread torn from the loaf,
hands touching each other, and eyes glittering with drink and tears of laughter

Years pass and shadows lengthen and flesh loosens and you remain
An object of permanence and fealty
Demanding of worship yet shunning love

I want to take your face in my hands and turn it towards me
Place my flat palms on your sharp shoulders and smooth them down
Make you soften, make you fluid
Destroy the lines that require my reverence, and pull you down to me.

Laura Hogensen is a writer and pastry chef who lives in Los Angeles. Her work focuses on the ways that memory can shape who we are as individuals, lovers, and partners as well as how our personal narratives influence our interpretations of past, current, and future relationships.

DRIVE-BY

BY OSCAR VELAZQUEZ

i once saw
my homeboy spider
grow eight legs
& become a
spider

when shots rang out
he crawled
 up the concrete wall—
both the one in front of us
& in the abstract of
our juvenile lives

i recount that night in my mind
how we were caught
in the crossfire
between the moonlight
& the wrong
place & time

how in the aftermath
a man
was left
confined to die—
a bloody mess
beneath the
 spotlight
of a ghetto bird
circling the sky

spider must've had eight eyes—
how else
can you explain
the burnt-up holes
in our clothes
the twin
circular rips
in my 501 jeans

the void
at the shin of my pants

Lost Cause

BY OSCAR VELAZQUEZ

HEYYY
CHUYITOOO
JESUCRISTOOO
mr upstairs-en-los-cielitos maannn

last night i died
for the thousandth time
another after midnight suicide
still, i don't see ya
i'm listening
but i don't hear ya

la luz
la luz
donde está la luz?

i slipped into darkness
ain't no end when
dealin' in absence
ain't nothin' dullerrr
than living with no color
last week i traded places with my shadow
& today i'm
runnin' on fumes

like hubert selby jr
i keep sayin
tomorrow tomorrow
it'll be better tomorrow

well
tomorrow's today
&
yesterday never was!

they say people's pupils adjust to
low light
how 'bout—no light?
can't even catch a glance

at the triste moon

mr chuyito
please
tell me the truth...
is this cause too lost
even for saint jude?

mr chuyito
please
while i still believe...
do your thing
do what my mother says you can—

flick your switch
before i forget—

who
 i
 am.

Serendipity

BY OSCAR VELAZQUEZ

ever since
i first saw you—
before you even knew i existed—
i've had this story in my mind

it's like a painting come to life
a real van gogh
where you & i go
just a little
crazy

because
is there any other way
to fall in love?

in my tiny tale told by
this fool—
i pick you up at night
sometime after nine
when the introverted moon
shines its extroverted glow

we'll ride the train, the bus, the metro
we'll go anywhere
filled with people

we'll drink cheap liquor shots
& travel the city's underground spots
24-hour donut shops &
7-Elevens
insomniac heavens

we'll find a man with a guitar
& have him sing love songs with us
by the slurpee machine

we'll talk about all kinds of things

like how those tiny sparkles in the sky
can somehow make us dream

we'll buy five-dollar mad-dogger shades
& look up at the midnight moon &
name it—
Serendipity

what else can it be...
if out of 7 billion people in the world

you're
right here with me.

Oscar Velazquez is an Anaheim-based poet whose work draws inspiration from his lived experiences, his Mexican-American heritage, and his sharp observations of the world around him. His writing transforms adversity into art, blending raw honesty with lyrical depth and mucho corazón. He has performed at such notable venues as The Cheech Chicano Art Museum, the Boca de Oro Literary Festival, and the MUZEO Museum in Anaheim. His poems have been published by the City of Anaheim in *Anaheim Poetry Review*, a celebration of local voices. Through a voice that is both streetwise and soulful, Oscar speaks to struggle, survival, and the beauty found in unlikely places.



Crash

Model: Akiko Scott

Photographer: Beau Blue

Parcel

BY BART EDELMAN

Go tell the dread
There's no more room
For it here ever again.
We've had enough to pass
A few lifetimes, at least.
Yes, we've finally dismissed it,
Packed it in a carton so large,
We paid extra freight—
All too happy sending it
On its way to who knows where.
Surely, someone needs a crate
Stamped with *Breakable Sorrow*,
As its last known address.
Believe me, boxing it up
Took seven of us all night,
And well into the morning.
You should have heard the wails—
Well beyond normal lamentation.
But we were goal-oriented.
Ready to bid it adieu.
Shake off the demons.
Parcel out any remaining doubt.

Bart Edelman's poetry collections include *Crossing the Hackensack* (Prometheus Press), *Under Damaris' Dress* (Lightning Publications), *The Alphabet of Love* (Red Hen Press), *The Gentle Man* (Red Hen Press), *The Last Mojito* (Red Hen Press), *The Geographer's Wife* (Red Hen Press), *Whistling to Trick the Wind* (Meadowlark Press), and *This Body Is Never at Rest: New and Selected Poems 1993 – 2023* (Meadowlark Press). He has taught at Glendale College, where he edited *Eclipse*, a literary journal, and, most recently, in the MFA program at Antioch University, Los Angeles. His work has been widely anthologized in textbooks published by City Lights Books, Etruscan Press, Fountainhead Press, Harcourt Brace, Longman, McGraw-Hill, Prentice Hall, Simon & Schuster, Thomson/Heinle, the University of Iowa Press, Wadsworth, and others. He lives in Pasadena, California.

I Keep Adding Songs to New Playlists Even Though I Haven't Felt Anything in Months

BY JONATHAN HUMANOID

Every now and then my brain
decides that it cannot handle
everything that it's dealing with
and tries to turn itself off
then back on again.

So I wait
to reconnect
with myself.

I keep moving through the day like I am still a river.
Taking sips of myself from a cup. There is not enough of me.
Time is loud if I only listen to the moment.
I try to find the way this makes me feel
and the slosh of water against the side of
the brim resting on my lips does not
make the same roar that I am familiar with.

Time is noise. Like music is noise.
Writing is noise. Breathing is noise.
Emotions are an orchestra of random noises.
Quiet by themselves. But it becomes loud.
In the same way soft sounds are loud
when I'm in a large room with a small group
of strangers. I try to scream myself
into the moment, before they melodize themselves
into a dampened stillness.

I am disconnected from everything
But I make playlists with songs that no longer
flood my body with an abundance of existence.

I add songs that are still what they have always been.
I add the songs that normally make cry.
I add laughter from the last conversation I will
ever have with someone. It fills the room
like a cymbal struck at the wrong moment.

I add who I used to be. I add new songs
that are nonsense right now in their unfamiliarity.

Time is loud if I only listen to the way it skips
until it gets stuck in something distorted.

I add the songs that remind me of myself.
The one I played on repeat until it didn't matter
that it was in a language I don't understand,
until it only made sense to tattoo its lyrics
on my wrist when I wanted to keep the music in me.

It is just a song now.

Every time it comes on repeat
I hold my breath

and try to find my heartbeat in it.

Last Call

BY JONATHAN HUMANOID

Dionysus shields his eyes with a hand. Stretched out towards the sun. Blinks. Face contorted in confusion. Wonders if this is what mortals call a hangover. Head throbbing. Stares through open fingers at a world that is less recognizable to him now more chaotic than ever. More violent than hedonistic. Wonders when mortals started seeking pleasure in emptying each other...or themselves of blood. Started drinking to survive. Wonders when mortals started calling themselves gods. Not one being connected. Human. How does a toast at night become burnt bread for those starving? Not celebratory. Salud. Empty blessings. Mourning in their cheers. Tears in their, "What does tomorrow bring?"

Dionysus stares through open fingers. Skull splitting open. Stares until the space between his fingers are hands on a clock. So many hands and how can he keep track of time this way. Time he figures, is not an illusion. Time is an angry god, and he is sure he has pissed it off. And, as if on cue, Zeus descends from Mount Olympus in mortal form or as a goat, maybe, this detail is less important.

"Mere mortal," Zeus accuses, "you are a drunkard without my blood." Dionysus squints through the open spaces between his fingers. The world, a skewed reality. He tries to lower his hand, tries to see reality, tries to be anything other than survival, and cheer, salutations, and warmth.

I am sitting in a chair at a family gathering, having just woken up from a nap. My brother, surprised that he has stumbled into this poem, all allegorical, late to the party, asks me how many drinks I have had. Asks me why I am drinking, and I do not bring up his past. Asks if I have been drinking alone or with friends. Does not know any of my friends or their names. Says he didn't realize my depression was this bad, and I wonder how seldomly we speak,

that he must ask
if I'm okay.

I shield my eyes with a hand, stretched out towards him and I wonder if he sees the flesh and broken glass of my wrist. Bottled emotions. Shattered bottle. He, perhaps thinking that there is more whiskey in my blood than blood, says, "no more drinks for you."

And my brother smiles. I stare between fingers, blinded. He promises to call. Promises to check up on me...a call I know not to wait on. The tick of time between each finger. My phone silent. He does not realize that this whole poem, this entire year, the clink of glass against my teeth, has all been about depression.

And when I say that I am doing my best, I mean that I am fighting,
to not pour everything in my veins into this empty glass,
in order to have one last drink.

We both mean very different things when we say
Last call!
And I am trying to avoid them both.

Jonathan Humanoid (he/they) writes poems and is constantly confused. He would like to believe that the writing poetry thing helps with the being confused, but there's no evidence to support this. He writes in the hopes that others will feel less alone by reading his work as he feels less alone by sharing it. Jonathan has had poems in *Freeze Ray*, *Fight Evil With Poetry*' first anthology, and *Shit Men Say To Me! An Anthology Challenging Toxic Masculinity*. He likes making old school DIY chapbooks and has put out three so far called: *I Was Never Going to be Normal*, *How to Accept That Your Words Are Going to Outlive You*, and the latest one *All the Light In Me*. His first official chapbook *This Is the Ship I Used to Be*, which explores his experiences with Borderline Personality Disorder, was released recently through Arroyo Secco Press. Jonathan is grateful to have so many people who love him. He is glad to finally be one.

To a Long-distance Lover

BY VANKSHITA MISHRA

Asymptotes are underpinned by tragedy—
the falling rock of Sisyphus.

Someone once used the phrase
'infinitely remote' and I think of it on days

we don't speak. Nothing punctures
the longing. What if I revelled in it?

I do not meet you on a point or line
but the plane, the expanse is ours to share.

We flip in our roles; sometimes you
the axis and I with my limbs outstretched

tumbling into the unknown,
almost forgetting I am anchored by you.

Intersections are tragic, points
of connection bound by time and space.

Instead, oh, to be by your side infinitely,
reaching

reaching

reaching

I found a memory

BY VANKSHITA MISHRA

trapped between my toes
in the shape of my grandmother's ring—

what is it made of?

i.

it sprouts like keratin all over
my limbs and ligaments

yet it's alive, bristling as
I touch it

it's perturbed like plastic;
stretched and stressed until it yields

beyond the point of recognition
so trawling through my

summers in Pune; our last conversation
deforms them as time wears on

I should tread gently
focussing first

on the smell of linseed
or the shape of your jawline

ii.

I see it mix with
muscle or melanin—

shrinking to nanoscopic lengths
twisting and pairing into helices

bursting out on my skin,
my reflexes; those reactions

to homelands/birth-lands,
lives led in other lands

and when I go into the ground it will mutate
expanding into layers pressed

preserved over aeons in mountains
monuments of bones, blood, mulch.

iii.

and sometimes it is a drug—
angel dust transporting me to

relations now departed,
selves now defunct,

yes, it's a permanent dust
coating everything you cannot touch

Vankshita Mishra is a filmmaker, writer & curator based in L.A. and London. After completing a bachelor's degree in Natural Sciences (Physics & Chemistry) at Durham University, she worked freelance in film and publishing well as briefly with Greenpeace UK. In 2022, Vankshita was selected for a Fulbright-BAFTA Scholarship to pursue an MFA in Film Production at the University of Southern California. While pursuing her Master's she has been awarded the BAFTA-Pigott Scholarship and an Alfred P. Sloan Writing Award.

Circles in a Circle, 1923 Zuihitsu

BY JOHN BRANTINGHAM

In the spring, the turtles wake up in ponds all over and I know one where they sun themselves on the banks and on logs, and they remind me of a Kandinsky painting, *Circles in a Circle*. Some swim under water and touch the surface and make circles inside a large rippling circle.

Then, I think of how Kandinsky lived through the First World War.

I think of canisters of mustard gas spreading out on a windless field in a circle. Dozens of them so if seen from above they would be circles in circles. Yellow-brown on a field of green, and I don't know if Kandinsky saw that, but I wonder if he heard about it and thought about it the way he thought about music. I wonder if he thought about turtles in the forests of New York waking in May and making their circles in circles.

I wonder if he thought about shrapnel patterns even though he never saw the battlefield.

I think about shrapnel patterns most days. I think about how they move in circles outward, during carpet bombing. I think about them because I am a father. I think about them because I am a husband. I think about them because I am a human, and those circles cut down children and fathers and mothers and people who are without families and people who are very young and people who are very old.

I think about Palestine.

Some days I think about nothing but Palestine.

Some days I think about nothing but the trenches in France and those circles and that footage you can watch on Youtube out the back of some plane flying low over the jungles of Vietnam and circles of fire follow it. Somehow in my head those two things are the same, Vietnam and France, and I guess Palestine is linked there in my head as well.

I don't think Kandinsky was thinking about any of this when he painted *Circles in a Circle*. Maybe, he wasn't.

I like to think about turtles .

John Brantingham is currently and always thinking about radical wonder. He is a New York State Council on the Arts Grant Recipient for 2024, and he was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been in hundreds of magazines and *The Best Small Fictions* 2016 and 2022. He has twenty-two books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

Bildungsroman

BY SAVANNAH MANHATTAN

Found a little golden hand on the floor

Worth 98, not even 100 dollars

19.40 a digit gripping my pinky finger

Am I new yet?

Young woman behind me, passionate and invective

Telling her friend that the guy who watches her at the gym

Is rich as fuck and has four dogs

Dogs are what make us all smile now

Dogs and white rooms with white chairs, blank books, and cream yellow cups

Am I new yet?

I'm tiptoeing that line, thin enough where corn silos penetrate the horizons in Dakota, I guess

How and where do I become new and not say

"It's always how things have been" since it's easy as watercolor to cascade

Into those people that go the same place every anniversary and eat the same things

That custom, obscene as Catullus

I've met shapes who shift or even double shift every week

like they wake up, shake their hypnagogic heads and spin a wheel

Clapping their hands with an imaginary studio audience and betting it all

those laughing, trucker hat khaki chameleons

"That's how he copes with his issues," another woman says in front of me this time

and it was in a movie theater, I guess

Am I new yet?

I could put a ring on every finger, find one every day and the only one that will feel true

is the one on my left ring finger

I'm sure if you switch my adjectives

my pronouns

my verbs

fill in the blanks

and worry about dogs and men, then I can be new to you
for all intents and purposes

Am I new yet?

Am I new yet?

Holy Monday Reflection

BY SAVANNAH MANHATTAN

To all gods, Gods, beings, the concerned:

With a liturgical sigh, I cry out
I cry out in lilts and airy syllables, sheer vowels devoid of their brother consonants
Untamed aahs and oohs escaping into the polluted sky of my city
Afraid of what gravity might do to them if they fell back
Into my mouth and mind

The wishes I've saved in a brass lamp
Now float above the US Bank Tower
Are gawked at in panorama
Shredded by helicopter blades
The demands of a girl in distress

I lay quiet and full of hope and sorrow
A mother of patina, embroidered roses
Of late Cretaceous carnivorous teeth found in a field museum
I lay with that bitter taste on the roof of my mouth, where the rain pounds and scampers
An arsenic jelly slathered around

And who do I cry out to if not to you
Who do I tell without being defensive or ruptured, worn or doomed and depraved
Can't be the legislature and can't be the coworkers
And the stuff I read delves me deeper, with everyone being kidnapped and taken from the streets
Taken from the news after a few weeks
and traded with the Himalayan traipsing of Dow Jones and NASDAQ
With Draft Day and box office projections

Hands only warm me so much
Gentle affirmations only embalm me for so long
Chatter chatter chatter only distracts until the sun is down and the store is closed
In deus ex machina I keep an upturned heart
The same dips of the gathering of roaring swine suspended by executive order

On Monday, that's today
I untie the silver bow and undo the cap
I rub the lamp and watch the vapors containing all the French press ghosts
All the disasters and recoveries, the 11:11s, the twice-a-month paychecks, the bloodwork, the

ever-dimming world swirl upward up up up
Excelsior and up
And I wait as I'm supposed to

I've wanted and wanted and wanted and now I've
Needed and needed and needed and now I
am and I am and I am
Holy Monday, and may you find me among the smog and stratosphere to be carried into your
deep, innumerable kingdoms and split the spoils among yourselves
The spoils fleeing from FDA regulation
I've no faith but in animals, vapor, acetaminophen, and the CDC
And perhaps I've no faith at all, vanished from the lamp

Savannah Manhattan is a trans/queer poet and author in Los Angeles. She has released two poetry collections worldwide and two short stories in national anthologies. Coffee and vinyl are her two greatest pleasures.



Shed Photographer Mikie Schulz

Clingy

BY ELENA WU

She says, you're a Scottish Fold
a long-haired fluffy one
frost white with ginger spots

tiptoeing
on the lavender lacy lily
embroidery on a big black piano

you want everything when you want it
you hate everything when you hate it
hiding softly in his hoodie in his closet

in bed scratching the baby blue
cotton sheet, demanding meows rise like soufflé
in the oven so high, only to collapse in a heartbreak

purrs rumble deep and sweet
dulce de leche
filling the void between two cookies

an unnecessary decadence
waiting without a sound
a cat does not know it is a cat

Elena Wu is an MFA candidate in Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her fiction and translation have appeared in *The Popular Review* at NYU Shanghai, and she is currently at work on a collection that explores diasporic grief and sensuality through inherited mythologies. Born in Nanjing, she is interested in writing that blurs the line between intimacy and invention.

Arriving, Again

BY CATHERINE FLETCHER

Here I am arriving, again. That old self-same feeling, arriving yet not arriving.

Another day thwarted by LA. The future stretches in front of me, but this vast terrain proves so uncooperative. Stop, slow, then go. Hours lost in sprawl. Above me: the whirr of a helicopter speeding by. I pass an exit, a green mileage sign, another exit, trying to shrink the distance. Moment by moment I'm getting there. Maybe. Wherever there is.

This nowhere neighborhood in the middle of somewhere is almost another city. Tidy rectangular blocks of slow streets. Dingbats' stucco facades like blank pages waiting for writing. The Westside lonely quiet—though droning from unseen garaged cars and drivers rises from the alleys. The pink raincoat lady with her butterfly sunglasses and stuffed shopping bags wanders from wall to wall to steps of an apartment's gated entry—does anyone else see her? I circle the block, the next block, two blocks over, trying to arrive. Beyond the rooftops, I glance at the expanse of rosy sky. Could I smell its sweetness if it were closer?

So comfortable, all this seems. Sun, sun, rain sometimes in winter. Year-round tropical flowers. Streets named for familiar Eastern places. Tiny strips of lawn like putting greens. But these sidewalks are not for walking—except for dogs. Palm trees offer little shade. The 7-Eleven keeps unpredictable hours. Smart & Final's cheery red sign sneaks its way into most—dammit, that was my spot! Maybe I should just drive to the bar and come back later.

I turn a corner. Keep going. My mood's not right this evening. Plus, I struggle through the city's lingua franca. I'll hear again how I am unlike myself yet so much like another's cousin or childhood neighbor—ha-ha, okay. Locals end sentences with the rising intonation of a question. Certainties become maybes, common confounding refusals to end possibility. The dialect of the maybe purveyors: someday seems ever-present—

The phone! Could be a gig from C's friend at Television City? Or that budget shoot in the Inland Empire? Gah, it's probably the clingy guy from the dry cleaners. How often I follow others' cues, seduced by the opportunity for opportunities. I stall and still. On many nights, I worry and weigh my own heart. But, okay, tomorrow's another gorgeous day. Am I time's fool, believing there is always a chance to... The pink raincoat lady—does she hide the rain in her pockets?

Slow, slow, this circling. My hamstring cramps. Is the Great American Road Trip ever over? Meanwhile, another chopper overhead—and close. I hope the LAPD's not searching for a suspect hiding in the alley dumpsters. Sky shifts into crepuscular indigo, contrasts with the Smart & Final sign. Do any of my choices seem smart or final?

These LA days of maybe. I could arrive at any moment. Keep it light, keep it breezy, keep the faith, keep it to myself—ha-ha. Okay?

Catherine Fletcher is a writer. Recent work has appeared in *Tears in the Fence*, *Under a Warm Green Linden*, *Naugatuck River Review*, and the concert series Concept Lab. She was a Creature Conserve Mentee (2022-23) and a Virginia Commission for the Arts Fellow (2022). She serves on the Poetry Society of Virginia's Literary Advisory Board and Seven Cities Writers Project's Board of Directors. A former resident of Los Angeles, she lives in Norfolk, Virginia.

The good morning after

BY MARGARET ELYSIA GARCIA

I
love a slow morning
after
when the body
sore from its mischief
still
smelling of its animal
speaks to the mind
over
the matter of morning
coffee and memories
play
like fantasies and still
finds the space sips again
craves
more

Recipes to Disappoint Smokey the Bear

BY MARGARET ELYSIA GARCIA

Put your mother's car in neutral and set it on fire;
Roll it down a dry canyon.

Add a train too fast around a bend. Brake hard and spark—

Next build your own campfire on the Pacific Crest Trail despite drought and 100 degree heat—

Then insist on 4th of July fireworks because burning things is patriotic.

Do no maintenance on your power infrastructure for years.

Do nothing when trees fall on your power lines.

Do a controlled burn on a windy day.

Be a playground for the rich.

Check in on the arsonists among you.

Kill off the porcupines.

Cut down all the old growth trees; leave thin match sticks at the ready.

Drive your hot truck on a sweltering day onto a dry parched grasses let it idle and ignite.

Flick a cigarette out the window

Repeat every summer

Every season grown longer

Only you can't prevent

Only you can't prevent

Only you can't prevent

forest fires

Margaret Elysia Garcia is the author of the poetry collection the *daughterland poems* (El Martillo Press, 2023), of the short story collection *Graft* (Tolsun Books, 2022), and the poetry chapbooks *Iconistas!*, *Burn Scars*, (Lit Kit Collective, 2025, 2022). She's the co-editor of the anthology *Red Flag Warning: Mutual Aid and Survival in California's Fire Country* (AK Press, 2025). Her second short story collection *Chicana Noir & Other Stories* will be published summer 2026 by El Martillo Press.

Burn

BY NIHAL PRASAD

It's always when you've got no other choice that a change finally offers itself to your hand.

It starts when you're on the way back home. It sucks because the walk used to be nice. It was brief and calm and it gave you time to clear your head. Each step peeled the day's burden off your shoulders like old bark. But that was back when you lived at the last place and you attacked every stretch of the grind with a sort of bruised hope. Before that hag deemed stability unworthy of her pride and the rent payments vanished and the notice came soon after.

Now what used to be a relaxing four-minute stroll turned into a whole damn 5k that cuts through bar-lined streets where the stench of cheap liquor clings to the air and drunk creeps spit lewd catcalls that make your skin crawl. You blast your playlist at max volume and keep walking, telling yourself that your sister's counting on you, that things have to get better.

It's been a year. And it feels like nothing's ever gonna change.

You hike through the sketchy neighborhoods where the windows are dressed in white sheets and the houses lean like they're tired of standing, where the paint flakes like dead skin and the gutters hang crooked like broken limbs. You pass the dimly lit alley corners where homeless addicts huddle like ghosts and the pawn shop where you once traded a shiny bracelet forgotten under table nine for like forty bucks.

Then you reach home. If one can even call that dysfunctional mess home. The front door lets out a loud creak that splits the silence like a warning shot and you wince because you were hoping the house would be asleep so you could slip inside like a shadow and curl up on your forty-dollar futon peacefully. But that'll never happen. Because sure enough when you walk in she's on the couch with her plug-slash-boyfriend, the shady nutcase who's unfortunately the reason y'all have this place after Dad quit on you. And though your bones ache with fatigue you brace yourself for the echoing fury of her words which sting worse than the reek of marijuana.

Well well. So honored you decided to grace us with your presence. Where've you been?

You drop your bag with a thud. Work. Like I told you. Like I always tell you.

It's almost midnight. Who said you could be out this late? It sure as hell wasn't me.

Her voice, all gravelly and slurred, made it clear she'd been hitting the plant for a good minute already. Something in you starts growling—maybe it's your anger that your sister's been alone in this trainwreck or your stomach from going without food the last seven hours.

I actually have a job, you hiss through clenched teeth. We can talk rules when you contribute with something other than a pity check or EBT.

She points a finger at you—shaky and thinned, like it couldn't decide whether to accuse you or collapse. Watch your tone, Ava. You think this is easy for me? That this is what I wanted? You don't know anything about what I've been through for this family.

Oh sure. I guess I missed the part where puffing weed and nodding off in front of Judge Judy became a sacrifice. God, I forgot just how delusional you are.

Suddenly he chimes in—hoodie on and eyes already half gone. You don't talk to your mother like that. She'll find a job and get clean. Just relax. She's the reason you guys have a roof over your head, anyway.

You scoff all bitter and dry as your cooped-up feelings from the last couple years begin to fissure through the facade of practiced indifference. Yeah, right. And maybe next week she'll win the lottery and act like a real parent. Shut the hell up, Larry. You're half the reason my life is so screwed when you keep feeding her poison like a degen-

erate.

Larry promptly shuts up.

And you, you declare ominously, refocusing on your main target. Don't stand there like some divine prophet. You treat us like pawns to max out your unemployment but you refuse to pay rent or raise us at all and then you drop everything for a hit like the junkie you'll always be. You're pathetic. I genuinely don't know why I put up with you anymore.

She turns red and screams about whatever but it dissolves into static. Your last sentence—you later realize those will be the final words you say to her for longer than you care to measure—plays on repeat in your head. You've had more arguments than there are cracks in the ceiling or stains in the carpet but this one feels different. This one feels like the last.

You're hit with a wave of finality, a sudden but vivid realization that you can't keep doing this every night. You can't let your mom torture you like this anymore. You would rather die than spend another day in this stupid house or this whole damn city. So without another word you storm into the mini-dollhouse-sized bedroom you share with Anneliese and lock the door.

Outside the yelling abruptly ceases. As if nothing happened. As if you never happened. The TV hums back to life louder than ever.

You kneel beside her, her small frame quivering as she sits towards the wall with her head buried in her arms. You gently tap her shoulder and she turns around to face you, her hazel irises all red and raw.

You hate seeing your sister like this—hate how it reminds you that you're one of the only people she's got, how her sobs leave the kind of scar that doesn't cover up with a Band-Aid.

Are you okay? she asks.

She's two years younger but remained untouched by the volatile turbulence of adolescence, gliding through her years with a grace so effortless it bordered on miraculous. She's so kindhearted you can hardly believe she came from the fiend you just fought, a woman more ghost than guardian and more chaos than caring.

Don't worry about me, sis. It's just how she is by now.

You reach out and wipe the tear-stained streaks from her face with the sleeves of your navy blue uniform. Listen. I know you won't be ready for this but we don't have another choice.

Her expression twists in confusion. What are you trying to do?

I need you to ask your boyfriend Cameron if you can stay at his place for a while.

She's been with the guy for like two years now and his family's had her over so often you know they won't hesitate to take her in. They like to joke that she's the daughter they never had and you can't help but feel like that's a little weird to say.

She asks, Why?

'Cause we're getting out of here. Both of us. And you need a safe place to stay.

A quiet so deep you can hear her heart beating. Are you sure about this? I'm scared.

Annie. Do you really want to stay here with them?

She loves your mother unconditionally, but through your eighteen years of life you haven't grown to share that same sentiment. And despite her affectionate nature she can't help but fervently shake her head.

Then it's our only option. You have to trust me. Please.

She takes a deep breath. Ok. I trust you.

Great. Text him now and start packing your bags.

What about you?

I said don't worry about me, you respond, tousling her golden locks, perhaps to calm her nerves or to signal

your affirmation.

It takes less than five minutes to gather your life into a mid-sized duffel and a couple plastic bags. You peek into the living room and as fate more favorable than fortune would have it your mom and Larry are sprawled across the couch, festered in the kind of stupor born from inhaling enough chemicals to deep-fry her last three neurons still clinging to consciousness.

On the count of three you throw open the front door and sprint down the streets until your legs ache and your stomach burns. Anneliese has Cameron track her location as you continue walking on the shaded sidewalk where the houses become unrecognizable and the trees obscure any semblance of reality. Eventually you drop onto a random roadside curb and bury your head in your hands, the weight of it all finally catching up to you. She gently sits beside you and you embrace her tightly.

The eerie stillness of the night creeps into your head like you're between the walls of some locked psych ward. The sky dark beyond darkness and the full moon piercing through the black like a needle through silk. Like the air lay in wait for a werewolf's howl to swell and rupture the earth. Your shoulders rise and fall dramatically with each stolen breath and your head pounds with a slow but assertive understanding that your life will never be the same after this day. That you've either saved your future or doomed it. That it's entirely possible your sister may never have a normal high school experience. But you can't think like that. Not now. Not when she's here, trembling against your side. You know that staying would've meant erasure and someday so will she. But for the next few minutes all you can do is hold her close and silently swear to her that she'll never face the dark alone again.

A pair of headlights sweep across the curb as the Beamer you recognize all too well hurries into a screeching halt ten feet away. With the engine still running Cameron hops out of the driver's seat and races over to your spot.

You guys alright? What's going on? Anneliese said she wanted to stay with me but she wouldn't say how long and that you guys were in a tight spot and—

You interrupt his panicked rambling, keeping your words quick and concise. Not right now, Cameron. She can tell you what went down later but for now I just need you to give her a place to stay for a while. You have to keep her safe. And don't let my mom try to take her away. Can you do that?

He stares at you with a mix of skepticism and worry. How long's a while?

Not sure yet.

Understandably, his expression says you're insane. At this point you barely even know what the hell you're doing, but you're convinced that by putting on a brave face and acting like you got it all figured out, the rest will fall into place.

And surprisingly enough he relents. Alright, we got a guest bedroom she can stay in. I'll also get her some extra clothes and whatever else she might need. What about you?

You notice that Annie's staring intently at you while you try to weasel out of answering the question because you know she'd freak if you confessed the truth. So you talk like how you'd tutor a friend or flirt with a guy: you roughly allude to the answer.

You say with borrowed confidence, I'm staying at a friend's house for a little.

Ok. That wasn't alluding. That was a bold-faced lie and they probably know it. But the last thing you want is someone stressing about your wellbeing when they're already occupied with their own stuff, so there's really no alternative.

You turn to your sister and give her the strongest hug you can possibly muster but it doesn't seem to quell the silver sorrow welling at her lashes.

You whisper, Don't worry. We're safe now. We're not going back there again.

Her voice quivers as she holds onto your arm like the edge of a cliff, her fingers palpitating with desperation. I don't want you to go. Please. I don't have anyone else.

You fight the burn behind your eyes, trying to swallow the lump in your throat. If you break, your reliability does too. You need to be strong for her and crying defeats that purpose.

This is how it has to be, Annie. The world never liked us but this is how we deal with it.

You pull back from the ever-tightening clutch and look her in the eyes.

But you won't be alone. Never again. I swear to you from the bottom of my heart.

She nods and manages a fragile smile even as the tears flow unchecked down her face and you worry that sometimes she doesn't think you care because you're always tough on her but you know you have to appear collected so she doesn't lose hope. But then, despite everything you promised yourself, a single teardrop ripples down your cheek and collects on the asphalt at your feet.

You give her one final squeeze, probably holding on longer than you should, and then nod to Cameron as you pull away. He takes her hand and guides her to the passenger side of his car, taking her bags and opening the door like it's their first date. And despite your inevitable skepticism, that kinda thing gives you the momentary assurance that maybe, just maybe, she'll be fine after all.

But you still can't help but pull out your phone and text him: if she ever feels unsafe ill find u and make u regret it. Just for kicks.

Annie puts her hand against the window, unflinching even as the car begins to roll down the block and out of sight. You manage a weak hand raise in return, but by that point, they're already gone.

Now the hard part really begins.

Time begins to move a little faster around you as you sprint down to the nearest road and wait on the sidewalk for a car that doesn't give you serial killer vibes. After like five minutes a Lexus SUV—good enough?²—passes by and you flag it down. The driver hops out, a middle-aged black lady, and after conjuring up a couple tears and some sob story about escaping an abusive boyfriend you've persuaded her to drive you to the airport.

Your soul begins to peel away from its physical body. Flying, almost, weightless and untethered as it breaks free from the bondage of your old life and soars through time and space.

You torch a painful chunk of your emergency savings on a red-eye to LA, the numbers at the terminal blinking back at you like a dare. But you just need distance—miles, cities, even states if your wallet allows it. Anything to put between you and the life that threatened to swallow you whole.

You sleep the night away on the airport floor, the terrazzo cold against your skin. Insects birthed from the recycled air and fluorescent lights gather around you but you don't stir. You're already elsewhere—up in the sky, drifting through the stars, clutching onto a sensation previously untouched. You don't know what this feeling is but it is exhilarating.

Watching through the airplane windows, the old city below shrinks to a blur, a smear of light and memory, and it feels like you're watching your old self dissolve with it. The engines hum a steady lullaby and time forgets how to move. Five and a half hours goes by like a few minutes as you breeze through the clouds and the sun.

The sudden landing catches you off guard, a loud and surprised yelp escapes you before you can swallow it. The dirty looks from nearby passengers will imprint a new reflex of white-knuckling the armrests at every descent, a habit that will follow you long after you've convinced yourself you're past needing it. That was before every walk became a little more bearable, before you learned to embrace the night as much as the sun.

And as you step off the plane into a new world bathed in strange light and unfamiliar promise, the other part of you, the part that makes you you, which has been dancing above in a sort of existential ether all this time, finally invites itself back into your physical being again. And that is where your new chapter begins. Where you finally begin.

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Chimes

Photographer: Mikie Schulz

The Beaut is Dirtiful Down There

BY EMILY DRESSLER

I saw it happen, otherwise I wouldn't be telling you about it. Well, I saw what happened but I'm not sure I saw it actually happen. That doesn't make sense now, but maybe it will. Just hang on. We can figure it out together.

On Tuesday, my daughter's friend was over after school. The two of them had started playing dress up I guess. I came downstairs and her friend, Paisley, looked like ET from the back. Like when they put ET in a dress and wig as a disguise. She was wearing an old-timey looking dress that my daughter, Maxine, had found in the neighbor's clubhouse. It looked creepy, like something a haunted doll would wear. She had on a straw hat that our friend Jamie's dad had glued a bunch of feathers and shells to. They cascaded down like hair. It sounds like this getup is the story. It's not. I just wanted to tell you about it. Paisley and Max had practiced their stage makeup, so Paisley's face was done up like an old woman's with exaggerated wrinkles. Max looked mostly normal, except she was carrying a broom and wearing her white ballcap with the black netting in front.

They were going for a walk around the block, they told me. Paisley wanted to know if I thought she would scare people. No one lives here, I reminded them. We were in a pocket neighborhood by the ravine; our house was the last on the dead end. There weren't a lot of people, but it's not like we were totally isolated.

When they went outside, I heard Paisley yell, "Here we are, people!" I pictured her arms outstretched, greeting the world or at least our neighbor, Louie, if he was outside.

I heard someone say "Yep, there you are." He sounded jovial and a little surprised. I thought it was Justin, Polly's dad, down the street. He was always willing to go along with kids and their games. But when I looked outside the window by my desk upstairs, the one facing the street, I saw a thin guy in his 20s sauntering down the street. I'd never seen him before, I don't think. Every so often, we get people going in and out of the ravine, so I wasn't completely surprised to see someone. He had long dark hair. It was straight and didn't look great: no body to it, hardly any volume. It wouldn't have looked good short either. Sometimes people are stuck with awful hair. His face had a ferret kind of look that was noticeable, and not altogether unattractive. There was a little goatee but it was hard to tell if it was purposeful or if that was just where his hair grew. When I say he was thin, I mean he was the type of skinny guy I go for. Don't know why, but I've always liked them skinny with long, ropey muscles. Low-slung black jeans, a brown belt, a black crew neck sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up, and worn brown loafers. A red and white bandana tied around his neck. The mix of brown and black stuck in my head. He walked into the ravine at the end of the street, parting some branches on his way in. He disappeared into the tunnel of branches and leaves.

I didn't think much of it at the time. It wasn't an everyday occurrence but it wasn't

completely out of the ordinary. A couple years ago, we saw an old guy emerge out of the ravine into our side yard. The weird part about that guy was that he was missing an arm and carrying, somehow, a rake and a bicycle. He had offered to rake our yard, but I told him we liked the leaves. Last spring, I saw a beautiful Black woman coming out of the ravine by the road. She had long dreads, a flannel shirt, and that sloppy kind of look but with all her clothes fitting perfectly. If I dressed like that, I looked like a scarecrow. I asked her what she was up to down there, but I tried not to sound threatening or angry. Really, I wasn't, I was just curious. She said she and her boyfriend had been foraging for mushrooms down there and had found some turkey tail mushrooms and lion's mane. There was beautiful dirt down there, she told me. I explained how we dumped all our vegetable and fruit ends down there, the ground was probably teeming with growth. The weird part about her was when she said that maybe we could make something grow in the ravine together, like go in there and plant something together. Yeah, I had said, and then told her I had to go so I could drive to work. Usually, I'm the one to say the weird thing.

I'm getting to the thing that happened, don't worry.

When it was time to take Paisley home, I walked down the street looking for the two of them. They were likely in someone's backyard. We treated the other side of the street as public access. Across from us was Louie, and then Sharon but she was dead and no one had bought her house yet, and then next to Sharon was Justin and Alyssa. Next to them on the corner was another Sharon who was not dead. The stretch of back yards, and then beyond that, the woods and then the train tracks, was used by everyone. So I figured Max and Paisley were in one of the yards. I walked between Louie's and dead Sharon's house and shouted for them, reminding them that I needed to take Paisley home so Max and I could go pick up her glasses and then go to the grocery store before dinner.

The grocery store is where I saw the thing I've been getting to. Our cart had an odd smattering of stuff: a rotisserie chicken for dinner, some wet cat food, cat litter, a new cat toy, Dawn Power Wash, and some laundry detergent. I was pretty sure I was forgetting something. "Guess which one is for dinner," I said to Max when we were standing in line.

She rolled her eyes at me, which was fair. In front of us was this older dude. He was talking to the woman in front of him, and I couldn't tell if they were having a connection or what. They looked like they hadn't seen each other in a long time. He had long grayish-white hair. It looked straight and clean, and honestly, if I were his age and still had all that hair, I'd go for it even if the hair was just so-so. He had a little goatee, also white. He was tall and thin, black jeans, a black jean jacket overtop a long-sleeve black t-shirt, brown belt, and worn brown loafers. A ferret-type of look, noticeable and not unattractive. Sounds familiar, right? It was fucking weird. He didn't have a red and white bandana but a red ballcap with white lettering. You know the type. It disgusted me. It was also unexpected. He seemed cooler than that. I'm not saying he was a silver fox, not like George Clooney, Robert Redford, or that old dude in your undergraduate graphic design class. It's hard to explain; it's like there was something missing. A lot of good looking people have that, though, something missing behind their eyes. He was a handsome man except for that damned hat. And I shit you not, he looked just like the thin young

guy I had seen disappearing into the ravine earlier. It's like I was looking at that young guy who had sauntered down my street and into the ravine, but with white hair and stage makeup so good you couldn't even tell it was makeup.

Max was purposefully being a pill, asking me for everything in line and coming up with a crazy reason for why she needed each thing. Bubble gum for her lizard breath, a 20 oz. Coke with Tyler on the bottle so she could give it to Jackson, a book of crosswords for her brain workout, a lighter for her arson. I kept saying no like she knew I would. When the guy turned to us, he smiled and said "Hey, there you have it, kid," and then he winked. She leaned into me, and let me tell you that Max is 11 and her days of publicly touching me are nearly at an end. But when this guy spoke, she leaned into me and wanted me there. I positioned her behind me and said hi to the guy. My shopping cart was in front of me. He had emptied his cart onto the conveyor belt already: lots of that fancy yogurt brand with the cream top, four boxes of tissues, and that was it.

He said Max would be prettier if she smiled. In response, Max pushed her nose up with her middle finger and gave him an absurd smile. "Guess not," I said, "But thanks for the advice, mister."

He looked surprised, like he was the first person who had ever thought a smile was beautiful and it was his job to tell us about it. It was his turn to pay, and I kept looking at his skinny legs. I figured, if I had to, I could take him. He had a bunch of bills in his wallet. They were crisp 20s but the older design.

Before he left, he shrugged at me and said "You never know how things are going to turn out until you do."

I didn't know what that meant. I shrugged it off and told Max I wanted to go home and tear into that chicken. She said maybe we could just eat the cat food instead.

Later that night, after dinner, homework, dishes, and everything else we tried to fit into a day, I was sitting outside on the patio with Nathan. I had told him about the young guy in the street and the old guy at the grocery store but I wasn't trying to connect the dots for him or figure out what it meant. I didn't know what it meant. Our new cat, Baby Boy, liked to sit outside with us. Baby Boy was adventurous, and I had worried about him at first, so close to the ravine and all that possibility. He was good outside, just skirting around the ravine but not going down in it.

He was nosing around a pile of leaves and sticks in the backyard. I called for him because I didn't want him any farther away. He looked up at me, then he looked down and started wiggling his butt the way he did when he was about to pounce on one of his toys.

I guess it's obvious by now that I don't actually know what happened or if anything happened at all. I'm not saying that people walk into the ravine by my house and come out as a different version of themselves. I'm also not saying that's outside the realm of possibility.

But what I do know is that the ground beneath us is teeming with the life of it all. The dirt is beautiful down there, and if you say it enough times, it starts to sound like nonsense. The beaut is dirtiful down there but you don't really know that until you do. The beaut is dirtiful down there. It's better this way.

Emily Dressler holds an MFA from the NEOMFA in Ohio. She works as a proofreader at a global advertising agency. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Okay Donkey*, and her flash fiction has recently appeared in or is forthcoming in *Villain Era Lit* and *The Citron Review*.

His Great Escape

BY IAN C. SMITH

Dusk, fully dressed, packed, lit only by distant neon pulsing weakly, he slept knowing they would come, his thoughts fatalistic before succumbing briefly to a nap. Come nightfall, alert again, he would read but couldn't risk the bare light bulb. As a child he read, lamplit, a guilty secret in his neighbourhood. Reasoning that death awaits us all he listened stoically but with underlying sadness, tuned in to invasive sounds, anything furtive. Hunted, a rat, circumstance, the wrong people, wrong choices, had led to his spiral. Memories of books, and a girl's doona-shrouded body warmth, her laughter, comforted. A dog whimpered somewhere. Down that crack in the black city where he holed up addicts dreamt their homeless shelter dreams, hope rancid with despair.

Stubbing and saving a last cigarette, he went over his drastic escape plan for the final time. Out of options, good fortune drained like blood from bullet holes, he would blend with shadows, wraithlike. Beyond the window that dog cried again, then a close sound, muffled, alien, outside his blocked door, prompted his egress. His stuffed backpack including a tiny tent dropped with a soft thud. The sloped sill reached a drainpipe where grout-crumbled bricks afforded edgy hand and foot holds if he didn't look down. Down, his recent life direction, was another challenge to tackle, but his imagination, always overarching, spurred him. Inching ever lower he figured he could slide, run or hide, then vanish.

Familiarising a new name he yearned to forge south where they once walked and swam in a sheltered cove. Avoiding the peril of his known habitats, even fleeting ones, he resisted contact endangering her via her phone, life's delicate thread, though buoyed by risk, too precious. Images swelling his heart, that beach laid out like a welcome, gently bobbing boats, water view accommodation, and bikinis decorating suntans, tantalised. So he hitch-hiked in the opposite direction, eventually walking strategically unnoticed into Canada smoking during a heavy downpour of rain

He boarded ferries, slept fitfully on the sluiced deck, pack for a pillow, waking soaked again remembering snatches of a poem, *water, water, everywhere*, finally reaching a different coast, the foggy silence of the Labrador Straits where the great Gulf of St Lawrence narrowed before the Atlantic's roar. Picking up rough work he learned of frozen harbours used as runways for aircraft, tracks for skidoo races or hockey rinks where fishermen skated waiting for the stilled sea to thaw. He might have felt safer when enclosed by the cold but couldn't afford to wait it out when the casual work halted.

From there he backtracked via Newfoundland to transit the continent westward, crossing The Rockies, compiling written notes of what he saw and did like a cartographer, his mind's voice describing these to her. Hitching the province with an assortment of types a good way to find

occasional work, he accepted kindness but always warily. Arriving in Alaska, again entering a country undeclared, this time inside a towed trailer, he reached The Inside Passage where icebergs swam in ethereal light and whales sang their wise songs.

Loneliness accentuated by yet another ferry's mournful foghorn's lingering echo like a siren call, he decided it was time to end his distrust, those empty loner's evenings followed by troubled dreams while he could still enjoy rain on his face, the wild wind. Perhaps they might adopt a dog, he thought, wrinkle its ears if dreams came true. In his battered pack he had stowed a bonny blue ribbon for her hair. Her ringtone sounded intimate, those moments breathless. Then her voice, hushed, expectant

Ian C Smith's work has been widely published. He writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island, Tasmania.

The Book-Eater

BY LUCAS MURPHY

It eats three books a day. Sometimes four, if they are short. Other times, though, it will spend an entire shift eating a single book, if it is particularly dense. Those are the days he likes the least.

On other days, the normal ones, he likes to begin his day by reading the books he likes the most. It's easier that way. If he saved his favorites for last, he is not sure he would have the strength to finish. And if he is falling behind, he is happy to speed through the books he cares little for.

Of the books he loves; French novels in translation, historical fiction, books by lonely women, books by manic men, novels with many characters listed in an appendix, novels with only one character, novels about modernity, novels about antiquity, romances with sad endings, comedies with sad endings.

Of the books he doesn't care for (he doesn't think, at this point in history, it is worth it to *hate* a book): books on love, books on self-care, books with brightly illustrated covers, books written by celebrities, books from series with more than five entries, novels-in-stories, poetry by novelists, novels by poets, 'just-so' stories, collections of previously published essays, auto fiction.

It doesn't care what kind of book it eats. It eats them all the same.

It is tall and wide and black. It takes up nearly the entire room that it is housed in. It is made of a strangely luminescent material, sleek and starry. He has never been able to decipher what material it is. His best guess is some kind of aluminum. Or a new kind of plastic.

It makes no noise, except when he has finished reading it a novel and begins preparing the pages for digestion. Then, as its black maw opens, it emanates a soft *cha-chunk cha-chunk*. Like a gear grinding. Or teeth clacking. He has always felt that the noises sounded fake, as if they were played from a speaker somewhere deep inside it. He had begun to believe the noise was played only for his own sake, a reward for his effort, and that if he was not there it would operate in a sleek, perfect silence. When he nears the end of a novel, he often finds himself reading faster in anticipation of that soft *cha-chunk cha-chunk*.

It is housed in a small ancillary outpost to the main campus. Unlike the campus, the outpost has no guard, no walls, no parking lot, and no real gate. It is a simple dusty grey building under the highway. He has a keycard that opens a door that leads directly onto its room. There are other doors, but his keycard opens none of them. The building is large enough for at least five or six rooms as large as his, but he has never seen anyone else arrive or leave. There is no break room. There are no halls.

The books are delivered each morning before his shift, in a neat pile on a small desk. The

desk is the only other furniture in the room, other than it. He had never seen the delivery person. He had once come to his shift an hour early and watched from the other side of the street. He had seen no one arrive. When he had walked inside, the books were waiting for him.

He often wondered who chose the books he read. He had once catalogued each title, in what order they arrived and how many each day. He had tried to decipher any pattern to the genres, authors, length of book. After a few months, he gave up. He was sure there had to be a pattern, if one looked hard enough. There always was.

He was happy for the work. He had worked at the corporation for nearly eight years, the last three as a reader. Before that, he had worked at the campus, in deconstruction. His job had been to catalogue the corporation's new acquisitions, make lists of new employees, properties and inventory, and compare those to existing employees, properties and inventory, looking for redundancies. He had not particularly liked his job, but he had liked being in an office with other people. They had automated his job and offered him this new position as a reward for his diligence. The others in his office had been let go.

He had read more books now than he had in all his life before, though he barely considered what he did reading. He sometimes found himself having read a whole book without taking in any plot or character and, if he tried to remember it hours or days later, could come up with nothing. After a while, he began to see the words on the page not as symbols but as actual concrete objects, each one a small spreading of ink on paper, a mixture of oil, tree, dye. And he, too, was just a transitional entity whose purpose was to transform one phase of matter to another, ink into sound, book into non-book.

He could take pleasure in being part of this transition, one part of a mysterious transmission, in the way the words flowed from his lips to the microphones attached to it- like ears but not ears- and the way the book would slowly slip from his hands into its opening- like a mouth but not a mouth.

He began to understand it and its way of seeing, he believed. At first it had felt so impossibly different, impossibly inhuman. But now, he saw its actions as much the same as his, choices chosen from a very large decision matrix. His life was just as predetermined as its; what he would eat for breakfast, what bus line he would take to work, what he would watch on television. Was there really much difference between himself and it? He could choose to leave, could choose to leap up and down or run from side to side, he could choose to scream. But he did not choose those things. And perhaps, he reasoned, it, too, could choose to scream or to leap up and down, and it, too, chose not to.

He wondered what it did with the books it ate. At first, he had believed that each book was being recorded, scanned and uploaded into some unknowably large database, a digitization of humanity's written record, the building of a new kind of library.

He had once read a story to it about a massive labyrinthine library, one that contained every book every written, every book that could ever be written, overwhelming and impossible

to navigate. He liked to picture this new library they might build together as a single room, not much larger than the one that housed it, with a single tablet that contained *everything*, every verse ever written and every verse that could ever be written, every story humanity had ever told of itself, and every story that humanity ever would tell, all in the palm of one's hands. A single, bite-sized home for humanity. That was the end goal, he had hoped. That was an end goal he could believe in.

Now he was less sure. As the books continued to arrive, as the words were spoken and then, with that *cha-chunk cha-chunk*, its maw opened and he deposited each one, he began to suspect that each time he read a book it was the last time anyone would ever read it and even if there was a digital imprint left somewhere in the corporation's databases, no one would ever access them again. Maybe *it itself* was the library of the future, a library without access, a library not made for us.

Once he started having these thoughts, he found it harder and harder to continue his work unperturbed. When he would be assigned a book he knew, something of import, he would stutter as he read, he would lose his place, he would find it difficult to get to the end.

He began staying up late at night, lying in bed, unable to sleep. Usually the moment he left the outpost any concerns from his day evaporated and he thought only of what meal he may make, what entertainment he may watch, and what comfort he may feel, back in his bed. Now, he found himself ruminating on the novels of the day, the characters no one would meet again, the words lost to time. He heard the *cha-chunk cha-chunk*, playing softly in his mind.

He began sleeping through his alarms, showing up late to work. There was no one to reprimand him, but he still felt guilty and worked hard to make up time. But that only meant the books and their words were gone even faster.

One day, after a particularly long night spent tossing and turning, he dozed off in the middle of his lunch break and awoke near the end of his shift in a panic, realizing he was nowhere near finished with the large tome of a novel he had been assigned. This had never happened before; he had always been able to finish his work, even if it meant working through lunch. He was not sure what to do; should he feed the book into it anyway? Should he leave it where he found it and hope the delivery person would know what to do? He could leave a note, explaining what happened and that he would work extra hard to finish it alongside his assigned workload the following day. In the end, he simply left the book on the desk, earmarked to the page he had gotten to.

The next morning, he arrived to the outpost thirty minutes early. He had woken up with an awful knot in his stomach. He waited outside, watching the door; no one came or went, just like always. His shift began and he hustled to the door.

The book was just as he had left it. The delivery person had not left any more books, nor seemingly had they touched anything at all. Perhaps he had worried for nothing. Perhaps he had spent years hustling through his workload, not realizing that he could take his time

and determine how long to spend on each book himself. Perhaps he was the most diligent and productive reader they had; maybe each delivery was meant to last days, *weeks*. Maybe he was their most prized employee.

He sat down and, for once, took his time reading. He let himself sit in the dramatic pauses, react to the shocking twists. He even started talking to it, telling it when a chapter was particularly moving or a scene particularly funny.

He finished the novel around lunchtime and fed the book into the machine. He was surprisingly moved when he heard the *cha-chunk cha-chunk* start again, and that black maw open up. The book slid in and, like always, was gone without another noise.

He still had hours before his shift was over. He thought about calling someone to ask for more work, but who would he call? There was no supervisor, no attendant, no department head or human resources. He spent an hour sitting patiently. For once, he had time to really take it in, without any pressure. He stood up, he walked towards it, he placed his hand against its cool skin. He knocked on its torso. There was no echo.

He left the room and walked around the outpost's perimeter. He watched the cars on the highway above. At five, he took the bus home. Who would know, except the delivery person, that he had spent his afternoon at ease? He should take this as a gift, a small vacation. Tomorrow, there would be more books and no one could claim he didn't take his job seriously.

He cooked a real meal for the first time in ages. He stopped at the grocery store near the bus stop, bought fresh produce, and made an old pasta recipe his mother had taught him. He went to bed early. He had no trouble sleeping.

The next morning, he arrived at the outpost right on time. He felt clearer than he had in years. Yes, there *was* worth to his work. He was reading *literature*, and it was his job to express that beauty. What an honor. What a wonderful, wonderful, honor.

He could not believe his eyes. He circled the room four times, checking every corner, before he accepted the truth. The delivery person had again left nothing. The desk was empty. He paced back and forth. Was this the punishment he had been waiting for?

He called the only number he could find, a number given to him by his department head in deconstruction before his reassignment. It was disconnected. He listened to the high-pitched clicking on the other end of the line for two minutes before hanging up.

After he calmed himself down, he tried to see it as a good thing, another day off. They would certainly send him work the following day. They would never fire him for a single infraction, especially one as minor as not finishing his allotted work on a single day, three years into his contract. It simply would not make good business sense. He was a highly productive reader; he must have been!

He sat at the desk for hours. He looked at every single object in the room in greater detail than ever before; there was a metal cup filled with pencils and pens and markers. He wondered what they were meant to write on. There was no paper provided. There was a sleek black folder; empty. There was a stapler and a three-hole punch. Neither had ever been used.

Around lunch time, he decided to leave. He would go home in protest and return the following day to a full stack of novels. But, the second he stepped outside, he couldn't bring himself to leave the premises. What if the delivery person arrived, unexpectedly, in the middle of the afternoon? What if it was simply a delay on their end, some strange error that had just so happened to coincide with his afternoon of dalliance?

So, he turned back around and stayed in the room. It was so quiet, without his reading or the *cha-chunk cha-chunk* of the machine's mouth. In the end, he sat at the desk, staring at the wall, until his shift was officially over.

That night, he couldn't sleep. He tried to remind himself of the relief he would feel the following morning, when he walked back into the outpost and found a stack of books waiting for him, the clerical error rectified.

There were no books. He again checked every corner, under the desk, under the chair. Now he was certain; this was no accident. They knew about his failings and had rescinded his job. It was only a matter of time before they called him and told him the unfortunate news. He had read his contract; he would only have a week before he would have to vacate his apartment as well.

He spent the day laying on the ground, drifting in and out of consciousness. Snippets of all the books he had ever read it began bubbling up in his mind. Surprisingly, many of them were from the lesser books, the ones he had despised. Scenes of young love in the halls of a boarding school, scenes of gunplay on the streets of Abu Dhabi, or Shanghai, or Turin. Self-indulgent monologues. Mantras of self-help. What he would have given for one self-help book!

The next day was Friday. He was sure that was when they would call. He arrived in the morning- again, no books had been left- and spent the day in a strangely elated mood. At least this excruciating wait would be over. He missed it, he realized, the reading. The way the pages felt as he flipped them, the satisfying snap as the book cover shut. More than anything, he missed that artificial *cha-chunk cha-chunk*.

No one called. He waited all afternoon, his phone laid out in front of him. At five, he went home and checked his bank account. They had deposited his stipend like always, not a cent deducted. He lay on the couch, unsure what to make of it. Perhaps this was a form of severance. They would give him another week. He had been a good employee, hadn't he?

He spent the weekend like he always did. He cleaned his apartment. He went grocery shopping. He took the bus downtown and ate a small pre-made salad in the park. He watched a film on Sunday night.

On Monday, he returned to work. There was, of course, nothing for him to read. He began to consider that perhaps his work had not faltered but *ended*. Surely, there had to be an end at some point. Maybe they had read everything there was to read. Maybe it needed nothing more from them. He now wished he had savored that final novel far longer. He could have spent days reading it. He could have read and reread it, enunciating every word.

He spent another week idling in its room. Then another. His paycheck arrived like always. Perhaps he truly had been forgotten? Or perhaps they would simply pay him to sit with it until some other corporation bought *this* corporation and turned the outpost into some other kind of office entirely.

He began to dream about it. In his dreams, he was reading books again, a new one every night, and each dream would end with him walking up to it and feeding it the novel, hearing its blissfully soft *cha-chunk cha-chunk* once more.

After one such dream, he had an idea. He took one of the pens, approached it, and held it out. To his shock, its mouth opened, waiting. He placed the pen inside and it closed its mouth, and there it was, the *cha-chunk cha-chunk*. He almost began to cry. In a frenzy, he started feeding everything into its mouth. Pens and pencils, even the metal cup itself. He ripped the folder in half and fed both ends to it. Each time, it responded with that *cha-chunk, cha-chunk*.

But no sooner had he begun than he ran out of objects to feed. He should have rationed it! If he only fed a single pen to its mouth every day, he could've made that last for weeks! But it didn't have to end here! The next day, he came back with a duffel bag, filled with everything disposable in his apartment. Into its maw, he fed reusable grocery bags, coffee filters, paper towels, a pair of old sandals, stained boxers, socks with holes in the heels, old notebooks from college, electricity and internet bills. He came back the next day and the next day, gleefully filling his bag with more and more of the detritus he called his life. Shirts he'd barely worn, cups and plates he never used. What did he need any of it for? When was the last time he'd used any of it? Then, one morning, he looked around his apartment, barren and desolate, and realized there nothing left he could feed it.

All he could do now was wait. He sat cross-legged on the ground and stared up at its dark, brooding body. What really did it *do* back there? Behind the gears and tubes and wires? He had never really considered it, had never really *had* to consider it. Where did they go, the books he fed? Perhaps there was a room with every book he had ever read, all lying in wait, waiting to be read again. He stood up and inched closer to it. What if it was not a mouth but a gateway, an entrance to the library he had always imagined he was creating.

He placed his hand against its smooth dark surface. It was warmer than he remembered; had it turned on? Was something operating, deep within its recesses? He felt each crevice, each crack. Who had built it, how long had it taken? Had they built it in this room or had they constructed the building around it? Had its job ended just like his? Were they the same: two obsolete creatures, left to their own devices? Did it wait for a new novel? Did it mourn, too?

A line from that final novel flashed into his head and, for reasons unclear to himself, he whispered it out loud. For a moment, nothing. Then, he felt it, a rumbling; the mouth was opening. He moved his head to look inside. He was closer than he had ever been. The mouth was deep and dark, its matte walls absorbing all light. But deep inside, beyond its lips, he saw something, a plate at the back of the throat made of a glittering material, like diamond, crystal or glass.

Was that where the books went? He brought his head closer. Where were the speakers, the ones that emitted that noise he so desperately wanted to hear? He felt he could almost see them, set back against the roof of the mouth. He brought out his phone, flashed its light inside, but the walls reflected nothing. He slipped his hand in, moving the light closer to that plate. It glittered; every color of the rainbow reflected back at him.

He set his elbows on the lips of its mouth. Tried to peer closer. What was the trigger, he wondered, for the noise to play? If a pen had triggered it, perhaps it was simply a button, or a sensor. Perhaps if he swiped his hand across it, it would make that *cha-chunk cha-chunk* again. He hauled himself up onto the lips. With another foot or two, he could reach the diamond and his questions would be answered.

He hoisted himself up so his body was almost entirely within it, only his feet dangling out. Perhaps the diamond plate was a door, that opened out into whatever lay beyond. He pulled himself in another foot and was finally able to grasp it. It was warm in his hand and throbbed with some unspoken and unseen knowledge. He wanted to sit there, holding it, letting that throbbing pulse through his body. He let his feet slip inside and pulled himself around the diamond. It was big enough to hold with both arms. The darkness around him became complete. The diamond's glittering disappeared. For a moment, he couldn't understand. But then he looked back and understood; the mouth had closed.

And once last time, he heard it. The *cha-chunk cha-chunk*.

And then, it would be heard no more.

Lucas Murphy was originally raised in an isolated cabin in the woods of Minnesota, and is now a Los Angeles based writer, filmmaker and editor. His writing has been published in *Currant Jam*, *Mosaic*, and *Mercer Street*, and is the co-founder of LA-based literary magazine *Cusper*. He premiered his debut short film at Raindance Film Festival in 2025. He is currently working on his first feature and first novel.



Shed 2

Model: Bakula Sheth

Photographer: Beau Blue