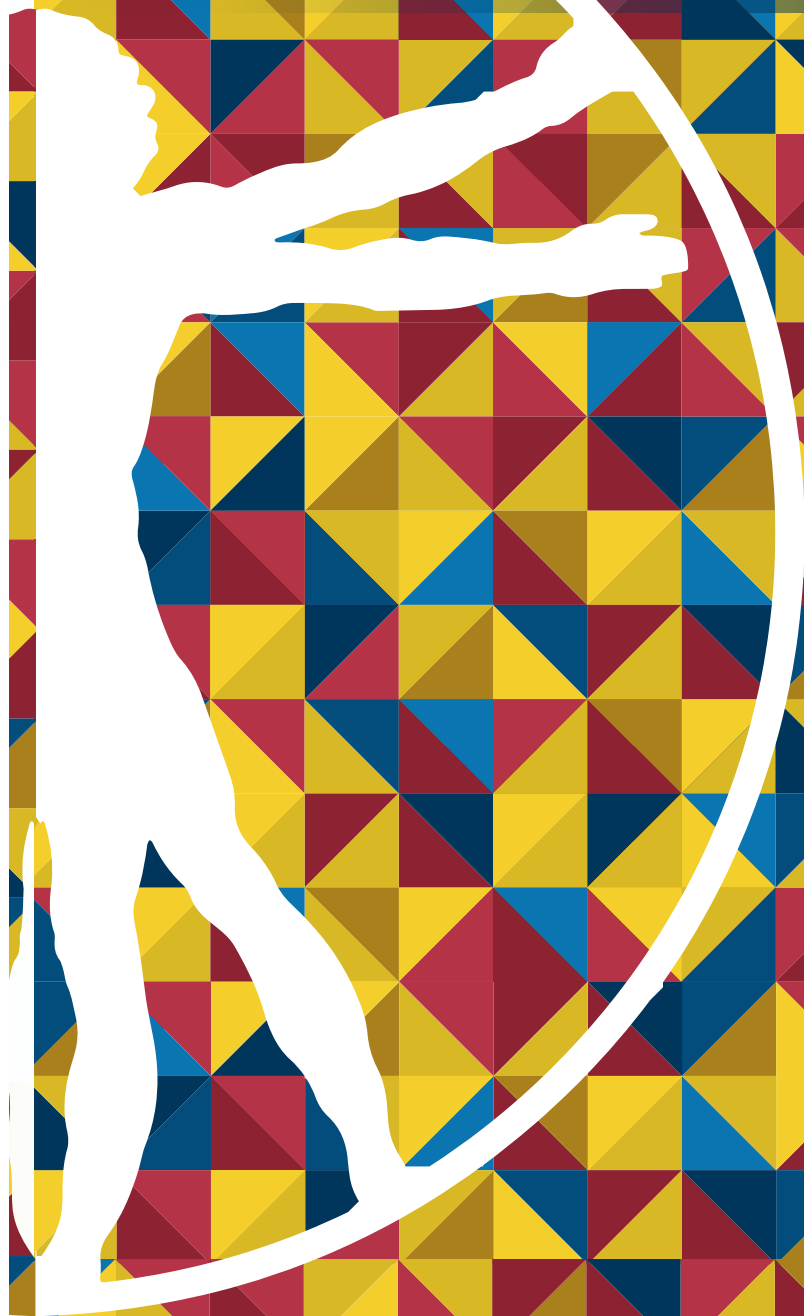


Alchemist Review





The title is surrounded by five triangles of various colors and orientations: a yellow triangle behind the 'l' in 'Alchemist', a pink triangle above the 'i' in 'Alchemist', a blue triangle to the left of the 'R' in 'Review', a red triangle below the 'R' in 'Review', and a light yellow triangle behind the 's' in 'Alchemist'.

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The Alchemist Review is a journal of literary fiction, poetry, and visual arts dedicated to publishing dynamic works by emerging writers and artists in the University of Illinois Springfield community. With an appreciation for print culture, as well as digital technologies and mixed media, The Alchemist Review provides a forum for collaboration and exploration within the ever-evolving world of literary publishing. The journal is edited by undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Illinois Springfield.

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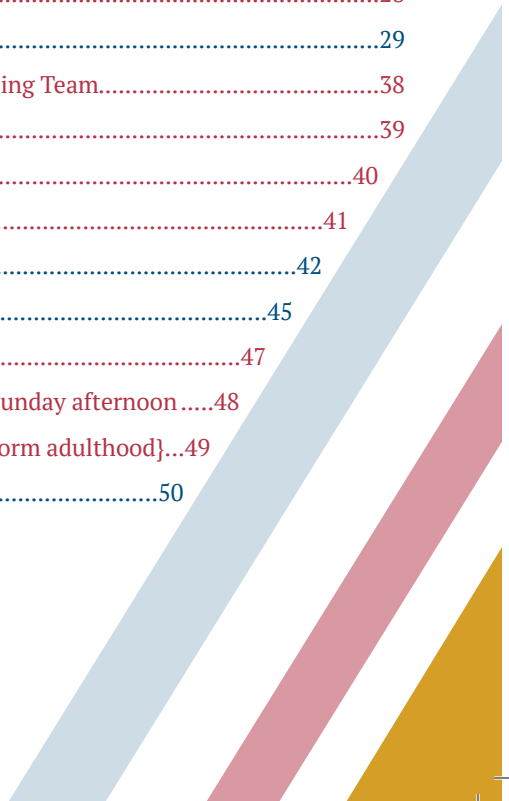
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(2)

Christine Ferree

2.

Understand that I
am by no means a mathematician, a mathematical dilettante at best,
but the interest is there. Even in exceptionally satisfying times, odd feelings stir.

3. A girl I am acquainted with claims she is followed by the number 23. I am envious and feel inferior because I secretly want all prime numbers to belong to me. I want to be the pith to which they gravitate. She must be seeking this number out because I cannot accept that it seeks her and I assume that she has a severe case of selective attention.

Baader-Meinhof phenomenon suggests that once an object or idea is pointed out to someone, they tend to notice it everywhere. She desperately wants to notice, be noticed. But 23 has neither real parts nor imaginary parts. Even if it could care, it wouldn't. It is simple and it is not thinking of anyone. A frequency of illusion. This number would exist whether ever sensed, it just is.

5. I have a tendency to overestimate my control of external situations. He is my dearest, my companion, and I his inamorata but not his controller. His oddness attracted me first then bewildered me. He would play music so loud you could hear it through the door and I never knew if he would be moving to it or laying on the floor letting the music move him.

7. His inner chaos was becoming more prevalent as time proceeded. One day a misanthrope, the next a savior. I could tell he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. An intellectual gypsy moving from one camp of thought to the next. He hated people for what they did to each other but wanted to save them all the same. A mental paradox.

11. Loathing numbers, evens to be exact, has always felt natural and I cannot remember a time in my life where I chose an even number willingly for anything. When I was younger, I resented being 12, 14, 16. As I age, I have come to terms with the fact that I will always be half even. There is comfort in the juxtaposition of my evenness with embracing odds on my sides.

13. Two happens to be even yet prime and when I found that out as a young mind, I thought my brain was going to collapse. How can the very number responsible for creating all evil evens in this world be in the same family of numbers that I love so much? I started to question if numbers were real or if they created by the human mind. I started to question what I really knew. We know them through experience in the empirical world, but the idea of what numbers represent is beyond this physical realm. The idea of love is in that same realm. Could I truly understand?

17. People started to say that you are acting odd. Was he on drugs? Did you see him in his bathrobe at the grocery store? I saw him there. I saw him here. Every time my phone would ring, I would bury my head under my pillow and wish that I could die in my sleep, but I was hardly sleeping and you were never sleeping.

19. To feel whole. To feel dual. We stared at each other on opposite couches. I said, "I hate you right now." without expression. You said, "I hate you." without emotion and without time. There had become a dullness between us and a cessation of our connection. I knew it was not permanent, but that did not make it hurt less.

23. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?" As if I understood what was happening. There were not magnets throughout our home seductively attracting all the furniture. The pieces were slowly pushed against the wall, day by day, until the house was unrecognizable and it felt as if the walls were literally closing in on us. It was a gradual process though. Someone does not wake up one morning and suddenly feel their brain forcefully "turn on." It builds. It takes time, pressure, and then a detonation of emotions. Despair and despondence no longer exist. He still exists. The Center. A colossal personality unleashed upon the world. A superior being.

29. It is speculated that the ancient Egyptians were aware of prime numbers long before the Greeks. Pyramids built by mathematics and not celestial beings as still thought by some. I cannot imagine a displaced intellectual life force docked on Earth just to create perfect pyramids only to leave without a trace. He believed he could build pyramids. Empires.

31.

3
3 1
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3 3 3 3 1
3 3 3 3 3 1

People started to ask
you were feeling more
“normal” as if the word
was objective. Normal to who?

33. Since even has the connotation of being balanced people believe that it is inherently good. We aren't to tip one way or the other and if we do it is taboo to talk about. If not good then bad. If not even then odd. We thrive because we have an even distribution of odd.

37. It is getting colder and you are getting sadder. More even. People started to ask you were feeling more “normal” as if the word was objective. Normal to who? Your change in mood was seasonal as if you were time itself. Eternal sun shining summers and long, forlorn winters. Could it be measured and accounted?

41. What is it about Mathematics that gives it a disguise of infallibility? I believe in math. But to believe something means to have a faith without real knowledge. To really know something you need proof, Concreteness. I cannot prove that the number 2 exists the same way I cannot prove love exists, but I know that it does. I know that we have twoness.

43. All even numbers in this universe, and others, can be deduced to the addition of two prime numbers. Two completely random seeming, yet sometimes perfectly paired prime numbers. The world's evenness would not exist without its odd. To think we did not belong together would be a gross miscalculation.



A Bowl of Cactus Fruit

Sue Maresch

I kept a bowl of cactus fruit on the kitchen table.
It was our favorite fruit.
You told me once you were like this fruit,
tough on the outside,
tender in the center.
You can't eat the skin—
you must remove it,
slice through it,
tear it away
to get to the inside—
like you do the walls that people put up
to protect what's underneath.

To grab the fruit with your fist
it feels spiny and uncomfortable—
like that feeling of being in a strange place,
like the feeling that much had changed.

The inside is soft and sweet when ripe,
a color green or purple,
and you'd rather let the sweetness linger
in your mouth a bit
before swallowing the bite,
kind of like those Belgian chocolates you gave,
or the taste of guilt.

It was only by coincidence we met—
how I came to know you on the outside,
how I came to know you on the inside.
I wish I could have known when the change would come
so as to have been spared
from the last harvest.

I stared at the cactus fruit on the table,
sometimes for short periods,
sometimes for much longer.
The longer I stared the more I remembered.
The longer I stared the more uneasy I felt,
like that feeling of having taken one bite too much.

I finally threw them,
as far as I could throw them.
Maybe the birds found them,
and pecked through to the center.



The Bookworm

Abeha Usman

Everything was almost packed. She gently set down the last stack of books from the bedroom shelves into the cardboard box and sighed. She hadn't eaten all day, busy with wrapping up her mother's belongings and as she sat down the cover of one of the novels caught her eye.

She picked up the book and touched the first page. The inky words glistened on the page and suddenly she wanted to feel the words her mother had most likely read so many times.

Gently tilting the book up to her mouth, she felt the words slide swiftly in, leaving behind inky kisses on her tongue. She looked down at the page, startled to see nothing but a blank page left where the words used to be. With the realization of what she'd done, she slammed the book down in shock and immediately left the room.

She was still hungry though and the sweetness of the slippery words still lingered in her mouth. She went back and gingerly picked up a worn pale yellow paperback. Bringing the book to her mouth, she ravenously ate every letter except for the faint F in Faulkner, simply for memory's sake.

She ate letters from pages of books. She stopped main characters from getting cancer, from bad relationships, from bad breakups, from big decisions, and even from loneliness. She felt powerful. Then she moved on to letters on keyboards, posters on walls, leaving everything bare and clean, as though nothing had ever been there or as though everything could begin again.

One night on her way home from a bookstore,
she pulled a novel out of the shopping bag and
began nibbling on it as she walked. All of a sudden,
she felt every word shrivel up inside her and her
heart lurch with an achingly familiar panic.
Sitting down on a nearby bench under a lone
flickering lamppost, out poured words on
treatments, tears, remissions, returns, and goodbyes.
The goodbye stuck in her throat, gagging her.
She closed her eyes and felt it dribble unwillingly
out, pooling clumsily in her palm, and finally
looping unceremoniously down to her feet. Leaving
the blank book behind, she got up and went home.



contorted heretic

Courtney Cox

i hope my bones cut you, leaving imprints on your skin:
a network of etched memories you'll never blink away.
i grew expectant, transfixed by the stories you told, mistakes
worn as victory sashes, distractions as you tied your snare,
pulled tight around my trusting, flimsy neck
as my body swung for intruding eyes,
i think that's the last time my head held high.
with struggling breath, you pressed knee to bending rib,
threw each stone as if by catapult, rained down as boulders.
to mark your conquest, build a wall above my skeletal frame
your scent still braided in each decaying molecule.
before you fling the last handful of soil,
chalk me to experience and take my stories as your own.
from afar, you'll narrate the decay of my flesh to your next victim
as she swears she's different, weave your cord and muffle her screams with your own.



The Extraction

By Raven Wilson

“A va?” I ask, on the threshold
of her bedroom door. She
looks up from her Lego tower and
gives me a thin smile. I can just
glimpse the unshed tears in her eyes
like LED lights in the darkness.

“Yes mommy” she answers, her
voice sounding unnaturally ragged.

“Are you alright?” I ask. Of course, I
know she isn’t, but comforting words
have alluded me. She moves her head in
a discombobulated jerking motion and
turns back to her tower. I watch as she
takes her time choosing a Lego to place
on top of the structure. She weighs it in
her palm, her face tilted downwards as her eyes narrow. She sets it down and chooses another,
giving it the same treatment.

“What are you doing?” I ask, feeling it was wrong to just leave. Without looking up
at me she mutters something about the tallest tower.

“I could help you, you know, build the tower if you’d like,” She shakes
her head, pressing a Lego that passed inspection on top of the tower
with more force than necessary. I realize that she doesn’t want
to talk to me. I lift my shoulders and allow them to fall
gracelessly, backing out of the room and slowly shutting
the door so it would squeak. I want her to realize
that I’m going; I want her to call out with tears
in her eyes and throw her small form into my
legs. But she doesn’t; her position doesn’t
change as the opening between door
and frame grows smaller.

In the adjacent room I
hear the contented
shrieks of Cynthia,
which contrast

sharply with the past half hour.
I should peek in at her, but the
thought of seeing such a bright,
unburdened smile fills me with a horror that
I cannot explain. Instead, I make my way
to the kitchen, not willing to rest despite my
fatigue. I've always been like that; the more
exhausted I am the more I need to function.
The fact that today's events still prick my mind
with horror also keeps me from tucking my feed
into thick blankets and laying my head down on
fluffy pillows.

When I step into the black-tiled area my eyes catalogue the
damage. The sinks are overflowing with dishes; cups stained
with red juice and plates smeared in cheese, ketchup, and
peanut butter. The countertop is dotted with small globs
of mayonnaise, chipcrumbs, and the sad, unwanted crust
of milk-white bread. The lower cabinets yawn widely,
spilling out pots and pans like a gutted turkey leaks
entrails. The all-too familiar flare of frustration sets in. I
plunge my arm in to the right side of the nauseating
sink and toss dishes into the other sink.

The clank of metal and plastic hitting each
other loudly seems to trigger the pounding
of my temples.

I stop, staring at the half-empty side of
the sink and the dish soap perched
distinguished and forgotten
on the corner. I sigh and
turn my back on the
mess; the flare
extinguishes
with a
forceful
blast

of apathy. I wander over to
the stove and spot pots from
last night's dinner that no one
bothered to put away. I look closely
into one of them, seeing the signs of
elbow-shaped pasta.

"Mommy, Brad had to go home today," Ava had said
reluctantly as I browned the pack of ground beef that would go
into the two boxes of hamburger helper. She was standing against
the frame of the kitchen entrance, her beaded braids falling past the
protection of her rectangular glasses and into her brown eyes. She held
a clear doctor's kit case which
she had recently converted into
a carrying case for her lion. In the
background, Cynthia was yelling and
banging things together. I rubbed my temples,
not in the mood for the barrage of sensory
overload I was being subjected to.

"Did he? What was wrong?" I asked her as
I maneuvered my silver spoon around the
black cast iron skillet. I wasn't completely
paying attention to her; after all, the worst-
case scenario was that he had the flu.

"He was all red and itchy, like I was when
I had the chicken pox. He said his chest
felt funny too. His daddy had to come and
pick him up; he didn't even get to finish his
cookie that Moni brought for her birthday,"
she confided, her face scrunched in worry
and her hands fidgeting with the Doctor's
kit closure latches.

"That's too bad sweetie but
I'm sure he'll be better
tomorrow," I
consoled her
as I raided
the

fridge for fresh milk. She looked at me from over her glasses. Her look was oddly conflicted; she was still extremely worried but a glimmer of hope could be found in her face; her mouth was more relaxed and her fingers had stilled.

The shrill ring and vibration of my hip pulls me out of my memories. Unknowingly, I put my hand in the pot and it is covered in cold, creamy sauce. I rub the soiled hand on my black slacks and reach it into my cross body purse.

“How’d it go?” Meghan asks as soon as I answer.

“What do you think?” I say placing my elbow on the messy counter and pillowing my ear on the warm phone.

“That bad, huh?” she sighs. In the background I can hear steady clack of keys; she must still be at work.

“Her friend died Meg, what do you expect?”

“I heard you gave the case over to Amanda,” she continues, ignoring my question, which is fine by me because I can’t decide if I want an answer.

“You already know, conflict of interest,” I say shortly. It isn’t exactly true; I didn’t know the family personally, but I know that I won’t be able to take this case.

“Are you at least going to the funeral?” Meghan asks, her voice more gentle than it had been thus far.

“No.” Unbidden, the image of Bradley Watkins’s bloated, multi-colored body flashes against my corneas like the sun’s rays just before the blindness kicks in. I see his arms covered in boil-like hives weeping pus and his purple-black face complete with an inflated, lolling tongue reminiscent of a long balloon before it’s twisted into an animal.

“Ok, I understand,” Meghan concedes. “Do you need anything?”

“No.” I say, my mind miles away from the conversation. She acknowledges my answer and promises to call me later.

“How was school today?” Marvin asks Ava as the sound of forks scraping against plates fills our small dining room. Her head is bent low over her plate of chicken breast and mashed potatoes.

“Fine,” she responds. I watch as she struggles to cut a chunk of chicken with her little fork. At first she does it gently; as if hesitant to break the utensil. Then, she brings her fork down upon the offending piece of meat with a ferocity; mashed potatoes spraying off her plate.

“Sweetie, let me cut that for you,” I say to her, already reaching my hand out for the plate. To my surprise, she shakes her head and pulls the plate protectively towards her chest, coating her blue shirt in gravy.

“I can do it on my own; I don’t want you to help,” she says. I freeze, my hands still reaching for the plate. “What?” I ask stupidly.

“Mommy, I’m old enough to cut my own food,” she tells me. I open my mouth to protest but Marvin shakes his head and passes Ava a dull dinner knife.

“Be very careful with this; I don’t want you to cut yourself,” he tells her as he sets the plastic handle in her hand. She nods and begins to slice through her meat. I spend the rest of dinner alternating between pushing my food around on my plate and staring fixedly at the sloppily-cut pieces of chicken steadily vanishing from a messy blue plate from across the table.

I sit up in bed that night, my heart giving a lurch. Peering at my phone, I see that it is almost 1:00 A.M. I ease my black Dell laptop from the nightstand and power it on. Once more, I glance at the E-mail I sent to Amanda earlier that morning when I had realized that the death case I was assigned was for my daughter’s closest friend. Bradley Watkins, age nine. Died from allergic reaction to cookies with peanut oil. Did not receive medical care due to mother’s religion.

The words blur together on the bright screen and I suddenly shut the computer, wanting to forget. Feeling slightly ill I clamber out of bed and slip on my pants and house shoes. I Peer into Cynthia’s room. Her three-year-old body is sprawled across the small bed, her curly-cue twists falling in a tangle on her forehead. Her floor and bed are hidden under piles of dress-up clothes and stuffed animals. My lips twitch somewhat. I gently ease the door shut and turn to Ava’s room.
Hesitance overtakes me as
I debate my options;
if she is awake,
she won’t want
to talk.
I feel a

swoop of horror, as if an ice cream scoop has carved out a chunk of my peace of mind. I wonder if she's lost her trust in me.

I carefully lean my ear against the cool wood and hold my breath. I hear nothing so I crack the door and stick my eye through the gap. At first, she looks to be sleeping beneath her mound of blankets. She looks like a turtle; only her head is visible. I start to pull the door wider, wanting to smooth her hair back and watch her regain her innocence in sleep, but as I look once more, I see the slanting light of street lamps glisten on her cheek; the bed looks as if it is shaking. Then, I hear a whisper, so faint it could be my mind breaking down on the road to insanity.

“Dear God. Mommy says that Brad went to heaven but why? Kids aren't supposed to die; we're supposed to do our homework and play kick ball and open presents on Christmas. Mommy says that I'm not going to die for a very long time, but Brad died.”

I stumble, my back hitting the wall opposite from the door. From the crack, Ava's voice continues to drift. What once was a faint whisper that made me question my sanity is now louder than a school band trumpet section, though her volume hasn't altered.

“Mommy said Brad would get better. Why didn't he get better? He said that we would build the biggest Lego tower in school but we can't because he's gone. I tried to do it by myself God, but it's not the same? Am I going to die to like Brad?”

The darkened hallway lurches as I trip over my feet, heading back to my room. All thoughts of comforting Ava escape me; I can't bear to look into those eyes that seem to hollow by the moment. My worst nightmare has become a tasteless reality; I've promised to hold my little girl and instead I let her crash to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. I dig into my nightstand drawer and pull out my Melatonin tablets. I dump three into my hand and gulp them down dry. Staring at the thick blackness, I slip into a cloudy sleep.

Ava is standing on the elementary playground holding the hand of a brown-haired boy. "I'll race you to the swings!" he calls. She giggles and gets into her running position. As they take off, the boy shifts in color, his pace slowing rapidly.

"I won!" Ava yells in triumph, leaning over to catch her breath. She turns back to see a purple-faced, red-bodied boy crawling on the ground. His shoulders are heaving, as if he can't find enough air to force into his lungs. His arms erupt in large red boils that look disturbingly like cherry blossoms.

"Brad!" she screams, running to him. Just then, a hand the color of granite and as thick as the earth's crust descends from the reddening sky. The hand constricts around the brightly painted boy and draws him upwards. Ava watches, her face taut and paling. She sees how his body hopelessly flops then comes to a complete halt like a flag in the final throws of a storm.

As the boy disappears, streams of milky liquid pour from her eyes. Each spot of skin the tears touch turns pale and wrinkled. The tears flow past her cheeks, down her chest, and run down her pant legs like urine. Within minutes Ava is a skeleton blanketed in elephant skin, her hair thin and wispy like a nearly cloudless day. She buckles on the browning grass and rolls onto her back.

"Dear God. Mommy said I wouldn't die," she whispers; her voice a barren thread.

I feel it being pulled out of me; a surgical procedure in which they forget, or never intended, to drug me senseless. I feel the roots in my chest and belly tugging free, floating in the final throws of life. This must be what it's like to lose something so small and vital.



Foreclosure

David Garvey

I wonder if they would still demo this place if I chained myself to the foundation. The wrecking ball would probably come anyway. End times for the house filled with our memories of family vacations, dinner parties with friends, romance in the midst of our misgivings as parents, wondering if we were ever doing the right thing, but there is no sense in trying to analyze what went wrong, no sense in fighting for our house that isn't "our house" anymore because it's been deemed unsafe. I look around at how empty, desolate this place has become. It doesn't look familiar. A stranger

in my own home. Walking to the kitchen I see a crudely drawn picture from my daughter hanging on the white door of the refrigerator. It's our house drawn in crayons. Looks like a pentagon, that traditional way a child draws a house with its stick figure family. How I wish we could be that family. We look much happier. Maybe it's my yellow pants. Still, it's precious to me. How was this left behind while the unopened factory sealed Hulk Hogan Chia Pet wasn't? All that green hair would be quite the sight, not to mention that mustache of his. Now there's a man who has surprisingly aged well. I wonder what his secret is. Maybe he was born in Neverland. I see we made the right decision in keeping Hogan, but that apple/potato slicer? Grade-A piece of shit. I hear the car in the driveway honk. The kids must be restless. Better wrap this up here. I go to the room that was once our bedroom. My feet dragging against the hardwood floor I worked so hard to polish. All that remains is a mirror by the doorway and an empty picture frame on the other side of the room. I notice the broom leaning against the cerulean blue painted wall. That coat was a son of a bitch to find. No furniture, no possessions. This room is depressingly clean. Pacing in a wide circle around the room I try to force my mind to serenade me with notes from the strings of long forgotten memories, but I'm interrupted when I trip over a piece of wood that's camouflaged into the floor. I curse the block and hurl it towards the mirror, striking the reflection of the man who failed our family. The glass shatters into an infinite number of shards all over the wood floor. I stare at the broken irony scattered in front of me. The car honks again. I look up at the mirror and see a long jagged piece remaining in the frame, a distorted reflection staring back. I can't tell what's on his mind. Maybe it's defeat. Maybe it's now what? We both know that it's time to get the fuck out of here. Standing up I walk past the broom and instinctively grab it, but realize there's no need to sweep it up and instead let it fall to the floor. I make my way to the front door, reluctant to leave our home behind for a wrecking ball determined to strike what they claim are ruins. Ruins that I desperately want to chain myself to.



Fort Lauderdale Beach, January

Bobby Bolt

Play at your own risk—
Actions bold as expensive sunscreen,
Vanilla poison around the flags
We expect to signify
The state of things:
Green for calm waters, inviting, GO
Purple for HAZARDOUS MARINE LIFE,
Rising here to storm the sands.

If you act like something belongs
To you, like it never had another
Owner, then it just might. Find there
An explanation to your pirate attraction
With their flags and their theft
So foreign, so sexy—their crime
A musical and dead language.

The sea can't kidnap its own children
After they grow the legs they need
To run, the same legs they need to swim.

The sea won't steal, just reach in moonlight
With soft guiding pulls, taking back.



Hyde-sight is 20/20

Elyse Jennings

Under attack, for no earthly reason the roots of my castle
walls buckling under the violent screams of silent assault.
An everyday rendezvous with the devil of my lizard brain.[1]

A chameleon
of life. Blending in like fawn spots
on the forest floor.
I must make sure that no one sees. Shaking. Shaking.
A jackhammer on the inside.
Still. Still.
Calm smooth glass on the outside. Will they see
how often
oh God, here comes the next wave –[2]

steam rolling my psyche. A meat cleaver pounding.
Pounding. An unseen fiend I cannot outrun. A living nightmare
from which I never wake. Fear your burglars. Fear your rapists.
Fear your foes concrete and known. I fear concepts. I fear
phantoms. I fear fantastical fights
unfounded.
Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.
Okay? I'll be okay I'll be okay I'll be okay I'll be... Okay? Okay.
okay[3]

This
is
the
end[4]

[1] It is true that my amygdala and lateral septum are responsible for these cumbersome outbursts – but how do you train a scaly worm? Even in the midst of battle I know my fears are, at best, preposterous. Tell this to Mrs. Hyde. Or should I say Mrs. Hide, as that is what I must do. Keeping these daily upsurges to myself. I am the elusive Snipe.

[2] You see? Occasionally Dr. Jekyll makes her appearance. Short lived and as messy as a short-order greasy spoon cook. Primal urges and fight-or-flight win out. Always the flight. Irony at its best – airports are my purgatory.

[3] Intonations – the mantras of survival. Tell yourself a lie enough and it becomes the truth – if only for you. Yes – I am safe. Yes - I am okay. Once upon a time I will believe that.

[4] The end of the attack? The end of me? Have I met my maker or has my disorder met his? I live to fight [myself] another day. Amen.



Leaving

Holly Ann Mills

They showed up nine months ago. At first there were random reports of loud metallic sounding booms with no explanation. A couple of news reports ran stories about it but it wasn't until we started actually seeing them that we all accepted something was happening. Even then people had trouble with the reality of it. It was an amateur video by a kid over in Missouri who showed the world what had come.

The three-minute-long video showed a large grayish green mass slowly appearing out of empty sky and lowering and widening until it covered an acre of unused field across a two-lane highway from a small town gas station. Accompanied by the noise we had already heard, at first it seemed to be a cloud of gas or even a swarm of insects but as it lowered to the ground it began to solidify until it became more of a blob than a cloud. For several seconds nothing happened then it looked like small pieces of it were pulling loose and floating toward the camera and off in all other directions. Like the thing they came in, these pieces continued to change or focus until they were clearly no longer pieces of a thing but beings that came out of it. They continued to pull away and move out of frame. At one point the camera pans down field and you can see them disappearing around curves and into woods in one direction and as far as you can see down the highway to the east and west. The video ends when the kid loses his cool and begins to run back in the direction he came. What we didn't realize at first is that this video caught just one of dozens of simultaneous appearances happening all over the world. They continued for a couple of weeks until there was a dark ship outside of every small town and spread out in rural areas. In cities, there were many more.

When the video became viral it became obvious that viewers couldn't agree on something important. Everyone described their appearance differently. There was no real consensus other than that they were somewhat humanoid with fairly clear limbs and hands and head areas. Other than that, descriptions varied. To my husband, they were a dull, olive green with long, thin appendages. Our son said they looked like birds,

but “weird.” There were countless other opinions and for a while people even seemed to enjoy comparing.

They set up camp pretty quickly and remained mostly in their blob-like ships but occasionally one or two would drift into neighborhoods. When it was clear they were settling, people became more frightened and more territorial. There had, of course, been resistance. In the beginning there was violence and many deaths. All of the deaths were ours. Reports suggest that they never killed a single one of us, that all of the deaths were from suicide missions or friendly-fire type situations, but not everyone believed that. My neighbor’s step-son told me, over our shared fence, how he watched the fighters fall in the city. For days, he said, the fighters used their weapons and bodies in vain. Occasionally they were met with reprimands and curiosity from the enemy but never a fight.

The world went crazy for a while, and chaos led to rioting and more deaths. We finally just stopped.

Soon, we were given directions. Radio and television personalities came on air to relay the directions but we already knew what they were going to say because two nights before we had all had the same dream and woke with the same memories of the same directions being told to us in a way we couldn’t quite remember. When we started to share, we figured it out. Seeing and hearing it from the media just confirmed that it was wider spread than just our own friends and family.

Nothing we did or didn’t do made a difference. There was no resisting. Our options were to just lie down and refuse to move or follow directions. Refusing was just a statement though, because they moved us whether we wanted to go or not. The direction we were given was just to comply, to only take with us what would fit in the small boxes and gather at the designated areas when it was time to leave our houses, our homes, our world. Where we were going was still a mystery. We only knew that it was away and it was for our safety. Not everyone agreed that we needed to go but most of us had trouble

ignoring the signs the earth had given over the last few years. Time was running out and our species had come up with no resolution, no way to stay and no way out. Now, out of the sky, these strangers gave some of us hope and made some of us fear the end had finally come. At the meeting points at the edges of each neighborhood or small town, people filed into the strange vehicles and disappeared into the night sky. Thousands of cities were emptied before ours so we knew what would happen when it was our time.

It was always the same sound. We had heard it several times on the news or on the countless amateur videos online. It was hard to explain what it sounded like so we just started calling it “the sound.” My family had been preparing for the sound for a while. We knew, from our dream and the directions, that there would be another sound two hours later. There would be no third sound as we were expected to be at the spot by the second sound. We had a small, fire-proof safe filled with all of our important documents and priceless items. An accordion folder held our birth certificates, social security cards, and other Identification as well as college and high school diplomas, vaccination charts, and photographs. There was also a small box that contained a stamp of my son’s infant footprint, an envelope with a lock of his hair, and a piece of his baby blanket. There were a few other keepsake items, like my grandmother’s carnival glass toothpick holder, a small bible with a family tree in the front, and my husband’s wedding band that needed to be resized. Sitting on top of the box of keepsakes was a photo album with pictures of grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, and old classmates. On the top shelf was the box we had been given to pack our things in and bring with us as we left.

The rest of the house was not so tidy. It seemed like a well-deserved luxury to stop worrying about a perfectly organized home when we would soon be leaving for such an unknown destination. There were visitors from time to time but we weren’t really concerned with dusty shelves or unfolded laundry. We used to get together to discuss options of escape or hiding, but after a while we just visited to say goodbye or “hope to see you there.” Eventually everyone just settled where they wanted to be up until the end.

Now, out of the sky, these strangers gave some of us hope and made some of us fear the end had finally come.

When the sound came, we silently made our way into the living room. We felt nervous and unprepared but also kind of relieved because the anticipation had become so exhausting. We edged closer to one another and stared at the floor for a few moments until I broke the silence.

“Well, we’re ready for whatever, right?”

They looked at me, my husband and my son, and seemed to be waiting for me to say more or maybe to crumble.

“We’ve got everything ready. We know what we’re taking. We’ll grab it as we walk out the door. All we have to do in the next hour or so is just ... hang out. Then, we’ll go. There’s nothing to stress about because there’s nothing we can do, right?” I had asked this question aloud so many times they no longer bothered to answer.

“Go play with something you love,” I said to my four-year-old son.

“Should we call someone?” my husband asked.

“Who? We’ve said goodbye to so many people, so many times.”

“What do you want to do?” A knot formed in my throat. The open endedness of the question broke my faux calm and a sob shook out of my throat.

“I want this not to happen or I want to know what this is or I want to somehow take you and him and go where this isn’t but I know it’s everywhere and I can’t breathe,” I gasped and sat hard on the edge of the bed. “There’s nothing we can do. There’s nothing to do.”

He sat next to me. “The box is packed. You’ve checked it dozens of times.”

In the other room we could hear our son rummaging through his toy box. He found what he was looking for, and the loud churning of toys quieted. My husband started to speak and I stopped him by raising a finger and pointing down the hall. Instead of the once usual noises that accompanied his rough and tumble play, loud declarations of super powers or exaggerated engine noise, there was a small voice and that voice began to say goodbye to each and every toy, down to a favorite Lego and an old pony figurine with no hair and two legs.

I shot up from the bed. “It’s wrong,” I whispered. “We did it wrong.”

I ran to the safe and pulled the boxes and other contents from inside and dumped them on the dining room table. Shoving everything out of the way, I put the assigned box in front of me and took a deep breath.

“This is not us. We need to take us.” I nodded to myself, feeling confident and rushed.

My husband stood in the doorway, concerned but unsure of what to say or do. I ran through the kitchen and down the basement stairs. In the back of the basement was a box of Christmas ornaments. I moved boxes of tinsel and hooks from the top and saw what I was looking for. Wrapped in paper towels to cover the sharp edges was a broken ornament that had once been a glittering snowman. Its head had been shattered when my son, at three-years-old, backed into the tree because he was laughing so hard at a joke he made that made no sense. It was his first joke and the punchline was “bug butts” which had nothing to do with anything, but we all laughed and occasionally, we still threw it out when a moment was too serious or a silence too heavy. I ran back upstairs and carefully placed the broken snowman in the bottom of the box. I went into my office and opened a drawer where I kept arts and craft supplies. I grabbed the box of crayons that my son always asked for to make pictures for the fridge. All of the paper was peeled away from them because he thought it was funny to color with “naked colors.” In my husband’s closet I found a wrinkled t-shirt that he only slept in now because it was so full of holes and stains. In its better days he had worn it the first time we met, and when he was away and I missed him, I wore it.

I grabbed some photographs and put them back into the smaller box. When my husband saw the three items I had so far placed in the box, he understood. He ran to the hall and came back with a small picture frame. The frame still had the original stock photo inside. We had received the frame as a wedding present over a decade before and never changed the photo. Eventually we just made up stories for the models in the image and continued to put it on the wall for several moves. He grabbed his wedding band from the table and put it and the frame in the box. I grabbed some drawings from the fridge, and a funny magnet we found at a yard sale two years ago. My son walked in with a handful of trinkets and a small stuffed zebra. I looked at him and nodded and he placed them in the box, giving the zebra a long sniff before letting go. I stepped into the bathroom and put the old t-shirt on under my sweater. I also didn’t tell them about putting the locket of hair in my pocket. I didn’t want to admit that fear.

It was time to go. We finished packing our box of things, each of us grabbing a few more items. There were silly letters, candid photos, movie ticket stubs and an embroidered dog collar. We gave the house a once-over and a silent goodbye. We had only lived in this house, a rental, for a few years but it was the longest we had stayed in one place so it felt a little more like

home than any other place we had stayed, if only by default. I hated renting and, in what seemed like another life, had obsessed over real estate websites, credit scores and mountains of debt for years, wanting nothing more than a stable, steady house of our own, a place to grow old in.

“There’s no one else in the street. We have to go,” my husband said with a trembling voice he tried to conceal. “Now.”

He carried the box out the front door and down the steps and I followed behind with my son’s hand in mine. I could see a large family or group a few blocks ahead of us but no one behind us or in the neighboring yards. I felt my panic bubble over and I began to job. We weren’t exactly looking forward to getting there but we were afraid to be left behind or punished or whatever happened if you didn’t leave. As we turned the final corner, we could see the massive green-grey blob of a ship at the end of the street with many of our neighbors in front. The second sound went off and we began to run. The blaring noise stopped just as we tumbled into the crowd. A line was forming and we crowded close to one another in fear of separation. I touched my pocket and closed my eyes for a short moment. When I opened them the groups had parted and one of them, the others, the visitors, the things that were taking us, saving us, stealing us, was standing in front of me. I instinctively pushed my son behind me as it came closer, gesturing with its arm-like piece for us to move from the path. My husband, attempting to step in front of me, dropped the box and some of the contents spilled out. He scooped them up and was attempting to reassemble our package when the thing stopped in front of me, kneeled down, and picked up a stray treasure. It was a picture my son had drawn that looked very much like a squashed tomato but was apparently, “a castle!” Gently, it raised up and held the paper out toward me. As I reached my hand out for the paper, I was able, for the first time, to decide what they looked like. His skin was the color of a puddle of oil in a parking lot on a hot day. His appearance was fluid and changing but the color remained prismatic and occasionally flecked with a metallic sort of swirling glitter. He looked like stardust. She was beautiful. It let go of the paper and I saw a mark left behind from where its hand had been. I didn’t know what it meant, but to me, it looked like an anchor.



Lustrous Nocturnal

Elyse Jennings

Waterlogged irises whisk impressions of the sluggish
town whose likely already forgotten
the reason it mourns. No one left to remember,

few awake who care. The steeple dark within,
illuminated externally by the ghoulish scythe blade
glowing goldenrod for the midnight creatures.

Wailing wind whipping through the streets,
through the eyes of the sky, fingers of cypress,
hallowed from solo lamentation, shared by only

a few select night-walkers pacing their boudoirs,
desperately seeking solace from emptiness staking
claim within the blues and greens, hues and tones.

Beyond the tears, the trees, the town, the waterfall
Hillocks, dazzlingly out of focus, speak of better days,
when all seemed right within the world,

all hope, abandoned by the living, flees for the knolls,
running in terror from the sacrilege of the silent citizens,
who choose to brazenly sleep while forgetting to dream.

An amalgamation of pain and paint, of terror and time,
of sorrow and swirl, looking down upon a settlement
that will never know the true nature of life and grief,

content to slough it off like the day's filthy work shirt –
something I cannot fathom. Alone in my woe, the blurry vision
unbroken and prosperous, as the tears refuse to fall.



I tiptoe out when you're not looking,
creeping low in your shadow. I live

hugging the floor, licking up your tailings,
crumbs sweet or sour. Whatever you give,

Your shoe is too big for me to fill.
I run in circles on your sole,

slip and slide off your tongue,
peer through your eyelets like portholes.

Crush me body or soul, drag me
struggling into the light

or poison me between the walls.
Too mean to put up a fight,

I can squeeze my self through
a hole the size of a dime.

Subsisting on seeds of hope,
safely small in standard time,

I dreamt I drank an Alice potion,
shrank down to teacup size.

One lump or two? Footprints on the saucer.
What weirdly Wonderland lies.

Mouse

Veronica Hartman



Nature Lost

Laura Kearney

My playground in childhood mid country and town
Secluded and quiet in daytime year around--
The blackberries like forests hid a fort behind
Hayfields or corn it was rotated each time—
I flew diamonds of plastic with a cross in the sky
At the end of my string as I whiled away time,
Or sped down the hill abounding in snow
To see how much farther each time we could go.

Children grow up and times do change.
Our lives pass by and get rearranged.
Fields give way with each passing year,
Reluctantly clinging to memories held dear.
Whittled away, eaten piece by piece,
Sadly, I guess it's the way it must be.
A bank, a restaurant, and car lots down the way,
Even a church encroaches, stealing nature away.

Ah, childhood fun! How quickly you pass,
Your fields all becoming concrete and grass.
I yearn for days that are long gone by,
Catching wishing fluff and blinking fireflies.
Hedgehogs in the field were driven off or buried,
Long after I moved and then got married
But some children—mine—still tarried a while,
Experiencing childhoods in yesterday's style.

My playground has shrunk within close lines,
The berries migrated but still we can hide;
Not so secret anymore nor silent and calm,
All open to view, often trespassed upon.
Yet I couldn't imagine living anywhere else,
So long as we can manage ourselves
To maintain a living 'mid old memories
Of stories and lessons or midsummer dreams,

of family long gone but remembered quite well
in pictures or treasures I never could sell.
I sit on my porch and think of the past
With violets, and irises, and lilacs that last,
surrounded by garden and trees and sun,
I cling to my memories with roots deeply dug,
Pondering the ghosts of what used to be
That make up small parts of the whole of me.



The Observatory

Andy Conrad

Space has fascinated man since they first looked into the night sky. To enter the stars and fly among them was one of their greatest dreams. Some saw the universe as a black void, filled with nothing but chalk and fire. Others believed there was something... more.

Many would say that nearly every technological advancement made in the thousands of years since humankind first recognized the heavens was made in the name of reaching the ocean of dark and stars above us.

In 1903, the Orville and Wilbur Wright built and flew the first airplane, bringing, for the first time, mankind away from the ground, and towards the sky. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik, into space. In 1961, Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to leave Earth, realizing mankind's dream. In 1969, the United States of America landed on the moon, and Neil Armstrong became the first human to walk on something other than the Earth. In 2077, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France colonized Mars.

Finally, in 2182, the United Nations of Earth began launching one-way expeditions into the distant depths of space in hopes of mapping the universe. The ship, manned by a single volunteer astronaut, would go in one direction until it ran out of fuel and drifted on, with the pilot keeping the ship on course and constantly mapping to a degree a computer could not handle. Eventually, the astronaut would pass away, but the ship would continue on until it was pulled into a black hole, entered the gravitational field of a planet or a star, or was otherwise disabled.

In 2198, one man who hated his life volunteered to be an astronaut. He had nothing left to live for on Earth, and wanted his life to end, but not without doing something to improve the world. On May 5th, his late wife's birthday, he set out into the unknown.

*

Years passed aboard the ship, and the astronaut patiently awaited death. The ship was stocked with enough food and water to last twenty years, which was about a year longer than the fuel would last. The astronaut was not going to die anytime soon.

One day, not that he could tell one day from another, an alarm within the ship sounded, and a red

light flashed on and off. He knew immediately that this meant he had entered the gravitational pull of some celestial entity, and was being taken off course.

The astronaut took the controls and tried to steer back onto the path he was meant to, but the pull was too strong.

The alarm got louder, deafening him. Finally, the cabin's oxygen thinned, and the astronaut passed out.

*

The astronaut, before his wife and daughter had died in a tragic accident, had worked at a department store. Specifically, he stocked the warehouse. So, when he awoke in a room that looked not unlike the warehouse of a department store, he recognized it immediately.

Somehow, he had been launched from his ship, and his parachute, after deploying, had gotten caught on the rafters of the warehouse, so he was suspended ten feet from the ground.

As the astronaut awoke groggily, he tried - and failed - to wet his throat. His head ached, but not terribly, and other than that, he felt fine.

The room he hung in had dark lights in the corners, pointed at the walls, and these were casting an eerie blue light around. At one end of the room were large, corrugated metal doors that would be used for unloading trucks. At the other side, a single, almost lonely-looking wooden door stood.

The astronaut gritted his teeth, bracing himself, and detached his parachute, landing on the floor in a heap. His legs burned, but did not feel broken. After lying still for a few minutes, letting the back of his head rest on the cool concrete, he slowly rose to his feet.

He walked to the doors that were used for unloading trucks. The astronaut had no idea where he was, but surely looking outside might give him a clue. He grasped the door from the bottom and pulled upward.

When he saw what was behind the door, he took in a sharp breath and stepped back.

A spiral galaxy. After a moment, the astronaut realized it was the Milky Way. It seemed extremely distant, certainly millions of miles away, as he could see the entirety of it, and a large amount of dark space around it. Despite there now being several thousand stars in view, the light level in the room didn't change at all. Slowly, he took ahold of the door and returned it to its previously closed position.

The astronaut backed away, shaken. Where was he? He turned and walked slowly to the wooden door he had noticed before, his head filled with wonder and no small amount of fear.

*

Behind the door was a large room. The astronaut immediately became aware of an almost distant machine-like humming, something one might expect to hear in a factory.

Inside the room were a multitude glass cases, each several feet by several feet, all the same size. In appearance, they were not unlike fish tanks. Each wall was covered in them, and there were hundreds more running in maze-like formations throughout the center of the room. Some glass cases were dark, while others had light emanating from them. The floor was covered in a red carpet that looked old and faded, but otherwise spotless.

The astronaut walked to one of the cases and looked into it. Inside, he saw what looked like a desert landscape. However, instead of the contents of the case appearing as something set down inside it, it looked more like a TV display. The landscape was seen from a few hundred feet above the ground, and on the desert floor, several large, ant-like beings crawled along the shifting sands.

He turned away, fear and confusion pulling on his stomach. He looked at another glass case, and in the same type of view as the first, he saw a bustling city, not unlike in appearance to New York City or Chicago, but instead of humans walking on the streets, grey-skinned beings that slithered along on tentacles moved about.

“Beautiful, is it not?” came a voice behind the man. The astronaut turned and saw a man about a foot and a half taller than him dressed in a black pinstripe suit with a dark red shirt and tie. His black hair was slicked back, and he had a neat, trimmed goatee. “They are called the Durmas.” His voice was low, but warm and caring. The astronaut could not decide if this man spoke with an amalgam of every accent he had ever heard, or in a voice that was truly neutral in accent. Every word that came from the man’s mouth sounded well-thought out.

“I’m sorry...” the astronaut said weakly. “I don’t understand.”

“Those beings that you see in that case there, that you were just looking at. They call themselves Durmas, just as your people call yourselves Humans.” The man in the suit stuck out his hand. “You may call me the Observer. I have not seen one of your kind here in a long time.”

The astronaut took the Observer’s hand and shook. The astronaut felt odd, looking up so far to meet the Observer’s eyes.

“What is this place?” the astronaut inquired, his voice somewhat shaky.

Hm,” the Observer muttered.
“I have answered that question exactly three thousand, eight hundred and seventeen times, and I still find it hard to decide each time what the answer is. I suppose this time, I will go the easy way and call it The Observatory.”

The astronaut looked around. In each case, he could see either a landscape, a planet seen from space, or an entire galaxy. He then looked back to the Observer.

“So, who are you, then?” asked the astronaut.

“I am the one who created the universe and everything in it.” He began to walk away, but slowly, silently beckoning the astronaut to walk with him. He clasped his hands behind his back and looked in the glass cases as he passed. After a moment, the astronaut followed.

“Are... Are you God?” the astronaut asked, incredulous.

“Not as you would know it, no,” the Observer replied, a smile on his face. “I created the universe and your Earth, as you believe God did. However, I did not do the other things you accredit to him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am not the God you have read of in your Bible, or Allah you have read of in your Quran. I did create all you know and see, but I have never answered your prayers or desires. I have never taken your curses to heart, and I have never spoken to those who claim to have been contacted by a God above. I did not tell Abraham to kill his son, nor did I send Jesus to your world.”

The astronaut glanced at a glass case that showed a planet entirely covered in ice. “Why don’t you? Listen to prayers, I mean. Is it that you can’t?”

“I can. I hear them all the time, if I choose to. And I certainly could do what people ask of me.”

“So why don’t you?”

The Observer glanced at him, an amused smile on his face. “Many reasons. There are more beings in the universe asking for things than I have the chance to

hear at once. I have my limits, you see. In the time it would take me to grant one wish, several billion more would pile up. As well, some wishes are beyond what is fair, and would tamper with another being's free will. I could not do everything all beings in the universe wanted and make all happy, so I choose instead to do nothing." He turned to a case that showed a jungle inhabited by monkey-like creatures with dozens of limbs. They danced from branch to branch, clearly calling out to each other, but the glass cases did not seem to convey any sound.

The astronaut looked up at the Observer. He wanted to ask something else, but decided not to.

"You wanted to ask me about the meaning of life, correct?" the Observer chuckled, apparently having read the astronaut's mind. The astronaut nodded, and even though the Observer was turned away from him, he knew, and he spoke again. "The meaning of life is a concept that you humans alone have thought of. There are exactly one hundred-and-forty-three sentient species living in this universe, and only one has questioned the point of existing. That being said, there is no specific meaning."

The astronaut's heart fell, feeling a little disappointed.

"Do not be upset by that," the Observer smiled. "The meaning of life, as you would put it, is whatever you make of it. I understand that this might not be a fulfilling answer, but it is the only one there is." He glanced back at the astronaut. "What did you believe the meaning of life was before arriving here?"

The astronaut stared at his feet, unsure of what to say. He stared at the faded carpet for a moment, gathering his thoughts, then spoke. "I was never really sure. I guess... I thought it was to find someone to love, maybe make a name for yourself before dying."

"And you did the first, I know."

"Yeah, but the woman I loved... and my daughter... they both died recently. Well, I guess, not recently, because it had to be a few years ago now, but it feels so fresh... I can see it all so vividly, almost like I just saw it a minute ago. So I guess I'm not sure what the point of living is anymore."

The Observer stopped, turned around, and looked at the astronaut. "I am sorry you had to experience that. I want you to know that I did not choose for that to happen. As I mentioned, all beings have free will, and there is no predetermination." His voice almost quivered.

"Your wife and daughter were not destined to die then, and I did not choose for it to happen.

That is just how it happened to work out." He

looked away, his eye glinting in the dim light. The astronaut could tell the Observer would like to save everyone, but did not want to disrupt the balance of things. "I love all my creations. I wish I could keep everyone happy, but I simply cannot." He turned and continued walking, and the astronaut almost thought he heard the Observer say "I am sorry."

The astronaut followed again. He stopped beside the Observer, who was looking at a glass case that showed Earth.

"You humans are an interesting race, you know."

"Are we?"

"Indeed. Only fifteen other races have ever waged warfare, but no other has ever gone into such large-scale fighting. Your World War Two was quite the spectacle to watch."

"You say that like it was a TV show," the astronaut growled, a little angered.

"I mean no disrespect. I was not hoping for the victory of one side or the other, and I did not revel in the slaughter. I just simply found it interesting that an entire species could somehow turn against one another."

The astronaut just looked on at the planet where he fell in love, where he had a child, where he had been completely and utterly broken. It was bitter for him to see it again.

"But that is not the only reason I am fascinated by humans. You are only one of seven that have any type of concept like 'love.' As well, you are only one of nine that have traveled into space, and humans have by all means gotten the furthest. You are the only being ever to physically reach the Observatory."

The astronaut looked up quizzically. "What do you mean?"

The Observer looked down at him, warmth in his eyes. "Sometimes, when someone significant moves on from their world, I will call them here, so we can chat. Of the people you have known of, I have spoken to Julius Caesar, George Washington, Adolf Hitler, and several others."

"What do you talk to them about?"

"Several things. Most of the time, it is what his or her motivation for the change they made in the world was."

"What did Hitler say was his reasoning?"

"He thought he was making the world a better place. He truly believed that those he slaughtered were a danger to the world. It was a case of good intentions, bad execution." He paused for a moment, then added, "No pun intended."

The astronaut glared at him, but the Observer continued. "When he came here, he had had some time to think about it, and ultimately regretted it. He still saw the groups of people he killed as below him, but he decided he did not have the right to take their lives. He was an intelligent man, Adolf. He just made a lot of big mistakes, so he thought."

"You don't think so?"

"I do not have the right to say one way or another. The right choice is entirely relative to the person making it. If he believed it was a mistake, it was."

The astronaut thought about that.

"Humans are not the only beings I have spoken to. I have spoken to the Durmas, as well as the Garveys, and the Pquils, and several beings from each sentient species. But, as I said, they come here when they die and move on. You are the first to actually stumble upon it."

The astronaut looked away from Earth, and saw instead a landscape that showed black soil and giant pillars of twisted metal jutting from the ground.

"So..." the astronaut began, preparing himself for whatever answer he may receive. "What happens when you die?"

"If I do not call one here, one goes."

"Goes?"

"Wherever one would like. Some go to places on their planet that they never saw. Some go to places across the Universe. Some... Well, some go beyond where I feel I have the right to say."

"What do you mean?"

"Some souls, when they decide they have seen what they wanted to, will move on to where I can no longer see or hear them. I am sure they are not dead, but where they are, well... That is a private matter to be known by only myself and them."

The astronaut pondered this in silence for many minutes. He could feel that the Observer had something else to say. "Go ahead," the astronaut encouraged quietly, smiling.

"I spoke to your wife, and your daughter," the Observer said quietly.

The astronaut looked at him suddenly.
"You did?"

"Indeed I did."

“Why? What change did they make that you wanted to talk about?”

“They did not make a change, not a specific one. I just get lonely sometimes, and I decided those two were interesting people to speak to.” He smiled sadly. “They were wonderful, those two.”

“They were,” the astronaut said quietly, a tear running down his cheek.

The Observer smiled, then put his hand the astronaut’s shoulder, consoling him. He left it there while the astronaut cried silently.

*

The Observer and the astronaut spoke for a long while. In the astronaut’s time, it would have been several years. In the Observer’s time, it was mere seconds in the grand scheme of things. Finally, one day, the Observer said, “I believe it is time you continued on with your mission.”

“Are you sure?” the astronaut asked.

“Yes. As much as I have enjoyed talking to you, your destiny is to continue on.” The astronaut looked at him, questioning in his eyes, but the Observer winked and laughed.

The two went into the warehouse-like room, and there sat the astronaut’s fixed ship. It was positioned right in front of one of the truck loading doors.

“There are many things to discover in this universe, my friend,” the Observer said. “I hope that you can see some of them before your time ends.”

“I hope so, too,” the astronaut said, slight sadness in his voice. “Will I see you again?”

“It is always possible.”

The astronaut smiled at the Observer, and the Observer smiled back. Suddenly, the astronaut hugged the Observer. The Observer was taken off guard, but, after a moment, he returned the embrace.

“Thank you,” the astronaut said.

“There is nothing to thank me for.”

The astronaut smiled, then entered his ship. As the ship left the Observatory, he glanced back and saw the Observer waving, smiling sadly. Then, he was gone.

*

The astronaut flew through space for many more years. Eventually, he died quietly in his sleep. It was a painless death, one that any being would be happy to have.

As his ship continued on through the darkness, the astronaut was called back to the Observatory, and he and the Observer spoke again, about everything

that there was to talk about. The astronaut learned all there was to know about the other sentient species in the universe, about the creation of everything, and what the Observer hoped the future would look like.

“I think things will get brighter. For everyone,” the Observer said one day. “I hope they do, at least. I would like to see a day where there is no more grief or strife, and there is only happiness for every being.”

The astronaut thought that sounded like a fine idea.



On Learning How to Cheer for a Losing Team

Bobby Bolt

I thought we were talking about baseball
When you stopped me: Look! See?
Going, going, gone. High over the wall.

This is a slow game. The umpire's all
Have intelligence found only in their authority—
I thought we were talking about baseball.

He's going to have a great showing this Fall.
While understanding of time slows, seasonally
Going, and gone. High over the wall.

Some kid got rolled over by a tarp in rainfall,
America's past time, and we're now delaying
My thought. We were talking about baseball

When we heard it made, the worst call
Always received at the worst time, unfairly
Going, going, gone. High over the wall

And rising still, record-setting concrete sprawl
In the year of broken records, you see,
I thought we were talking about baseball:
Going, going, gone. High over the wall.



the poet is large

Patrick Hurley

the poet is large
and wears a look of easy prosperity
he is expansive
I don't think he can be a single poet
an accretion
or amalgamation
his appetites are immense
he is huge
a daunting presence
like one of those contemporary visual artists
Schnabel or Weiwei
are such men
I wonder
immune to chronic dyspepsia?



Preface

Shayne Phillips

On occasion, we cross paths – and I feel a tugging, an invisible yanking on the thread wrapped somewhere between my stomach and my ribcage.

And I wonder if it's because when the universe was younger, still forming – stars shifting, planets shaping – that our atoms used to sit beside one another.

And I wonder if the very atoms that make up you, and the very atoms that make up me are attracted, tugging us – as human, still only a tiny particle of dust to the expanse of this universe – back together again.



Salvaged Dolls

Maureen Bocka

We all know what happens to Barbie
after her child friend grows up.
If she is lucky, she will be given away.
At flea markets she sunbathes
in a group of dolls on a blanket.
It is hard to tell if she has any friends or lovers.
At thrift shops she is put in plastic bags
with other dolls and miscellaneous toys.
Often Barbie has been stripped
of her clothes and her identity.
Who would they become?
There is nothing sexual about nudity
when it is part of the process
of finding a new home.
There are a few dresses that do not belong
to any doll in the pink back pack.
All rescued dolls need a disinfectant wipe and shampoo.
There are enough dolls at home.
No point trying to rationalize an attraction
to someone both repulsive
and despite her exaggerations
beautiful.



Shadows in Starlight

Courtney Cox

On the evening of their first anniversary, Alex drove Michelle to the river. Near a path bordering the sparse forest, Alex led Michelle through an opening in the tree line, almost invisible to the unsuspecting eye. Feeling the resistance in his girlfriend's step, Alex squeezed her hand, turning to plant a kiss on her forehead.

“Come on. There's no reason to be afraid!
I told you...we're going on an adventure!”

Grumbling in protest and chronicling the danger she imagined in each shadow, Michelle followed behind, her pink pepper spray ready in her hand. The stars shone weakly, but in the space above the river, there was a band of darkness between the civilizations burning bright on both sides of the water. Looking up, Alex and Michelle remembered the stars from their time in the country and how peaceful it felt when the bonfire was all the light that could be seen.

When they reached the water's edge, Alex spied a slab of cement embedded in the sand. The beach was littered with objects indistinguishable in the darkness: discarded hobo knapsacks, broken bottles, the crumpled remains of a lost kite. “You know, this place is a sort of a museum,” he explained, slipping his arm around Michelle's waist. “Ship after ship crashed here at the turn of the century. They never quite made it to St. Louis. Right over there, across the river...that's where the U.S.S. Montana, a steamboat...that's where it wrecked.”

“Ah yes, the mighty Missouri,” Michelle giggled, still clutching tight to her pepper spray. “What a romantic evening this is turning out to be, Al.”

“It just feels significant, kind of, being here. Even though it's tragic, it persisted in spite of all the destruction. It gives me hope, you know?” The silence followed, measuring itself in the lapping of the water against the sand at their feet.

“Shell,
I got you
something...I
know it’s stupid
and cheesy and weird
and you’re probably go-
ing to laugh at me...but...
here.” Alex reached for a folded
piece of paper from his backpack.

Michelle took the certificate, flattening it on
her lap and leaning in close to read the printed
words. Picking up the paper and holding it up to the
dark sky, she squinted to make
sense of the elaborate network drawn on the
page. Michelle looked over at Alex, “Which one....?”
Still nervous, Alex grabbed her hand in his own and pointed towards
the sky, “There.”

On the night that he first told her he loved her, they laid in the grass, looking
up at the stars that shone so brightly there in the country, a light they had almost
forgotten in the suburbs. Although the dust stuck to their clothes and the pebbles under-
neath etched Braille upon their skin, the silence of the poignancy of his words made them
both numb. Their friends were nearby, nursing a bonfire and sharing jokes over cheap beers.

“They’re going to wonder where we are...” Michelle whispered, cutting the silence with
her urgency as she ran her hands through her long brown hair. They rose to their feet,
Alex reaching to help her up. “But I won’t forget this night, Chelly...” he said,
looking up, “One day I’m going to give you the brightest star.”

From there, the evening passed, rustic with the popping of embers and
dimly lit, fuzzy as half-forgotten memories. Michelle blushed, uneven
splotches camouflaged by the fire’s flame,

and as her eyes met Alex’s in the dim light, they relived
their secret confessions with each glance. After the trip,
the return to real life was abrupt and sterile, and in
the sleepy suburbs, they memorized the shape
of the words spoken on the other’s mouth.

Once the feelings had been named,
memorized, and recited, the
words became routine: a
skipping record played
on repeat. The con-
sequence of love,
the bare
b o n e s
of it

excavated and mapped seemed duller under
their clouded skies. In the dusk, illuminated
by the light of her cell phone, Michelle made
her way along a once-familiar path. The trees were
thicker now, and the thumping of music from the dive
bars that lined the nearby river street seemed louder than
she remembered. Finding an entry point and pushing back
branches, she inched down the steep incline to the narrow beach.
Struggling for her footing, Michelle chuckled to herself. She wasn't as
agile as she used to be.

Once she reached the bottom of the hill, she shuffled across the sand, making
her way to the makeshift concrete bench. Stopping to catch her breath, Michelle let her
eyes adjust to the hazy light of dusk. This hidden place seemed all but frozen in time, aside
from, she noticed, more trash floating in the water approaching the beach. The cities dotting
the edges of the Missouri had grown since her absence and, in contrast to the sky above
the river, the streetlights and neon bar signs illuminated the evening air with generic
artificiality.

With her eyes trained towards the sky, she saw the first twinkle of stars
above the river. Michelle reached in her wallet, pulling out a worn, fold-
ed certificate. Holding the map of the constellations as a reference
to the sky, she realized, in spite of it all, so little had changed.

Here she sat and remembered the
boy who had once given her
a little piece of the uni-
verse to call her own.



W

Skin

Joe LaFata

When he opens his closet door it reveals the punched surface of the moon. Stepping through, the cratered horizon is specked only with a piece of furniture—a wardrobe off in the distance. He swings open the doors, its sticky handles ice-cold to the touch. The skins of his ancestors hang from hooks like old costumes. Here he is again. He hates himself for returning every night, for slipping into the different skins and reimagining himself through the eyeholes.

He's saved 8 lives on Omaha beach alone.

If he steps into the second costume from the left he can cover himself with his grandfather. He becomes a war hero as he pulls the zipper up his stomach, scoots the wrinkled skin over his shoulders, and lifts the hood-like face over his own. He's saved 8 lives on Omaha beach alone. I'm proud of you, he tells himself with the voice of his grandfather.

Back in his room he sits on his bed and glowers at the closet. I am worth something myself, you know, he lies to himself with his own voice.

There he is again the next night, this time trying on the 200-year-old skin of an ancestor he has only seen in pictures. It feels the same as the others as he slips it on and inspects himself guiltily in the mirror of the wardrobe. Maybe it's a little leatherier. His body goes limp before the wardrobe as he falls asleep in it, too ashamed to take it off. Even running after kids in self-stitched clothing and washing grass stains out by hand seems to suit him better than his own directionless life. Still, she wouldn't be proud if she could see him sleeping in her skin on the surface of the moon. She wouldn't be proud to see that he does not fit into his own life.

A week passes as usual. He comes home from his minimum wage job and sits on the dirty bed scowling at his closet until it is time to go in. I'm proud of you, he lies to himself with his own voice.

After the sun sets, the creak of the closet door is followed by the thuds of his slippers on the surface of the moon. The earth looks closer than it really is in the sky behind the wardrobe, a stone's throw away. He thinks he could shout and someone down there in the skin of their own life might hear him.

Sifting through, he considers slipping on a doctor's skin over an engineer's. Decidedly, he tries on the skin of his father. It's a little loose. He looks through the eyeholes and sees, with regret and shame, himself as a child. He unzips the suit, steps out, and hangs it back up on the first hook from the left.

The skin of his twin brother who died at birth is the only one that he doesn't try on. It doesn't even have a zipper. He rubs its smooth skin with his calloused hands. He whispers nothing to himself in the voice of his twin brother.



Stage Four

Veronica Hartman

Shut up. I'm sick to death
but you won't stop yapping

*we can beat this. Miracles **do** happen
Everything will be **oh-kay**. **Never** give up.*

I once gobbled fistfuls of your pluck.
My chin ran with the greasy hope of experience—

comfort food heaped on a hill of ants.
Now all your offerings taste like chalk.

Futureless as worms on the sidewalk,
I envy the silent, deaf way they seek

the soil, heedless of Death's bright beak.



to the bathroom counter on a Sunday afternoon

Shayne Phillips

I still remember the crinkle
of your voice cartwheeling
over the phone lines.

*I've got it - an epiphany - the answer to life's mysteries
We boil water to drink and keep things clean -
Do you use hot water when brushing your teeth?*

I laughed then.

& in a moment of silence
at the bathroom sink
I find comfort
in oral hygiene.

Your empty outline
stares back at me
in hot water mouthwash legacy.



{the uniform of adulthood | a uniform adulthood}

Courtney Cox

He wore a long coat in the city.

When I met him there, it seemed to extend forever, taller than the looming skyline. The hem reached for the floor, sweeping at the muddy residue of snow, muffling the month since college graduation worn heavy on his freckled eyelids. I felt like a child then, marveling at how well he could dress the monotony, cover both his sins and his youth, and call himself full-grown. And as we walked, I could almost feel the minutes pass us by on an endless calendar that no longer had room for my companionship. He would mark the days with solid black checks, rising with blinding hangovers, tucked in by late night blackouts just to keep the time.

But in that coat professional
and in those streets content.

She wore heels in her dorm room.

When I met her, she seemed a child, tripping and shuffling over worn grooves in ancient floor. Her platforms poised at the end of an aisle, each petal serves as an obstacle insurmountable by her naïve clumsiness. With each swell of the wedding march, I feel the distance between us heighten, wondering how long until we look back upon the memories and geld them with a blinding gold cast. Yet, still, she wore her heels, and now, as she approaches closer to an act they paint as sacred, her virginal veil covers her urgent features, a disguise to cover hesitation and sophomore broken hearts. But I'll call the ceremony perfect and then we'll never speak again.

It's a last catwalk before suburbia,
where it stops is where she ends.



With Minds Like These

Taylor Vazquez

Sam couldn't quite say what the outcome of the world was supposed to be, but she also could not deny the fact that she was unsurprised with how things turned out. Disdainful by nature, the girl had always been one to question the integrity of positivity. That's what the serum had been, after all, a positive. The Great Healing is what they called it, a mass exodus of identity that would occur at the injection point of a fine, tapered needle. *Fortunate* is what the afflicted were told to feel. This word coming after years of being told to feel *better* or *mindful* or *less-aggressive*. These words were meant to cling to one's being like old Band-Aids and ultimately were to be left there, dangling from threads of battered skin. Sam found the word fortunate to be a misnomer for a newer brand of adhesives.

She shifted in the tent she once shared with another, fully cognizant of her own stink and loneliness. The walls of the tent streaked brown and red, lines of blood and grime woven intricately around each other and Sam sometimes tried to find pictures in the designs that were made seemingly just for her. Sometimes she closed her eyes and imagined she was sleeping under beautiful stained glass. She would wake up after those nights feeling just slightly worse than she did before, her reality no longer being one that allowed for "sleeping it off." She shifted once again and felt the barrel of a pistol at the small of her pack and like a child pressing into the sides of its mother, Sam pushed herself against the gun until she felt the coolness of the metal against her skin. She closed her eyes and thought of every horrible thing that had ever happened to her. The zombies, even for Sam, did come as quite the shock to the world. She had believed that the "cure" had been a scam to begin with, just another way for insects like her to have the disease squashed out of them so they can stop buzzing around the conscience of everyone else in their lives and be normal. *Leave your depression* at the door, a sign outside of the hospital had read. While all the sad little people lined up along the sidewalk like dejected cattle, Sam hugged her depression closer.

The
serum
had been
administered to
all who desired it,
and Sam who had never
remembered a time when she
had ever desired anything more
than to have her ashes spread across a
place so far from her own, refused it. "It'll
keep coming back", she had told her mother.
"It always does."

Her mother, one who was always in a constant of panic
herself, usually spent her time trying to assuage the feelings
of creating a genetic disaster (Sam's own moniker for herself, her
mother had hated it). Sam's mother thrived on positivity and Sam was
quick to question her moral compass. She would tell her mother that pos-
itivity was selfish, and her mother would reply, "You've given up on yourself,
but I haven't, yet." Still, Sam refused treatment and found that a few months later
those words meant nothing. Her mother had died, and Sam had watched the flesh
be ripped off her bones by a creature that at one time, was more similar to Sam that she
would have liked to admit.

Outside of Sam's tent was a world post Great Healing and away from the desolate city, the girl
found herself more alone than she had ever believed herself to be. Sometimes she liked to
think that she heard moaning on the wind, a solemn wolf call to other creatures like
her who despondently lived out their days trudging through raw rows of dead trees
and muck that clung to the bottom of their boots like little dead hands. Unsure
if there was ever going to be a change in scenery, and unsure if they even
wanted one. Sam dug her nails into palms, an old form of comfort, and
curled her foul smelling body further in on itself and wondered if
perhaps this was where she was always meant to be. Where she
always was.

The scientist, stoic as the day his wife passed, did
not bother barricading the door to his office. It
unclear to his assistants (*God knows when
ever they ended up*. He thought silently
to himself) what his penultimate
plans were, and as they raced
out of the hospital for
the last time those
many months
ago, he
found
a

han-
 k e r i n g
 desire for an
 answer, himself.
 He knew the ultimate
 arrival was to be his death,
 and he attributed his calmness
 to this knowledge. His peers, to
 some extent, knew this to be true, as
 well; some going so far as to wish it upon
 him. "You deserve to end up like one of them,"
 were often the exact words seethed, tiny daggers slip-
 ping between clenched teeth. He did not remember much
 of the whirlwind that stormed around him when his work and
 life came crashing down around him for a second time, but every
 time he reflected on those moments he always went back to those words.

He crosses from the dark oak door to the single curtained window, trying to
 enjoy how heavy and official his footsteps sounded as they clipped along the hard-
 wood. He sprayed dust everywhere as he drew the curtains back, and he allowed himself
 a faint smile as he remembered how much she loved seeing the little particles float on the rays
 of the sun. She always liked minute details like that, and he had always struggled to feel the same
 The scientist looked at what was once a woodsy backyard garden and thought that perhaps this
 was a little thing he used to love, but not anymore. the little particles float on the rays of
 the sun. She always liked minute details like that, and he had always struggled to feel
 the sam The scientist looked at what was once a woodsy backyard garden and
 thought that perhaps this was a little thing he used to love, but not anymore.

It was a dead, barren landscape now, gray in color marked by splotches
 of reddish brown where the Earth upheaved and went belly up. A
 lifeless koi pond, a wooden bench swing dilapidated and over-
 run with weeds. All his plants were dead, their lives ripped
 up until their roots bared . . . he closed the curtain.

He only checked for signs of his impending death
 these days, anyway. His wife, not stoic, sat
 framed on his desk, her illness forever
 emblazoned and remembered by
 her husband as a too big smile.

At least, that was how he
 tried to remember
 her.

He
walked
to his
desk, set-
tled in to
his chair, slid
open a drawer,
and removed its
contents. He avoided
the gaze of his wife as he
examined his options. An
injection needle filled with
his own concoction, a gun,
and a book titled *Masculine De-
pression and You*. He weighed his
options and found that all of his ul-
timate solutions did not feel right. He
remembered a fourth option, which was
to simply wait for them to find him. He
thought about how that situation would play
out. They would stumble toward him, drag-
ging limbs as heavy and gray as their thoughts (*I
wonder what they think about now?*), their skin
bursting with decay and foulness, radiating
disease. The scientist realized after some
thinking that that was not the death he
wanted, he did not like idea of there
being an interim time between hav-
ing his brains eaten and death.
Too much time for introspec-
tion Perhaps his penultimate
plans, his tying up of loose
ends, was to come to terms
with how he would die.
Would he meet wife's
fate? The fate of
the world around
him? Or maybe
a fate that was
entirely his
own?

H e
gripped
the cover of
the book in his
hands as if he could
someone absorb the con-
tents with actually having to
read. The cover made him angry,
adorned with the image of a man
blowing steam from his nose with tiny
balls of flame for eyes, but what did he know
about depression?

She could never remember not feeling this way, even at her best. Ironically, now that the world had ended, it was easier for Sam to reflect on her years up until this point and try to make some semblance of peace with it. She adjusted her backpack, heavy with her condensed tent and other supplies and continued on the road ahead of her. With the world gone quiet and all meaningless things stripped away, she felt left alone at the center of it all and found she felt no different than how dead she perceived herself to be when all other things were full of life. She was not sure if comforted or horrified was the proper word to describe her feelings, it was nice to know that there was nothing that really could have been done for her, there was no discernable thing that caused the dam that kept her mind from overflowing to keep cracking. Still, Sam wondered now if this is what permanent madness felt like. A constant fear of dams breaking.

Her stomach ached for food that she had no more of. She tried to decide after running her hands through filthy hair and running her tongue over teeth slick with the fuzz of grime and plaque whether or not she wanted a shower or to brush her teeth. Her stiff with dirt and blood and her arms and legs stung with cuts that needed tending to. She tried to ignore the overwhelming sense of despair that hung over her and thought of times where she felt worse than this. Sam was vaguely reminded of the times where she heard phrases like, "there are so many people worse off than you." At the time, these words had angered her.

*What
could she
possibly know
about suffering?
She just always a bit
down most days.*

“What do you know about suffering?” She screamed, hoping the zombies would hear her. They were the lucky ones, she concluded. People who were once smart enough to quit while they were behind, content with a blanket “Woe-B-Gone” cure that would assimilate them into normal society. Sam liked to think she had experienced what normal life was like and had come to the conclusion that it wasn’t that great. Not that she had much time to enjoy it, her depression coming back like an old friend you take in doses. Gentle waves of familiar growing dread and before you know it you realize you’ve been sucked under for God knows how long and must once again make the decision of whether or not this will be the time you chose to just stay there.

Still, Sam pressed on, cold, hungry, lonely, and lost. When she first started her journey of survival, she often suddenly remembered that she had a gun in her backpack, a thought that would either excite or depress her. Now, whenever she thought about it, she felt nothing.

Back when she actually felt like she had reasons to end it all, she liked to dream about she would do it. Guns had frightened her, but now that she was in a position in which she must kill herself when the time comes as opposed to whenever she gathered up the courage, the whole notion suddenly felt cowardly, and perhaps even a little boring. Sometimes she liked to think that whoever started The Great Healing was still alive and somehow watching her. I didn’t take your stupid shot and I’m still alive! is what she would yell. She toyed with the idea that maybe the world needed people like her now but quickly dismissed it because how could the world be rebuilt by people who refused to be cured because their dejection ran so deep to the point that it was almost a comforting normalcy. That was the problem with minds like these.

The chilly day
turned to a fro-
zen evening. Dead
branches and twigs
fell horizontally from
expired trees like ashes.

A thick fog clogged her
vision and when combined
with her nausea-induced de-
lirium, made her dizzy enough
to vomit near a patch of decayed
underbrush. She spent some time
staring blankly at the remains of a skel-
eton that was once a rat or a squirrel. She
hurled again.

Her backpack weighed heavier than any
burden on her shoulders, Sam could only move
at a crawling pace. Here she was, succumbing
to the elements. "Death by apocalypse," she said
aloud, enjoying how powerful those words sounded.

It was only when she heard that familiar moaning on
the howling wind that she began to pick up the pace as
best as she could, listening for footsteps that were not her
own. If she was going to die, she decided, she wanted to die
fully. Being a zombie meant not being sure which one you
are, and if she already felt that way, then what was the point of
turning?

The house appeared like an oasis and Sam wondered if
her mind had collapsed enough to the point that she
was seeing things. The rotting front steps of the house
felt real enough under feet and waves of relief, as
foreign as that feeling felt to her, seemed tangible,
too. She was surprised to find the front door
unlocked and for a moment was fearful that
other may have ransacked the place first.

That persistent moan had floated into
her ears once again and Sam ultimate-
ly decided that she would deal with
whatever consequences lie inside.

What she needed now was food,
and if she was lucky, medica-
tion.

W h e n
the scien-
tist had found
his wife collapsed
in a bloody heap in
the garden, grass stained
a brownish red from the blood
and brain matter, he remembered
feeling embarrassed, like he had stum-
bled upon someone's most private, intimate
moments. Internally, he had felt himself die right
along with her. Externally, face he put on was
that of a man suddenly enthralled with his latest
experiments. He had not really taken the time to
understand his wife's passing but he found that
he could isolate the cure for sadness into a dain-
ty blue liquid, he found that it did not matter.
He found a cure for people like her.

The zombies and subsequent post-apocalyptic
world that followed had been unintentional. He
knew he was a failure to his practice, that had
been determined pretty quickly. The harder pill
to swallow, however, was being a failure to hu-
manity. At the time, eradicating an illness that
plagued a great deal of the world seemed like a
revolutionary idea. A way for people to sweep
those foul emotions under the rug for good.

Now here he was, hiding in his office, self-
help books scattered across the darkened room,
gun held firmly his hand. He feared a creature of
his own creation, a manifestation of an illness he
didn't want to understand. He could place any
rationality on his fear, he only knew that to die
by one of them would be

to
turn into
the very thing
he sought to eradicate.

And so when at long last
he heard his front door squeak
open, heard the heavy, uneven footsteps
drag across the hardwood outside
the door to his office, he pointed the gun at
the closed door, shut his eyes and fired. The footsteps
halted and a dense thud followed. The scientist
placed the gun back into the drawer of desk, turned the
photo of his wife face down, and made his way over to his
singular, curtained window. He pulled them back and watched the
sun set on his dead garden. "It's the little things," he sighed.





Colophon

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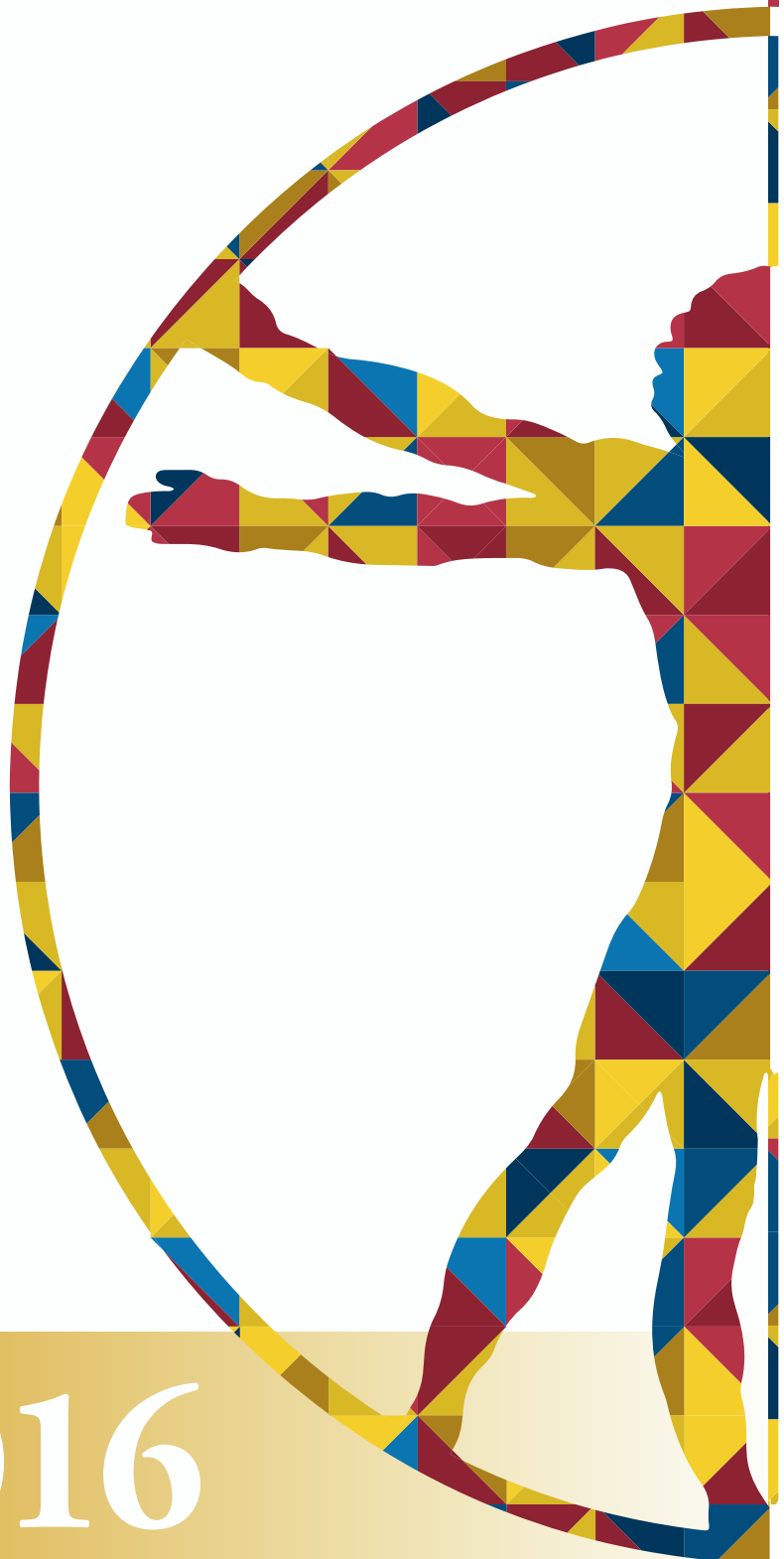
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