



The Helix

Spring 2019

THE HELIX

Spring 2019



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STAFF

~*~

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SUBMISSIONS

THE HELIX welcomes submissions of artwork and literature on both a national and global scale. Please review our guidelines carefully, as any piece submitted incorrectly will be rejected. To get a feel for the kind of work we accept, please review our previously published work.

Submissions are read by our editorial team in chronological order as we make our way through the queue. The wait time for an answer will vary from a few weeks to six months. If you have a submission still in the queue and have not heard back from us, assume it has been held over for consideration for another issue. For inquiries, send us an email at helixmagazine@gmail.com.

General Guidelines

The Helix accepts simultaneous submissions, with immediate notification if work is accepted elsewhere. Previously published work is **not** accepted, but we will consider work previously shared on personal blogs/websites.

- Prose submissions should be double spaced.
- Poetry should be single spaced.
- Up to 4 submissions per genre per submitter will be considered each issue.
- All literary submissions should be in 12pt font Times New Roman.
- Prose submissions are currently restricted to a maximum of 3,000 words each.

If you are submitting multiple works for one category, please send them in one file.

The Helix staff reserves the right to make light changes to the author's original work. If we accept a piece that we feel requires a more substantive revision prior to publication, we will notify the author and grant the author 3 days to respond to the editorial changes.

Creative nonfiction pieces must include appropriate disclaimers including name changes and paraphrased conversations.

We follow the Chicago Manual guidelines when editing submissions.

The Helix reserves first North American serial rights. All rights revert to the author upon publication. If you republish your work in a print or other journal, please credit *The Helix* for the first publication.

EDITOR'S NOTE

I got back from the Yale Writer's Workshop in New Haven this past week, and after feeling sort of ambivalent about the entire experience, I saw that the instructor, Mishka Shubaly, had sent me this email:

“I tell everyone not to but please keep me posted how things are going, in writing and in real life.

Anything that is preventing you from moving forward as a writer is bullshit and must be destroyed, even if it's a part of you.

M.”

Until I got there, I didn't think of myself as a writer or a non-writer; rather, writing was something I was decent at and used to get good grades in class. Writers were into self-promotion and modern art and expensive degrees, and I was a raggie from Thomaston who didn't know anything and didn't have a website or a publisher or self-esteem.

The biggest thing I took away from the week-long experience is that you don't need to come from a place of financial privilege in order to tell a story; most of the best stories come from the margins.

This edition of the *Helix* comes from the margins: there are stories about people watching and the Midwest and butchers, K-Mart and imaginary friends and divorce. These stories, across all literary forms, highlight a way of living that revels in the mundane and the strange simultaneously. These are the average lives of average people, shown at their most revolutionary moments.

As I step down as editor-in-chief of the magazine after a year of massive change, I'd like to thank, as always, the dedicated student staff, faculty advisor Tom Hazuka, student leadership director Sue Sweeney, and the entire English department. Special thanks to Jotham Burrello, who's suggestion that I attend the Yale Writer's Workshop led me to Mishka Shubaly, who gave me the kick in the ass that I needed.

All the best,

Kathryn Fitzpatrick

Editor-in-Chief

POETRY

GET YOUR FUCKING KID OUT OF THIS K-MART

Jake Omstead

He was pulled by his umbilical cord
like a dog down the soup aisle
while the cart began to fill with
wax noodles and prosthetic turkeys

He sloshed through the gravy that
ran like blood against the tide of
bodies wading through the debris
and the filth they had created

Boxes with colorful cartoons filled
cavity death and brake light fluid
were consumed and their intestines
turned purple right in front of him

His eyes were burning from the rotting
meat of dead forgotten cattle that had
been bled dry for consumption and then
chopped up for the display

What have we become? he wondered
as his caretaker yanked on his leash
to pull him into the line filled with green
dead men and pockets filled with minerals

Jake Omstead is a graduate of Ball State University, and current resident of Salem, Oregon. His work has been previously published in *The Broken Plate* and online at *Eskimopie*.

WHEN SHE TELLS ME ABOUT SHAMS

Bethany Armstrong Breitland

There's a 72-year-old rancher that lives inside my body.
Last week in the middle of doing morning chores,
me at my kitchen sink, her weeding my liver, she says:

To worship suffering is just a con.
Life isn't sweeter, the honey doesn't drip quicker
because the bear feels the sting on her snout.

She wags a finger at me. I can feel it
right under my sagging breast. I drop my head,
listen harder, I know what she's saying is true

Always making it about yourself -- that's the damn hook, ain't it?
Your boy's birthday and you spent more time
telling about your trials laboring him
than about the moment he entered god's green earth.
It doesn't matter, how long or how bad the pains were.
It doesn't matter you were alone or that he nearly ripped you in two –
what matters is the glory of him being alive,
standing witness to mystery becoming flesh.

Stop taking yourself the pain, lady-girl.
Don't you know women who wear the badge of suffering
don't have room for anything else?

She climbs up the ladder of my neck, and I can hear the smile
coming out of the side of her mouth as she hollers in my ear,
What did you think it'd turn into? Courage?

Bethany Armstrong Breitland has worked as a barista, a bouncer, an inner-city high school English teacher, a tutor, a researcher, and a florist. She currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Her work has been in the *Apeiron Review*, *Up North Lit*, and is forthcoming in *Forklift, OHIO*.

BALTIMORE

William Blome

Jockeying, humping, and swimming in a hot air balloon to Cecil County, I'm doing whatever the fuck I have to to get the hell out of Dodge and go breast-stroking high and away from my hometown. You best believe I made up my mind three years ago that when this bad boy descends today on the Eastern Shore, I'm saddle-hopping off to buy me a box of bubble gum (big-bang-sounding Bazooka or run-away-scary Fleers), gum to chew the shit out of on our gotta-be-heading-back crawl to where we started, for, certainly, while anyone right in the head would prefer savaging and swallowing licorice sticks or cheddar-spread saltines in the high, thin air, I don't think you or I or any of our pals will ever come across a better way to see gray Baltimore than from under this vagina-pink and latex bulge, unless it be by gripping the basket's handrail in totally honest fright as we simultaneously pop gooey atmospheres against and in front of our eyes.

William C. Blome writes poetry and short fiction. He lives wedged between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and he is a master's degree graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has previously seen the light of day in such fine mags as *Poetry London*,

PRISM International, In Between Hangovers, Fiction Southeast, Roanoke Review, and The California Quarterly.

GRAND CENTRAL

Danny Burdett

The possibilities diminish, even sleep at night, but never expire.

No longer the clarion clack of the next city

and the intermediate destinies.

But even in digital orange, aesthetics sliding,

the possibilities flower.

Someone has placed a piano in the midst of the tiled expanse

like a punctuation mark among so many human run-on sentences.

Occasionally a caesura of existence as someone sits to play.

Traversing -- between Boots the chemist and Burger King,

toward W.H. Smith, or through the entrance/exit on Gordon

Street --

I am buffeted with endless beelined purposes

from which I detour but never adhere.

A rogue molecule that sees nothing but possibility.

There is a corrugated roof over the heart of the world,

extending south endlessly, like a tributary to the Clyde.

Below it, I know, arteries wake and withdraw.

The rain and wind outside my window are tests of faith and color.

I live eight days in a Glasgow railway hotel

as completely as completely.

I don't enter through the grand, rounded portal of the hotel,

but through the train station.
Buffeted, drunk with destination.
Ever home; ever leaving.

Danny Burdett has had poems published in Mudfish, Cape Rock Poetry, Off The Coast, The Midwest Review and (upcoming) The Literary Review. I'm also the author of the film blog, Pictureland.

PERSONAL SPACE

Phillip Wexler

Standing room only on the Manhattan bound
#2 train as it leaves Brooklyn's Borough Hall.

A scrunched-up paper towel stained greasy
brown and yellow and stinking to high heaven

occupies a narrow space at the end of a long
bench. The business suited woman next to it

takes shallow breaths and tries not to look.
Coming on at Fulton Street, a transgendered

dish, hairy armed, stiletto heeled, sporting
smeared lipstick, sequined bag and wig askew,

all red, spots the vacant sliver. Casually,
she flicks the foul towel to the floor, wedges

herself in, digs into a bag of popcorn and,
oblivious, pokes her neighbor repeatedly.

Her Adam's apple juts in and out. The business
woman steals a lurid glance, and flees

to a distant pole. The red number sprawls
into part of the vacated space. She inverts

the popcorn bag and taps the remains
into her gullet, smacks her lips, and flirts

with a soldier across the aisle who has been
furtively checking out the ambiguity between

her legs. At Chambers Street, an obese mother
and toddler heave into the car and make for

the bare patch of bench next to the sweet thing.
Meanwhile, the vermin infested paper towel

has found its way back to her feet. Daintily,
she picks it up, wipes her mouth, and places it

next to her on the bench, glaring at the mother
and child, daring them to just try to wedge in.

Philip Wexler lives in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, and has recently re-
tired from the National Library of Medicine. He has had over 160 po-
ems published in magazines over the years. He organizes Words out
Loud, a free monthly spoken word series, in Glen Echo Park Maryland.

MORNING AFTER SLEEPOVER

Kate Ladew

I keep my head down, hand around the glass of orange juice, watching the condensation sink into my fingers. I hear your mother moving, the sounds quick and hesitant at once, frying pan in the sink half scrubbed as she says, water in her voice, *hurry now, we can't be late*, a pleading that makes me look up, the red around her throat in the shape of your father's fingers flaming out. Hand wet, I pass my palm once, twice, over my jeans and you're gone, backpack hitched, door slamming and it is me and your mother. I can't remember ever being alone with her. *It's okay*, she says, the lie big and wide. *Nothing you need to tell*. She waits. I wait. my chin nods, hers follows as the distance between us slips. After school, when I go home to parents who kiss each other's foreheads, embarrassingly hold hands and never make secrets, I'll nod my chin yes when they ask, is everything okay? And someday, maybe before, maybe after I become your mother's age, I will feel the wear of guilt sink into my fingers. It tastes like oranges.

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, NC with her cats Charlie Chaplin and Janis Joplin.

LAUNDRY LADY

Adam Berlin

The laundry lady
irons men's shirts
in her storefront
window. The streets
are busy with taxis
and buses, but she waves
when I walk by to school.

Her hair is cut
very short like a
bathing cap.
She's barefoot in flip
flops. Her T-shirt
says ALOHA.

While pressing collars
fish-scale sharp,
maybe she dreams of exotic beaches,
silver sand and breakers
capped perfectly white,
and of Diamond Head,
which really looks like
a diamond, I've looked
it up, its cliffs jutting
out to the wild Pacific
off the island of Oahu.

Adam Berlin is the author four novels, including *Belmondo Style* (St. Martin's Press/winner of The Publishing Triangle's Ferro-Grumley Award) and *Both Members of the Club* (Texas A&M University Consortium Press/winner of the Clay Reynolds Novella Prize), and the poetry collection *The Standing Eight*. He teaches writing at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City and co-edits the litmag *J Journal: New Writing on Justice*. For more, please visit adamberlin.com

SOUVENIRS

W.T. Pferrerie

I am the bug man,
and left alone rarely.

When the lady on Cinderella Street
goes to quiet the dog,

I touch her hairbrush, feeling
its bristles with a finger.

On Valentine Place a man leaves
me in his study facing

a wall of photos. A daughter,
a son in a monkey suit.

On my last stop,
I rub my dirty thumb along

a squatty bowl of change,
Canadian quarters and buffalo nickels.

In my truck I sort it into bags,
and then write songs about it all.

About the losers, their souvenirs
and my magisterial accompaniment.

W.T. Pfefferie's poems have appeared widely, in *Antioch Review*, *Confrontation*, *Connecticut Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Cottonwood Magazine*, *Gargoyle*, *Georgetown Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Kentucky Monthly*, *Mississippi Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Nimrod*, *North American Review*, *Ohio Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Oregon.

THIS PRINT TASTES LIKE A RORSCHACH BLOT

Eli Coyle

I bite into bright
yellow yolks
and orange embryos—

like little salmon suns
bleeding apricot,
tangerine,
and watered strawberry.

Within the frame,
globed fruit rise
and fade into shaded graphite,
like warm citrus over nickel.

—Awakened in cosmic dusk,
detached from the ovary.

Eli Coyle received an MA in English from California State University, Chico and lectures in their English department.

SOME SECRETS TASTE LIKE PAPER, OTHERS TASTE LIKE DIRT

Charlotte Van Werven

The past is red and sharp,
a day-old sunburn
from spending a June day
in a strawberry field,
telling stories to the quarter-sized
spiders before flicking them
into the dirt and
licking the juice off your finger.

My great grandpa never
worked in the fields.
He was a book in the barn,
paper lungs filling with sawdust
so he told his dad he had to leave.

His secrets were hidden with the war,
somewhere in Germany
where he fiddled with the tanks
and made them run like honey.

His secrets died with his friend,
his best friend that my great grandma
will never meet,
the one who knew more about him
than she ever will.

Her secrets were hidden with the spiders,
somewhere in the dirt
where everything is earth and water
and the past doesn't matter.

Her secrets died when a little girl
with Dutch blonde braids
stomped the pest dead
when the newspapers read,
“Peace! It’s over.”

Charlotte Van Werven graduated with a bachelor's degree in creative writing and lives in Salem, Oregon. Her work has appeared in *Into the Void*, *Her Story*, and *Gold Man Review*, and is scheduled to appear in *Columbia College Literary Review* this coming April.

FLUSH

Robert Focht

She knows my tell: odd twitch, cross-eyed half-swoon
sired by no-jive hole cards. I check. Her pinched
complexion corrugated, half-assed clinch
unsure of Grand Funk Railroad. Shoot the moon.
Pass the buck if you please yourself. Vibrate.
I eat all, unfiltered. Walk it off, deemed
hamstrung. Cough it up: lead pipe cinch, extreme
backtalk. Here's angular lick to placate
the elders, Susannah abashed. No child
need swallow hurt. Spy, stalk, deliver dirt
writ time immemorial. Deep six curt
gestures dismissed by twelve grand. Fortune smiled
again and again we join hands. Show me
your pause. Rise lucent above. Jamboree.

A graduate of New Jersey City University, **Robert Focht** studied with Maureen O'Brien, Marcus Eisenstein, Patricia Carlin, Dennis Nurkse, Rachel Wetzsteon, Terese Svoboda, and Brenda Shaughnessy. He's had work accepted by *Poached Hare*, *Deathbed Capers*, *The Hoboken Terminal*, *Red M*, and *Steampipe*.

STARBUCKS: EARLY MORNING

Emily Strauss

Piraeus Greece: the ferry from Crete
docked at 4:30 AM, quiet lull
in the shipyard, a few spotlights

passengers disappeared into night's arms
city buses to Athens wouldn't arrive
for two hours

a little fog curled around the giant hulls
silent cranes towered
distant Starbucks along the wharf

open at 5 AM. I huddled in the cold dark
with my bags, waiting for the coffee grinder
packaged cakes

tables and chairs, warmth of early
croissants with hot black tea
longshoremen entered, slurped

an espresso, bundled in wool caps
dawn thinning the Aegean—
stevedores, taxi drivers, passengers

customs officers milled, Starbucks
steamy and crowded now, coffee
smells filling the gaps.

Emily Strauss has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry, which she has written since college. Over 450 of her poems appear in a wide variety of online venues and in anthologies, in the U.S. and abroad. She is a Best of the Net and two-time Pushcart nominee. The natural world of the American West is generally her framework; she also considers the narratives of people and places around her. She is a retired teacher living in Oregon.

DEAD ANIMALS KEEP TURNING UP LATELY IN MY YARD

Jeff Morgan

The city said they could pick up the opossum
as long as it was in the road, which it was
after I gave it a flip with a hoe,
then part of the decaying fly feast
was in the road and part was in my swale.
A private contractor gathered it up in a heavy cloth,
threw it into the back of his truck, and drove away.

It had been days since I first noticed the feathers,
the decomposing bird's carcass hidden under tall grass,
and then walking back in from the shed,
I saw it and scooped it into one big leaf
with another big leaf, carrying it like a sandwich
for a heave into a dense portion of our garden
where once I threw vegetation growing in our plumbing.

Even the millipedes around my house are killing themselves.
Their tiny legs undulate in waves as they near the edge
of the pool, often dangling from the overhanging coping
like an action star to usually fall unto the water
where the current takes them into the filter,
the kind that can trap tiny fingers and toes
below the surface in the deep end where they shouldn't be.

Jeff Morgan's poetry has most recently appeared in *Spank the Carp*, *The Midnight Oil*, and *Pinyon*. He is also the author of *American Comic Poetry* (McFarland, 2015). He teaches at Lynn University and lives with his wife, Dana, in Boynton Beach, Florida.

MATHER

Reid Mitchell

He misses all the weddings. He always
has a good excuse. He is in China
or saving the world, or his uncle
Tonoose needs green beans and hand holding
when all the daughters march by

The bread-winner, the bacon-bringer-
homewards, kibble and a Pay Day bar
in every pocket, his scalp sweating
under his toupee, his fat thighs chafing
in his white sharkskin suit, and he

misses all the weddings, all his nieces
whose faces shine like the luminous dial
on his watch and whose honeymoon
tickets are to islands so familiar
he would have stayed home

The hotel, painted as pink as a woman's
summer dress, looks like a child's crayon
drawing. The hull of the boat is as rotten
and hollow as a cancerous breast, and
like that endlessly naughty child, he

is missing all the weddings, card
games, christenings, red skirts, flashes
of blond hair, he will never go fishing again
he is looking up through one yard
of sunlit water, at the shiny green sky

and always he will be missing all the weddings.

Reid Mitchell is a New Orleanian teaching in China. More specifically, he is a Scholar in Jiangsu Province's 100 Foreign Talents Program, and a Professor of English at Yancheng Teachers University. His poems have been published by *Cha: Asia Literary Review*, *In Posse*, and elsewhere and he has a collection due out from a small press in Berlin.

COMPANY

W.M. Snyder

The café door open to the street, the seven tables occupied tonight, one by troopers in uniform. A bony cat slinks through chair legs and rungs. We listen to the calms and quicks of conversations until the owners, two brothers, bring our food—fresh prawn, onion, butter, bread. Suddenly, the cat leaps to our table. I brush it off and the owners chase it, apologize, pat our shoulders, bring fresh wine. The troopers laugh, pound backs. One pings his glass with a fork.

The cat creeps back. A trooper tempts it in with coos and a knife, its blade spearing shells. The cat leaps toward the dangle. The trooper raises the knife. The cat eyes the shells, springs again—four, five, six times—claws spread, ears erect, but the knife jerked up just far enough. Someone behind us makes a hiss. The owners polish trays at the kitchen door. Another leap. The trooper darts his hand, throws the cat and it tumbles. Another hiss. A whistle. The cat leaps, fur-lines taut. The trooper slashes downward, but the cat twists, the blade flashing past.

The cat licks its flank. The trooper drops the knife—blade first—but the cat springs aside. We hoot for the cat, clap. The trooper smiles, leans back, thrusts his legs—accepts our applause. A woman glowers, reaches toward the cat. Tail quivering, it licks the bread, the juice and prawn she's offered.

WM Snyder has published poems in *Poet Lore*, *Cottonwood*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, among others. He was the co-winner of the 2001 Grolier Poetry Prize, winner of the 2002 Kinloch Rivers Chapbook competition; The CONSEQUENCE Prize in Poetry, 2013; the 2015 Claire Keyes Poetry Prize. He teaches writing and literature at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN.

EXPOSITION

Korey Wallace

We cut meat. Stack finely formed steaks.

Sell and are sold.

There is so much to getting up and putting yourself to tasks

Again, and again.

Culling meaning through what has been made necessary.

In some sense, the narrative is only and can only be some version of imitation.

And it was written, and it was nothing but that--

Words smoked through rocks and rivers and skies

Bodies birthed to and into variance

We cut meat.

We, the people.

We, the gods.

Sold and selling.

Korey Wallace's poetry has appeared in several online journals. He believes poetry is worthless yet it redeems both the world and himself.

CONQUEROR RYE, SOUTH DAKOTA

Henry Cherry

Sometimes I'd drag on a skateboard behind Marc's motorcycle. Bottom of the Hill had hot dogs and beer every Sunday. I looked up at the sky one time and heard the peal of someone who got on a train and went way out.

I shook in the ease-way of a Baltimore club when Paul separated me from a much bigger guy. Went home to the couch where I was living. There were lizards in glass cases and I needed them to know I wasn't always like that.

But this one guy and I rode around in the truck and tossed reasons into the Mississippi. I had a curly reason and one that wasn't. He had one taller than him. We weren't worth the record store operating allowances that came with us.

You could litter the counter with sandwich crumbs and lay out the astronomy of linear cultural abandon as it switched from A side to B. It was a valley above the water. When it flooded, the truck drifted across the boundary.

Henry Cherry has worked as a cowhand in South Texas, a chef in New Orleans, and once snowshoed through Maine in February. Now a journalist and photographer, he is based in Los Angeles. A recent story ap-

pearing in *Slippery Elm* was nominated for a Pushcart and shortlisted for the Best American series. An award-winning poet, he has been a featured reader at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and at Litquake in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *JMWW*, *Scalawag*, *Australia's Cordite Poetry Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Silver Needle Press*, *The Louisiana Review* and is upcoming in *Poydras Review* and *Free State Review*.

MULTI-LEVEL MARKETING

Jeffrey MacLachlan

Yesterday morning a giant lay dead on my lawn. Both hands rested against his chest. His opened jaw was wide as a modest hatchback and so I entered. Subterranean noise rattled me. Worried about being marked tardy at work, I photographed weathered molars for documentation. Wooden steps leading down the esophagus suggested an encampment deep within. The walls blinked with emergency lights.

I came upon a shallow creek carrying unhurried shadows. Bodies of Fed Ex workers rested among black puddles and rock. Tongues stretched out like conveyor belts and their yellow teeth were packaging slips. I attempted to see if any belonged to me when a numbing rain began. I ducked into a cellar stocked with Moscato wine. The walls were the color of pink eye and so I reached for my travel hand sanitizer. An old colleague tapped my shoulder. He began to sell the modern health benefits of descending into giants until they suffer cardiac arrest.

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan has recent work in *New Ohio Review*, *the minnesota review* and, *Columbia Journal*, among others. He teaches literature at Georgia College & State University.

WHEN DINOSAURS DIE

Jacob Bennett

It was called *When Dinosaurs Die* – a gift from my father. The cover was purple, like the bags around my mother’s eyes in the photo of us on my bedside table. I wore my Tigger slippers as I flipped its pages, my stomach warm with blue-box mac and cheese. Nowadays, I just read

her journals alone in my apartment. She wrote about being annoyed with my father when she fell and scraped her knee the summer the three of us took a trip to Disney World. He kept asking if she was okay. *Of course not.* I moved the journals

into the drawer of my coffee table as my father helped me move this summer. He didn’t seem to notice them, not really, as we brought the table out to his truck.

Jacob Robert Bennett's poetry has appeared in *Hobart*, *The Monarch Review*, and *Quail Bell*. He lives near Washington, D.C.

SKELETON

Alex Stanley

1

There's a skeleton in my living room.
My mother bought it for when
holiday season comes 'round,

but it's been there for longer
than last February, when I learned
that even St. Valentine was celibate.

My mother said that she equates it
to a death in the family. guess
that explains the plastic body.

2

I can see those unmoving eyeholes,
letting me know that this is permanent.
That I will have to learn to live with it.

So, I packed my bags and left to go back
to school, and I built a two thousand,
six-hundred-mile wall against it.

But I came home drunk one night,
tripped toward my bed and balled
my naked fists at its toothy smirk.

3

Right now, I'm staring at a girl,
whose beauty is so elegant that
I wish for nothing more than to talk.

I got my eyes checked, but I swore
it clicked its calcium-deficient feet
down the hallway, and clunked

its tailbone next to hers. I needed to
tell her that it's sitting by her side, that
I hope everything will be alright.

4

What I wanted to say is that
I was devastated when my father
said that word — “divorce.”

But I nodded my head,
let my brother speak for me
and quietly filled out paperwork.
(for my latest speeding ticket)

My sister cried and ran to her boyfriend.
My brother cursed and called his girlfriend.
I sat there at the table, filling out a form.

Alex Stanley is a graduate of Boston College, where he studied under poets Allison Adair and Suzanne Matson. He has worked as a sports journalist, and his work can be found published by *Sports Illustrated*, *SportTechie*, and the *Rio Grande SUN*.

THOMAS

Tuesday Taylor

talked about aliens.
I'm always listening.
He makes the best ham sandwiches ever.
Gray hair, hat
corn-oil stained,
chewed nails,
he's always nervous.

Says the government's gonna come get him.
Only if the aliens don't find him first.
Talking J. Edger Hoover, JFK and
aliens.
Says he shaves his knuckle hair,
his fingertips, too.
I might want to rob a bank one day.

Little chicken legs, teeth that fall out every day, he
talks about aliens.
I'm always listening.
He makes the best ham sandwiches.
Won't do anything "the man" says.

You want lettuce, tomatoes, onions and grilled bread?
Please sir.
That's why I do anything for you dear,

you give me respect.

Always, Thomas.

He says if the aliens pick me up,
they'll bring me right back,
I talk too much.

We talk about aliens, God, love
people, respect. I listen to everything
he says. Thomas made the best ham sandwiches.

Tuesday Taylor is an accomplished author, educator and public speaker. She received her degree from West Virginia State University and earned the Robert F. Kennedy Visionary Award. She then went on to produce and host her own multimedia shows called *Tuesdays With Tuesday Taylor* and *What's Real WV*.

RASPBERRY REFORMATION

Charlotte Van Werven

In a Dutch farm town
the rain washes the sky gray,
but not much else.

The smells of raspberries and
cow manure mask the vinegar stench
of duplicity because the wind-up pastor
is leading a Bible study
on sobriety tonight.

The women in this town
use Pine-Sol the same way
the Great Depression
used castor oil

There are holes in the wall
where old nails used to be,
hanging a picture of a lamb
in front of a great iron gate.
The title was, "Forgiveness."

THE DAY AFTER YOUR MOTHER ATE THE LAST RED VELVET OREO

Robert Beveridge

Your personal Maginot Line
involves hot dogs pierced
with spaghetti, marmosets
at the country bar,
the heartbreak of psoriasis.
New age piano pisses
from the ceiling speakers
as you order lunch.
From the corner of your eye
you see the orange tails
twitch, prepare to do
the Charleston.

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Soliloquies*, *The Coachella Review*, and *The Greensilk Journal*, among others.

UNDER A WAVE OFF KANAGAWA

William Doreski

A mural of a massive wave
painted on a concrete wall
can't provoke a disaster,

can it? Fenced off so no one
can smut it with graffiti,
a careful reproduction

of Hokusai's *Under a Wave*
Off Kanagawa convinces me
that such prehensile vigor

could claw the flesh from the bone
and leave the stony planet naked.
Hokusai liked to trigger fear

in admirers of his sentient forms.
His woodblocks invoke forces
shaped by natural enmity

to mock human fragility
and make us feel small. Painting
this image on a wall overstates

the case, but we're all believers,
and the weight of that cresting wave
overwhelms the usual doubts.

William Doreski's work has appeared in various e and print journals and in several collections, most recently *A Black River, A Dark Fall* (2019).

FUSE BOX, BAGHDAD MEDICAL CITY

Joumana Altallal

Among other things, the stasis:
the street that makes obsolete

oil lamp shrines, the wick
of kerosene before light.

The generator spits
in stimulated surges

tangles into a scripted
dementia of wire cadavers;

this unsteady wave of electricity
is maddening, faithless.

In the complex, doctors rush
legless patients

into the only working elevator
assuring *it is okay, it is the nature of our job*

in a country that depends on God
and the fuse box, to dig our heels

in the waters of its Tigris,
and attempt always to extinguish.

Joumana Altallal was born in Baghdad to Iraqi and Lebanese parents. She is a recent graduate of the University of Virginia and is currently a first year MFA candidate in poetry at the Helen Zell Writers' Program. She works with Citywide Poets to lead an after-school poetry program for high school students in Metro Detroit. Her work appears in the *Virginia Literary Review*, *Inkstone*, and *Jaffat al-Aqlam*, among others.

FICTION

ADVENTURES IN THE LAND OF THE PERMANENTLY ADOLESCENT

Audrey Rhys

Chey's got legs like stardust floating in the water and she's doing the breaststroke, look it, look it, check it out, five meters, ten, off and off and back again.

I can't swim.

Chey can though, fuck, man, like a shark, octopus, dolphin, squid, jets of water or tails and flippers or whatever. Chey can swim.

So we take Chey and cajole and bust and rumpusraise and use every dirty dastardly trick in the book and finally she's crooked her eyes like archers like she can see through everything if she squints at the right angle, occluding her eyesight to the proper level and plane.

"ya alrite" says Chey so we take her along in the van and sing rowdy songs all the way down to the pier.

We're standing there at the end of the pier and Chey's like "hey so where is it" and Jimmy points downward into the sunken nuclear city and we can all see the faint colloidal glow and Chey looks and she's like "nah fuck that im out" but we talk her back into it even though she wants three shares for our one each and there's some grumbling and Biff wants to just jump down and get it himself but we all know the thing down there will get him and so does he. He won't do anything. Chey kind of rubs his nose in it, makes to leave and Biff apologizes real quick and Chey's back on board.

So she strips down to her swimsuit and we all look at her ass and she calls us pervs even though I would think she likes it, she likes the attention, she likes the way my eyes slide from her calves to her ass to her

breasts to her neck and she winks at me every now and then because she knows it gives me a hardon and makes me blush.

And then Chey jumps in and all there is is bubbles and the splash.

Here's the story about Chey. She's not real. Doesn't exist. One of us made her up but no one's telling cause if they do she disappears and she won't get us the treasure from the sunken nuclear city. They say that down there some bits still glow white-hot with radiation and that the water cooks and that nothing lives, but the madeup people aren't alive so they can't die. They say that there's something down there, big and squiddy, with lots of tentacles and shit. Big lurking thing like a spider in a watery web. Gives me the chills just thinking about it, even if I know it's just a rogue notion gone a little overgrown.

"I bet they have a massive fight," Lors says, "down there in the water."

"Who?" Biff says. We all roll our eyes at him.

"Chey and the thing, dumbass."

"Oh, right." He squints a little, like he does when he thinks. "Think she'll die?"

Jimmy shrugs. "Prolly not," he says. "Those made-up people are tough."

"But the thing's made-up too."

"Even if it is, nobody's taking care of it any more. It prolly looks tougher than it is."

"I see bubbles," someone else says, and we all crowd round. This close to the water you can almost feel the radiation. The bubbles burble up then dissipate.

Here's the other story about Chey. I didn't make her up. Not my idea. Someone else's. Not Biff's either, he isn't smart enough for it. So it's either Jimmy or Neil or Lors and I don't think it's Lors but I can't be

sure. And even though they totally made her up for pleasure, I mean look at her, who gives someone legs like that and an ass like that and those small firm breasts like that and lips like that and a mouth like that if they don't want to fuck her brains out every night without feeling guilty? Come on. Even though all that, Chey fell in love with me. It's a secret. Nobody knows about Chey and me and I'm scared to death someone is going to find out because you bet they'd talk and if whoever dreamed her up found out he'd unmake her just to spite me.

So we're sitting there on the dock skipping rocks and I imagine myself into getting twenty-three skips and everyone complains because it's totally cheating, you know. I like skipping rocks, though, even if I have to cheat. I'm good at it anyway, not twenty-three good but a solid ten to fifteen good. But then Neil throws and he goes for fifty and the attention is taken off of me and I get to check my phone cause it's been buzzing against the side of my cock for like ten solid minutes and I kind of have a hardon and Chey texted me.

“hey when im done u wanna fuck?”

I text back “ya sure where n when”

“asap I need u baby”

We sext for a while until Chey bursts from the water with a sliver of inky-black tentacle clutched in her mouth and one strong long arm carrying the chained chest we all imagined must have been down there: the treasure of the sunken nuclear city. We all stand up and I pray to god that nobody notices my cock.

Later that night I imagine us up on the roof of the tallest building staring at the stars and pointing out constellations. “Hey, look. Big dipper.”

Chey is naked and rolled over on her side clinging onto me sort of and I can feel her nipples against my arm and god it's sort of driving me

crazy and I'm trying to distract myself cause we just fucked and I can't go again but if she sees me get a hardon she'll want to go again and I'll like die. Chey looks at the big dipper and yawns. "orion's better" she says and I guess I agree.

"Hey, what was the treasure like?"

Chey shrugs. "big and glowy. jewels and shit. probly radioactive but whatever, im fine."

Some of the guys are really unimaginative. Place is called the sunken nuclear city and the best they can think of is jewels. I gave myself an antique sword that turns into plasma when you press a button and then you can cut through anything. It's cool as fuck and it's a lot more useful than jewels. Anyone can make jewels here. Sword like that though, that has application. Jewels just look pretty.

Lors comes up on the roof and sees us and stops. Chey doesn't bother trying to cover herself, just stares at him.

"Oh shit," he says. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I ask. "My daddy taught me –"

"No, shut the fuck up, we're not doing that," he says.

"Look, don't tell anyone," I ask and I'm trying not to beg but holy shit Chey is the best lay I've had in a long time and I have to prioritize real quick and I figure that I can ditch these losers but I don't want to ditch Chey. Lors asks why not and I say, "Cause then she's gone, man, whichever one of them imagined her will fuckin' unmake her to spite me."

He laughs. "How come you figure it wasn't me, man?"

I shrug. "She's still there, en't she?"

"yo im still here"

"Shut up Chey," I sort of snap at her. I guess I regret it but Lors laugh~~will~~ I don't. I can feel Chey pouting out of the corner of my eye.

When she does I always grab her bottom lip between my teeth and it makes her laugh. I just want Lora to go away or something. I imagine it hard enough that he gets the picture and says, “Jesus fuck awright I get it.” He mumbles off back down the stairs, scuffing at them as he goes. He makes the door slam, too. Me and Chey just watch. I laugh when he’s gone.

“What a dick, huh?” I ask her. She shrugs.

“idk duder i think hes kinda cute”

I roll my eyes at her and I reach over and cup her breast. She makes a small noise, but I’m not paying attention. I’ve got the big dipper in one eye and Chey in the other and for a moment I make myself believe that this crazy stupid thing isn’t going to disappear.

Her eyes pop open all of a sudden. “fuck m8 i gotta run”

My heart pops out of my chest and runs down my leg into one of my soles. This means that whoever made her up wants her back. And of course there’s only one reason for it, you know, so on top of the jealousy burning a hole in your chest (literally, my ribs are starting to smolder) there’s the anger that when you love this girl so much you take her up the tallest building in town to look at the goddam big dipper and she just gets yanked out from under you like that without even a please or thank you.

I’m too busy getting mad to feel her kiss me and pop out of existence.

It’s just me alone with my still-wet swim trunks and my plasma sword. I feel so down I imagine myself a cool suit of armor and get into it and flip the visor down. I clank over to the edge of the building and sit down on it, look down. All the lights flickering on and off make me feel like I’m gazing from straitlace city down into neon hell, and I look up again. There are some jets and magic carpets and dragons and shit but I

look up further and further up, past the cloud cities to the left and the space stations to the right and there, in the middle of the sky taunting me, is the big dipper.

Audrey Rhys is an American writer who values her privacy.

THE MEDUSA STAGE

James Hartman

I really admire jellyfish. They have no brains, yet have survived more than four hundred million years. I have two PhD's, and I still don't know how to operate the fucking vacuum cleaner. I'm thinking about this when my wife of eight years strolls into the living room where I am standing with the vacuum cleaner and announces she is having an affair with her dentist. I guess I knew my wife as well as I did this stupid appliance. How do you describe a daze? I ask if she receives free teeth cleanings.

She says, "Did you hear what the hell I just said!?"

I don't answer, which seems to piss her off more because her cheeks bloom rosy explosions. I guess she was hoping I'd crumble and beg on my hands and knees for her not to leave me, but after begging the board not to terminate my teaching contract earlier this morning I suppose my hands and knees are a little sore. She doesn't know yet, of course, so I take this unique opportunity to inform her that her associate-professor-of-19th-century-history husband has been let go from his place of work of eleven years for "repeated failure to perform at a level appropriate to the standards of this university." Never mind that for three hours each morning before classes I was undergoing radiation treatment, and had been for the last four months, and that they knew this, and had offered me their unconditional support.

How hard is it to operate a vacuum cleaner? I push the On button and the thing doesn't turn on. It's plugged in and everything.

Carolyn explains how strong her dentist is and how he's provided her with a foundation of support through these last four trying months.

I am not sure but I think I hear a rickety sound, like something is rolling around inside this unwieldy thing.

“Are you listening to me, Edward? Because it’s like you don’t care about what I’m saying.”

Are you listening to me, Carolyn? Because it’s like you don’t care about what I’m saying. Also, did we throw the instruction manual out? I think we did. I think we thought we would never need it.

“And now you’re laughing!?”

When I have finally stopped laughing, I look around.

But she’s gone.

So, this is what happens when absolutely everything falls apart. You stand in your living room, laughing about an instruction manual.

The doorbell rings, and I go to answer because I think it’s Carolyn returning to inform me that she is also pregnant. After failing to conceive with me for five years she had conceived a baby with her dentist on the first try. Alas, it is not my loyal and faithful wife but a man in a light blue button-down with matching light blue shorts. The landlord’s maintenance man. Too bad. I was really looking forward to asking if the baby would receive free teeth cleanings as well.

The man smiles much too energetically for my liking. “Something wrong with your vacuum cleaner, sir?”

“Excuse me?”

He throws a thumb over his shoulder. “Just got a call a few minutes ago for a maintenance issue? Maintenance issues apply only to things belonging to the apartment but, hey, it’s a slow morning and I thought I’d see if I could help you out.” I think about telling him wrong apartment but he’s already, like, skipping inside. “Forecast says storms later and I’ll tell ya what, it sure feels like it. I’m slimy!” He stomps his feet on

the kitchen floor and struts through the kitchen into the living room. “Yes, here we are.”

I stop at the edge of the kitchen.

He looks down. Then he squints around the apartment. “Well, no wonder!” He walks toward the air purifier against the opposite wall, and does something behind it that I can’t see because I can’t see through air purifiers. He picks up the vacuum cleaner, presses On, and the damn thing roars. As he walks by he tips an imaginary hat at me and says, “All set.”

“Asshole.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

I wipe my nose and say, “You come in here to fix this problem, and it takes you two seconds, and then you tell me I’m *all set*.”

He leans in next to me. “Sir?”

I spread my arms. “*Am* I all set?”

His face gradually blemishes a bright pink. He’s embarrassed, though I can’t imagine why, just a guy here spreading his arms out asking if he was all set. Maybe Carolyn was fucking him, too? For his bright pink face was strong and provided her with a foundation of support through these last four trying months.

“Is there, ah, anything else I can do for you, sir?” he asks, suddenly glancing around, a little nervous.

And he should be, for I played a little golf in high school, and I feel my hands now grip the vacuum cleaner’s handle like it’s a driver I’d use to blast a par 4 in one.

Distantly, I hear the door close.

The handle slips from my hands, and the thing clashes to the carpet.

I realize my hands are wet, so I wipe them on my jeans. My cheeks are wet, too, and I wipe them with my hands.

A crumpled McDonald's hamburger wrapper, I notice, lies next to the vacuum cleaner, beside it the gold paper bag it came in. Several feet away I see Mister Samson's toy mouse that I still didn't know what to do with. Then a picture frame with Carolyn's and my smiles in the fractured glass. Then her necklace with the dolphin sparkling 47 diamonds, the month and day we were married. I bend and loop my finger around it, and the necklace drips off in separate directions.

I don't know why I didn't notice these things before. Even now, it is starting to feel like I am floating above it all.

James Hartman's fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions, and appears in *Blue Fifth Review*, *december*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *The Offbeat*, and *New World Writing*, among others. His scholarly work is featured in *The Hemingway Review*. He has several degrees, including a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, and lives in Pennsylvania. You can reach him at jhartm17@yahoo.com.

TWO BOYS

Henry Giardina

Outside the schoolhouse, two boys were playing an evil game.

“Let’s see how far we can throw Ms. Murchison’s shoes.”

They laughed as they pitched the galoshes into the outdoors, thinking how funny it would be for their teacher to walk home in the rain.

“Her feet will be so wet.”

“Yeah.”

One boy was older, dark blond with a ruddy complexion. The other was smaller, darker, more trusting. He had seen less of the world than his friend who, though he came from means, made it his purpose to introduce the world of larceny into their schoolboy existence. Stealing carrot sticks from his friends’ lunchboxes when they weren’t looking. Reaching for an extra pack of gumdrops while the cashier was busy filling a prescription. Chucking the galoshes had been his idea.

“I can’t wait to see the look on her--”

“Here she comes.”

From a distance they could see their teacher peeking her head outside the doorway. She came out, looked on either side just in case she’d left her galoshes somewhere she hadn’t remembered. She reached out her palm to feel the rain and stared at the sky for a bit. After a few moments she shook her head, sighed, and walked back in.

The boys, who had been prepared to find this hilarious, were oddly sunken by it.

“That was great,” said the older boy. “Gosh that was hilarious.” He forced a laugh.

“Hey, want to see if we can take the lizard?”

The class had a pet lizard that stayed in its cage overnight. Students were not allowed to take him home, so of course everyone wanted to.

“Yeah let’s do that,” said the older boy, trying to get himself excited about it. “That will be hilarious.”

They waited until the teacher left and headed inside.

“My mom won’t pick me up until later. You can come home with me, I heard your mom say it was fine last night.”

The lizard was in his cage, laying low on a rock.

“Wow he’s ugly isn’t he.”

“I don’t know,” said the small boy. “He’s kind of cool looking.”

“Yeah but ugly. Jeez.” The older boy reached his hand in, waiting for the lizard to make contact. The lizard, being slow, didn’t make much of this. He didn’t try to run or hide, not that he’d have had much success in the tiny cell.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

Lizard in hand, he slipped it into his pocket.

“Will he stay there?”

“I don’t know. Probably,” said the older boy. “He doesn’t care where he goes.”

“How do you know.”

“It’s not like he lives here.”

“Of course he does.”

“No I mean his real home. In Venezuela or wherever.”

“Lizards live everywhere.”

“Not this kind. He looks exotic.”

The lizard wasn’t even poking its head out of the pocket. He stayed there with his head just an inch or two below the pocket opening.

“Wow think about how Ms. Murchison is doing right now,” said the older boy.

“Yeah. She’s probably soaked.”

“Hilarious.” The older boy laughed: a low, heaving sound. “Classic.”

They were walking through the woods to get to the older boy’s house.

“Wasn’t your mom going to pick us up.”

“Yeah. She texted. Told me we should walk.”

“Okay.”

The smaller boy felt twigs cracking underfoot. He didn’t like the woods. He’d gotten poison ivy once, at camp.

“Are we far?”

“You’ve walked home with me before, idiot.”

“I forget.”

“No, it’s not far.” The older boy patted his pocket to feel the outline of the lizard.

“Is he alive?”

“He’s still moving.”

They went a bit further.

“Should we take him out?” asked the younger boy.

“What do you mean.”

“Give him a break or something.”

“A break?” he scoffed. “Lizards don’t need breaks.”

“Yeah but he can sit on a rock or something.”

The older boy rolled his eyes. He took the lizard out and placed him on a moss-covered rock along the path. The lizard’s eyes seemed to scan the distance.

“Wow he’s boring.”

“Do you think he’ll try to run away.”

“No. Like I told you, he’s far from home.”

“He’s a lizard. He can probably make a home anywhere.”

“Will you stop acting like I don’t know what lizards are?”

He roughly snatched up the lizard in his hand and felt it squirming.

“Let’s go.”

“You’re holding him too tight.”

“Fine, you know so much about lizards? You hold him.”

The older boy threw the lizard in the smaller boy’s direction. They heard him hit the leaves and scurry.

“What the hell?”

The smaller boy dropped to his knees and started sorting through the fallen leaves.

“Why did you do that? Now he’ll get away.”

“He’s right there, get over it.”

“Where? He’s not, he’s gone.”

“I can see him! Oh wait no. Never mind.”

“He’s probably camouflaged now. We’ll never find him.”

“Whatever,” said the older boy. “I don’t care about a dumb lizard. Let’s just go home.”

But the younger boy stayed back.

“What are you gonna do, call it by name?”

“He doesn’t have a name, I’m not stupid.”

“Stop looking for it. Come on.”

“Give me a second.”

“It’s getting dark.”

“Look...I’ll meet you there.”

“Stupid, you don’t even remember how to get there.”

“I’ll figure it out!”

The older boy was taken aback by this. Both the force of the statement and its meaning. During their years of friendship, the younger boy

had always largely bowed to the older boy's judgment. He wasn't one for speaking up or contradicting. He never asked to be alone, or to be left behind, or to not share in a prank.

"Just go," said the younger boy. "I'll be fine."

"Whatever." The older boy trod off with loud, deliberate steps.

The younger boy continued to look for the lizard. He did feel it getting darker, but he wasn't scared. He was glad to be alone for once. He pressed his hands to the ground and closed his eyes to see if he could hear the lizard's movements. He wondered if the force of the throw had hurt it.

"I should have carried you," he said. "It never would have happened if I was doing it."

About an hour passed. It was almost completely dark now. The sky was purple the way it is right before completely blacking out on a fall night. He could see a few stars but couldn't find the moon.

He wondered where Ms. Murchison's galoshes had landed. Right now, he thought, she was probably warming herself by a fire, or soaking her feet in the tub. He hoped she hadn't gotten too wet. Admittedly, it would have been funnier if she'd reacted differently. If she'd kicked the door or started swearing or something. Ms. Murchison was always so mournful. Part of him had just wanted to get a rise out of her, to see an emotion in her that wasn't sadness.

He lay down in the leaves. The lizard was long gone, most likely. He could hear things moving in the leaves and in the trees around him. He wasn't afraid of the dark or of animal sounds. He'd rather be here than hanging out with his friend, anyway. Lately all he wanted to do was boring stuff like that. Stealing somebody's boots and putting a wad of gum inside, or taking the class lizard. It was funny for a minute, and then it was boring. These days he wasn't really as interested in all that.

He'd rather just hang out doing nothing with the other kids. The other kids didn't like his friend very much. He was too loud and brash for them, and they didn't find his jokes funny.

"You should sit with us at lunch," one of them said. "Not *him*." She'd made a face.

But he knew what loyalty was. And he wasn't ready to leave his friend just yet. He wasn't really so bad, you had to get to know him.

He felt something move beside him. He jumped up.

"Is that you?"

He felt around with his hands, being careful not to make any sudden moves.

"I won't hurt you."

He felt the lizard's presence somehow. Like it was being cautious, making sure that the boy's friend wasn't waiting somewhere close by, ready to spring out and torture him.

"I told you, he's gone. You can come out now."

He heard the scuffle of leaves. It was too dark to see anything clearly, but he knew it was the lizard. He felt it come near him. It was almost touching his side. He stayed very still. He didn't know how long had passed since his friend left, only that it was dark now when it had been merely dusky before. They would come for him soon. He only had a short amount of time to lay here, still. He felt the lizard's stillness next to him. In a minute they would come, bearing flashlights, his mother angrily blaming him for making her "a nervous wreck." His friend behind her, grinning to see him in trouble. In a moment they would come. Just a little bit longer.

Henry Giardina is a writer living in Los Angeles. His writing has appeared in the *New Yorker.com*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *the Paris Review Daily*, and *the Atlantic*, among other outlets. He is a 2016 MacDowell Fellow and a 2018 Edward F. Albee Fellow.

DATE ATTIRE

Tyler Paterson

Madeline waited for Clark in the dimly lit restaurant. Blind dates were a younger woman's game, but somehow Lucy had talked her into it.

"Clark is nice, and stable. He does a lot of good," she said, and so Madeline reluctantly agreed. Traditionally, whenever a guy got too close to her and saw her for what she really was, they'd end up leaving and the isolation would take up fierce residence in her mind.

But maybe this time would be different, even though Clark was 45 minutes late already.

Madeline was about to call it a night when her date came scrambling in and sat down. His black hair was a mess, and he wasn't wearing what she would consider to be *date attire*. Instead, he wore blue tights, red undies, a blue rashguard with a giant 'S' on the front, and a flowing red cape.

"I am SO sorry that I'm running late," he said. His voice was like warm maple syrup. "It's just that work called, and there was this...thing...I had to deal with last minute. I swear, I'm not usually like this. Typically, I'm *very* responsible."

"Oh my goodness," Madeline gasped. She pointed at the giant 'S' and quickly looked around to see if anyone else in the dimly lit restaurant had noticed.

"Aw geez," Clark said. "Listen, you cannot tell ANYONE about this, ok?! It's already hard enough meeting a good woman, but to add this snafu to the list puts everyone in danger. Literal danger."

"But it's not..." Madeline started.

“What am I doing? Why am I angry? Listen, I’m sorry. I never really knew my parents. My adoptive family never quite understood me. It’s fair to say it’s caused some emotional issues. Not that I’m putting those things on you, I’m just speaking my truth, but as I’m saying it, I realize how insane this all sounds.”

“Listen, I get it...”

“A woman falls out of a building window, I need to catch her. A meteor is headed towards Earth, it’s up to me to punch it in half. The demands of the people...I tell you what... Do you know what I was doing right before this? The reason I was late? An elderly woman was trapped in a burning apartment with her eight cats. EIGHT! Why was her apartment even on fire?!”

“You did a great thing, and I...”

“No. I’m so embarrassed. This is truly awful and I’m the only one to blame. This is no way to approach a relationship. And to think – I was excited to maybe finally move on and meet someone after it didn’t work out with... It doesn’t matter. There I go again! Blabbering about past relationships! I’m so sorry. I’m just gonna go.”

Clark excused himself and threw a \$100 bill on the table. Madeline wasn’t sure where he pulled it from. He left without any more fanfare, and the other diners didn’t seem to notice.

Madeline took in a long slow breath and exhaled it, shrugging her shoulders and bowing her head. She stood up softly and walked to the exit of the dimly lit restaurant.

“I’m never gonna find love,” she said, and then raised her arms and flew away.

Tyler Paterson is the author of the novels *Dark Satellites* and *WOTNA*. A Pushcart Prize nominee and graduate of Second City Chicago, his work has appeared in over 40 publications worldwide including *Fiction Magazine*, *The Gateway Review*, and a number of Anthologies. He is a current MFA candidate at the University of New Hampshire. Send him a tweet @WTPaterson.

BRICOLAGE

Philip Kobylarz

Those days, he would shop for girls in the market. Not literally so, just in a way to maybe appreciate those who he would never have, or know, in any substantive or sensual sense, as they were so much more interesting than the fabrics, the giant shrimp of langoustines, the knocked off Italian bags made in Morocco or Spain, the Virgin Mary statues carved out of wax because they were candles now, the immensely large pan of paella, the shoes carved of wood and inlaid with sea shell, the tools constructed with even cheaper tools than the tools themselves, the rows and rows of everythings that no one ever needed but needed oh so bad, and there they were. Dressed in dresses from other flea markets of the recent past, in those European Birkenstocks we will never know the proper name for, their nails painted in colors one wouldn't suspect like silver or light pink or Nebuchadnezzar Royal Blue, that made them seem like mothers or wild young sisters or beauties met at one bar once then later that night at another and the way they wore their hair, as imperfectly as the public would allow simply made you wish to spend the day there sipping on that one pastis you could make last for hours by continually adding water, and how weird it was to be able to smoke wherever and not be seen as an outcast, an immoralite, and how exciting it was to understand the simple math of paying for and garnering the change in another language and how that made you think one day you could be fluent in really anything from air flight to surgery to baking to *add-another-skill-unattainable-here* and back to them, this endless stream of the world's most beautiful women, so exotic and so impossible to describe exactly what made them so other than that they were not of your cul-

ture, your language, your spheres of influence and interference and because you had no chance, no shot whatsoever, no way to make contact that would illicit only an odd, or awkward stare, and resulting forced laugh, you were in seventh heaven and in that bar, or technically outside of it on the tabled sidewalk, you couldn't care less about the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth paradises to go because your name was Limbo to them and they, they were the realest of real ideals on parade.

Philip Kobylarz's work has appeared in *Paris Review*, *Epoch*, *Poetry*, and *Best American Poetry*.

GUN

William Vernon

The Toch 44, .380 caliber, seemed tiny in John Phillips' right hand, but the hollow point bullets he'd put in its chamber and magazine made it a comforting protector. The rough-textured plastic grip clung to his palm and fingers as if it could never slip. It had been a good choice, paying 30 extra dollars for it. The gun felt like nothing, but was hard as steel.

He nestled it inside the fancy holster, thick leather engraved with trees, \$65 plus taxes, guaranteed to endure the worst abuse and to empty easily, i.e. to cradle the weapon securely, ready for use. Total package: \$500 but worth every penny. John touched his back pocket, which bulged with the wallet holding his Right To Carry Permit. The classes he taken to get the permit had been instructive, and they'd introduced him to interesting, salt-of-the-earth people.

John fingered the pistol-butt, pulled his wool sweater down over the gun and his right hip (he was right handed), left the house, and took the route he'd abandoned six months before, back in the late spring.

He walked fast, striding ahead as if on a mission. He felt excited, ready for whatever might come his way. Uncharacteristically, he yelled, "Hello!" to Helen Sears, who was facing her house, raking her flower bed. She looked around at him out on the street, said, "Well hello!" He waved and passed her. She was a good friend of his wife Sarah.

The public park was two miles from home, but his watch said he reached it in only 35 minutes. He hadn't walked so quickly in months, not since the last time he'd been here, when a man in a sweater with its hood up, hiding his face, had suddenly appeared coming uphill toward John, who veered left to avoid him. Only then did John notice the

brown pit bull beside the man. It was on a loose lead that allowed the dog to reach either side of the trail. A deep ravine cut into the trail just ahead of John and the dog so there was no place to step aside and let them pass.

John stopped on trail's edge and said, "Watch the dog, please."

The man grunted, made a noise that wasn't a word, but did take up enough slack in the leash so the dog came over next to him.

John waited for the man to reach down and take the thick collar in hand to restrain the animal even more. When that didn't happen, John figured the dog was well trained and stepped forward.

The dog snarled and leaped at him.

John of course recoiled. He jumped left into open air, faced the hill, and dropped, slowing his momentum by skidding down the cliff side and leaning into it, grabbing at branches of saplings and brush. The cuts from these had taken two weeks to heal.

He stopped falling about 30 feet below the trail, knelt into the hill, and looked up. Of course the trail was out of sight. So was the man. He hadn't even stopped. John saw him farther uphill making a sharp turn near the hilltop. He'd not offered to help John, hadn't even apologized.

John yelled, "What the hell you think a leash is for?"

The man stopped, looked back down the steepness at John, gave him the finger, then hurried out of sight.

John touched his sidearm with anger and hastened into the trees. The world was going to pot. Dysfunctional people were moving in and taking over. It was enough to anger the Pope. The country's justice-system was so inefficient anymore it encouraged crime rather than stopped it. Well, John had rights too, and he intended to exercise them.

He kicked through the fallen leaves at a pace like a teenager's. When he reached the brow of the hill he could see down the winding path, and

sure enough, as if part of a cosmically planned event, a man with a dog on a leash was coming uphill. The man wore a dark exercise outfit with the hood on the jacket over his head. The man was leaning forward, maybe watching where he'd step, so he hadn't seen John. Okay, let's see what happens. John walked on, rounded two turns, and stopped to wait right where he'd encountered the pit bull before.

This man with a dog approached still looking at the ground. This wasn't a pit bull, but it was the same size, knee high, and like the last time inconsiderately allowed on John's side of the trail.

John gripped his pistol and said, "Watch the dog, please," as if saying it the first time with the pit bull had been a rehearsal.

The man didn't look up or answer.

John was being ignored again. He yelled, "Hey, watch the dog!"

The dog looked up, barked, and lunged forward growling.

John was ready. He was watching. He took his gun out.

The dog barked and leaped again, stretching forward almost into biting distance, and the leash was hanging so John could tell it was not held tautly.

John pulled the trigger.

The explosion was loud in their little circle. The bullet entered the dog's open mouth and exploded out the upper back of its head. Its body seemed to shrink as it collapsed. Twice, it inhaled and exhaled, then lay inert.

Its owner knelt by the dog, then looked up at John. "Why? What's wrong with you?"

John stared into the other person's face while returning the pistol to the holster. A woman! Her face and thick glasses reminded him of his grandmother. One of her wired earbuds had fallen out, and John could hear a sad love song playing.

Bill Vernon studied English literature, then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folk dances. Five Star Mysteries published his novel *Old Town*, and his poems, stories and nonfiction have appeared in many magazines and anthologies.

THE OLD BRIDE

Kevin Richard White

It was a wedding with no flowers. That was the funniest part.

I can't say that I enjoyed the food. The open bar was alright - no top shelf liquor, the kind of rotgut you find in the kitchen of frat houses. The groom seemed preoccupied with the baseball scores (can't say I blame him, the Phillies were in first place for the first time in years). All the kids there were picking their noses and screeching, all wearing clearance bin pants and ties and dresses. Loud and obnoxious, just supporting my lifelong desire to use birth control every chance I get. You've thought it too at weddings you've been to, no doubt.

Standard fare, a gathering where you can all catch up and trade unfunny stories, but drink for free while you do so. But you know who did, the only one who actually wanted this? The old bride.

I don't remember who came up with the "old bride" nickname. We all clearly know her name: she's a longtime friend of ours. But someone said it one night when we were coming down from a majestic high and it stuck. We laughed and told the grass, the grill, the patio furniture. Old bride, har har. Something borrowed and blue and fucking old. The other wives didn't think it was that witty, but we laughed our high fucking asses off. It doesn't take much.

I went alone - my wife had the most conveniently-timed business trip in the history of all mankind. But I got dressed in my best, wore the Movado, shined the wingtips, even got my ears lowered. I drank lots of water beforehand and told myself I would drive myself home later.

You can probably guess how well that one worked out.

Despite the high, we didn't abandon the joke. We came up for a whole side story about the old bride to entertain us. She was a princess in a castle. She was a war widow. She had been in a coma and fell in love with the first ugly dope she saw upon waking up. She was only marrying for money. She wanted (or desperately needed) the health insurance. Had a one-night stand with a great guy, had sex, liked the feeling, and settled.

All of these, of course, were not the truth. They were high school sweethearts, made it through college, and actually are really compatible together. But that makes for a boring story (read: the truth), so we have to twist it up a bit. It's not like she knows - it's a carefully guarded secret.

I guess that my immaturity has led to these things - making up things to hurt people for my own amusement. We all do it. Our friends can be boring folk. We can spice it up a little when we're alone, make little jokes. As long as it never gets back to the person, it's all fair game.

She would never know. She wouldn't have time to know - she had a wedding to prepare for.

The toilets at the venue overflowed and all the glasses had water spots.

I can't knock their wedding dance too much. They were fluid and it was clear they practiced. But mine was better. We sang to an original and they picked a shitty cover.

Don't ever pick the cover song to dance to. If you do, you'll lose any past and future respect from me.

They insisted on going to a church to keep it religious for the parents. Which was okay, because it allowed me to zone out through the Mad Lib sermon and reflect on some things.

I'm happily married but I jack off twice a day. It's sad because I shouldn't have to. But there is no sex anymore. I love my wife, who made for an incredible bride. Her in the dress is what I jack off to.

But I see it in my other friends too; both the men and women. Sometimes, they don't have to say it. I can see it in the way they hold their beer or talk on the phone to their children. They're resigned. Weary. Tired of the runaround, everything's mundane. Cubicle slaves, boil-in-a-bag meals, Netflix until ten thirty, generic sex, sleep.

That's us. That's adulthood in a nutshell. I never thought that *Thirtysomething* was actually going to be a reality for me eventually. A lot of people will tell you that it doesn't have to be that way, but I just tell those people to go back to their blog writing. Because those are the types of folks that claim that everything is peachy, that having kids is a miracle, that the perfect weekend is going to craft fairs and having dollar margaritas at Applebee's.

And let me tell you, anything involving Applebee's is not perfect.

I know we're getting older. I know we're doing things we vowed never to do. Save for retirement, put a curb on the drinking (not me).

Marriage is what you get when you want the adventure you seek to just limp to you instead. It's not sour grapes. That's how it is. I hear it from so many people.

I'm reflecting so much that I'm the only one sitting when the pastor asks everyone to stand. I'm sure someone took a picture of it.

And why do we give Jesus and God all the credit at these weddings, anyway? They're not paying for any of it.

I had a moment alone with the old bride towards the end of the wedding. We were at the dessert table and so I gave her the typical compliments on how beautiful she looked. She smirked, but didn't say any-

thing. I guess you get tired of thanking people for the half truth after a while.

A slower song came over the sound system and she asked me very quietly if I wanted to have a dance with her. “He won’t mind,” she said, “he’s checking to see the score anyway.”

I took her by the hand and we walked to the center of the floor, bathed in a dimming strobe, flickering in and out as we matched up with other couples, moving in a trance. I had known her long enough for a dance. But I hadn’t known her well enough to dance.

I tried to think of things to say to her, but halfway through the song, I gave up. That’s when she started to whisper to me.

“I really didn’t mind the nickname,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t know anything about that.”

“Shut up. Of course you do. He told me.”

“Well...” I said, the drink finally hitting me as I found myself unable to craft a way out of this.

“It’s a game. I get it. We have to play games in order to get through life.”

It was one of the wisest things she ever said. I didn’t know what else to say so I just nodded.

“Did Erin really have a business trip?”

“I could really use another drink,” I said.

She shook her head. “Well, whether she did or not, since we’re on the topic of honesty.”

“Go for it,” I said, grateful the song was almost over.

“She was always a bitch.”

I was angry, of course, wanted to say something, but I couldn’t. I just kept dancing until the lights came back on. She gave me a peck on the cheek and went to go find her husband. I went outside with a fresh

drink and fielded some questions from my friends who saw us dancing. They wanted to know what we were talking about. They wanted to know what it was all about.

“It’s a wedding,” I said. “Does anyone ever really know what it’s about?”

Kevin Richard White's fiction appears in such places as Grub Street, Hypertext, The Hunger, Barren Magazine, The Molotov Cocktail, Door Is A Jar, Crack The Spine, Lunch Ticket, and Ghost Parachute among others. He reads fiction and nonfiction for multiple magazines, such as Quarterly West, Vestal Review and The Common. He lives in Pennsylvania.

CONFECTIONARY

Sara Fraser

That lady who works the register at CVS could be seventeen or she could be thirty-five. How am I supposed to know? She's not old. Old people walk like they wished they had a railing. This one, Erika—with a K as if a C wasn't fancy enough—she's not old. But other than that, I have no idea.

Now they have these little pay stations where a computerized voice tells me to scan my card, to scan my items, but Erika still has to come over because I can never seem to find the bar code. Vitamins are the worst, the round bottle with the bar code along the side and I can never see it, or aim it right. The female robot voice that tells me to scan my item again is sometimes the best conversation I'll have all day.

I picked up a box of Russell Stover chocolates for Betsy, not sure I'd give them to her or not, and again with the bar code. Erika comes over and says "Let me get that," which isn't a bad thing to say but her tone tells me that my stupidity is making her miss something better she could be doing, and she takes the vitamins from me with fingers that feel like licorice. I wish I knew how old she was. Not that it matters. She's younger than my daughter, though it seems they should be about the same age.

I didn't end up giving the Russell Stovers to Betsy so I still have most of the box left.

I was a handsome man. Me and my buddy Morris, even though we were getting up there. The girls always loved my glittering greenies. But Morris, he's in the grave now. A month Saturday. The only glittering happening around his eyes is because of worm spittle. They were blue,

Morris's eyes, and they used to look at you from under thick blond hair. Like an ad for an SS soldier, but he was Swedish, and a pacifist. I tell you, him and me could do some damage, a good night out.

Betsy's new. She flits about the senior center, as though she'll be here just long enough to redecorate and then she's going to be gone somewhere else. She pulls the curtains back and ties them with the fabric strips that have lain forgotten, dust-covered, on the windowsills. She cinches the curtains with the loops of fabric, puffs out the tops so they're dancers with tiny waists, curtsying after a show. Like Mary Poppins, Betsy straightens, tidies.

She moved close to me one afternoon; I think she was looking for something. I mentioned that the spring arriving makes me think we're all going to live another year. She stopped what she was doing and seemed to be thinking about it. She obviously used to look good. Her posture tells you that. "Doesn't it do that to you?" I asked.

"I'm from Florida," she said, "where it's always summer. Spring isn't such an event there." She went off, forgetting to look for whatever it was she was looking for.

I'd broken the ice though. She sat in the chair next to mine a few days later, but she didn't stay long. She smells good. I would have asked her about her perfume but she pushed herself up with those strong shoulders and shoved off. I went back to looking at the TV, but it was like where she'd passed in front of me there was something ghostly, as though her sweet, lemony smell had left a blur in the air.

Doctor says I have to lay off coffee and I don't like decaf so Dunkin Donuts is out. I end up at CVS again. No matter what you come in for you have to pause as you pass all those little yellow signs: buy two get one free. It's hard to resist, even though there's no guarantee I'm going to live long enough to use all three packs of batteries, or toothbrushes.

Band-aids, mouthwash, gel sole inserts. Bunion cushions. You reach a certain age and sales like that feel like a taunt. Or, on good days, a challenge.

Morris was the only one I told about my daughter. This Erika, she'd be much younger, now that I'm doing the math.

A decade ago I got word from a cousin who lives Upstate still, saying the mother had passed on. That was when I told Morris about it. So there'd be someone else who knew. Before Morris, it was just the mother and I who knew, and even though we never talked, we knew.

That cousin calls every time someone dies. He knows because he stayed put. I don't remember many people. But I remembered her. The mother. Never met the daughter. My daughter.

Drunk enough, I'd wonder with Morris about what the girl knew about me. Whether the mother ever told her anything.

"Hold it with the you-pee-cee down," Erika says. With all that youth and time in front of her. Ah, she'll probably go and make all the wrong decisions. God only knows who will love her.

"It won't read because it's not flat." This was a Cadbury Cream Egg, even harder to scan than vitamin bottles. Those eggs are one thing I'm glad I lived to see. Some things have gotten worse in this world, but not candy. I got two. Erika turned the thing over, straightened the wrinkled foil wrap, scanned one twice so she wouldn't have to scan the other. She was being nice for once, and it made me feel pretty good.

I might give an egg to Betsy, since I never did give her the Russell Stovers.

With Morris gone. I don't know. Maybe I could talk to her.

Sara Fraser has had stories published in *Carve*, *Salamander*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Whimperbang*, and, most recently, *Stonecrop*.

SICK

James Hartman

I cannot pull the door to Brimmer Notary open. I have to wait for someone. I lean against the door forty-five minutes. The guy who opens the door for me also picks up the three sheets of paper I couldn't keep hold of. Inside, waiting in line to be seen, I cannot remember if I thanked him. My mother got the flu, followed by my father and my brother. Now I have the flu. You feel the deep, clawing exhaustion first in your arms. It weighs down your arms and your back and your legs and your feet, and when you think you will not get any better, you puke it all out. Slowly, they said, you grow lighter again.

It takes me eight steps to the counter three steps away. The lady with the white cast on her right forearm looks at me, and I forget what to say. It weighs down your memory. It weighs down your functioning. Your hands moisten, and they shake uncontrollably.

“Did you need something notarized, sir?”

I think she takes them from me because I cannot push them towards her. She reads them and hands one back to me, with a pen.

“You just sign and date.”

The pen is a huge gold bar. Its weight is offensive. The lady watches me with curiosity. I wonder if she wants to say it. How will she say it? You're too young for this? How could this happen? She isn't my therapist. My mother and my father and my brother all said I would puke. I haven't puked. They have all puked and I cannot lift this pen.

“It's a tough thing to do, I know.” She raises her left hand and smiles as she wiggles her bare left ring finger. “You must have a very good reason.”

It's not that I don't want to speak. I crave speech. I need to feel myself connect with another. But like my hand, I cannot lift my lips.

"My ex-husband abused me," the lady wearing the white cast on her right forearm says. "First it was slaps. Then punches. Then it was punches and kicks." She looks at me with warm interest.

"I have the flu," I say. I grip the pen and aim it.

After several minutes, she says, "It doesn't have to be perfect."

The stupid pen will not steady enough. It drops away and I dry my hands on my jeans. "I have the flu."

"I was unhappy," the lady says. "And *scared*. I didn't know what would happen when he got home from work, or before he left for work, or what he'd do in the middle of the night while I slept."

I keep trying to dry my hands but it's like my skin is permanently wet. "I have the flu," I say.

The lady taps a finger against her white cast. "Something as stupid as the date on the yogurt being expired would set him off. One time," she says, and she smiles at her cast. "One time we're watching this mafia movie, and someone got punched in the head with a lead pipe, and Jacob doesn't say anything, just dumps the flowers out of the marble vase on the table and swings it at me." With her finger she now caresses her white cast. "I called my lawyer from the ambulance. I've been defending myself ever since." The lady looks at me and nods. "What you're doing is just defending yourself."

I try but I can't swallow all the saliva that has generated in my mouth. "I'm going to throw up."

She positions a trash basket on the counter before me. "You're okay," she says.

"I have the flu," I say.

"I know you do, sweetie."

Before you puke, my mother and my father and my brother all said, a sharp weight like something monstrous lodges in the center of your chest. In a few moments, that sharp monstrous lodging weight dissipates and—

The lady starts clapping and smiling wildly at me. “I am so proud of you!”

She picks up the trash basket, but before she can haul it away I glimpse there, inside it, the extortion attempt Kristina made against my parents in which she tried to swindle thousands of dollars from them by threatening to claim to the police that I physically assaulted her during our entire eight year marriage. I see her screaming at me as I am leaving to meet my best friend David for a drink, accusing me of abandoning her, of never wanting to be with her, of not caring for her, of not ever having loved her. I see her rushing out of my hospital room after five minutes because she’s exhausted, even though my nurse brought a cot for her to sleep on, my right hand over my heart, trying to will it to beat regularly and to slow down, just please slow down. I see the fork flying at my head after I told her I had to go to Lexington, Kentucky for the teacher’s conference. I see her flirting with my cardiologist and then checking out his ass as he leaves and when I ask her if she was seriously checking out my doctor she says don’t be ridiculous and calls me an insecure little boy. Then I see the way she chews carrots, sliding her teeth cautiously to prevent the loud *crack*. And I see the way she shifts her left cheek to push her glasses back up her nose. I see my wife sucking my best friend David’s dick in her car after their dinner at Outback Steakhouse and who knows what else this summer and David not answering my calls or texts or Facebook messages, nothing, our friendship of 17 years, with no explanation, over.

“How do you feel now? Any better, sweetie?”

I am standing straighter, but I don't feel any better. I don't know why I thought I might feel lighter.

TELEMETRY

Philip Kobylarz

It was one of those nights. The e-flirting would just never stop. Her endless begging for him to come over, which would mean a seventy-mile haul amongst the foothills then through the San Benito Valley, of which only the blinking red dots on the mountains could be seen, and constellations that all spelled out "this must be a bad idea", yet it continued, while he resisted with all of his might, which wasn't a lot.

He'd been through this routine before, star crossed lovers they were all, and he could only do his best to deflect the endless series of innocent pictures sent of her in her bedroom, unadorned, lying on the bed, no shoes on, her brushing her hair, her hands, her arms, her beautiful face that she didn't think was. The funny thing was is that she called him pretty.

They both knew it was something that could never be, for she had children, as so many women do out of a desire that he as a man could not completely understand, and he, as all men are, addicted to the illusion of freedom, and that road on that night would lead to shenanigans that could only curb his sense of wanting to fly on land, of never being harnessed, of being the rock star in his mind that he always wanted to be.

And maybe what they were creating, this fiction full of anticipation, this Harlequin Romance of the dreams of writhing bodies, of what the softness of another's lips tasted like if of anything at all, of this pas de deux that was only happening in their minds, was maybe the highest form of being together because that was the thing they so wanted to be but could not.

Better than sex this was, they thought to themselves, just dreaming of it without the awkwardness of disappointment or of ecstasy unshared, playing the game of affection, of really wanting and of being wanted. How they both would never know that everything afterward would dim in comparison and on that fateful night in November on the 10th that they were better than married, they were in a form of union if only electronically, mimicking the synapses firing, and that they had shattered the wall of loneliness and for a few instants felt as if they truly felt that they were both for minutes upon minutes not for a minute, alone.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

BEFORE WE GO OUT

Miranda Campbell

The first thing Morgan does when we get into her Ford Escape is plug her phone into the auxiliary jack and find a song to play. Usually something upbeat and with a fast tempo. All of our drives require music, but the one to the liquor store is different. There are a few songs on these particular trips I can always count on her playing. Got Money by Lil Wayne starts with its drum roll, "m-m-money" and Lil Wayne's raspy cackle. We sing as many words we know, which are almost all of them, making hand gestures and dancing as much as the slack in our seat belts will let us. We drive the few miles to the Beverage Depot and peruse the aisles as if we've never been there before. Walking by the pre-made margaritas in their multi-colored array: classic, strawberry, mango. The craft beers with their modish graphics that make one feel hip and bohemian. We take our time, more time than we ever need, because the anticipation is as much a part of this as the going out.

Our drive back has just as much pluck and punch as the drive to. Our voices carry throughout the car. I let myself sing off-key, which is not hard for me to do, and if Morgan's in a particularly good mood, she rolls down her windows.

When we get home, we make ourselves a drink in "fancy cups," which is anything other than the plastic cups we use for water and soda throughout the week, and then she goes to her room and I walk across the hall to mine. My hair is usually still wet from a shower and I have to blow it dry yet. I hog the bathroom for the next half hour and blow it dry with a round brush, like a blow out, but way less professional and tame. My hand often cramps into a concentrated, stiff position around

the handle of the brush. Sometimes I feel it might get stuck like that for an elongated period of time, but I brush and roll, brush and roll until each layer is dry. Morgan's hair is often already dry, so she styles hers. Curl or straighten. Braid or wind up into a top-knot. When we start to get ready, I sometimes don't see her for the next 45 minutes, depending on what each of us is doing.

Always the same. We get ready on opposite ends of our old apartment. Every few minutes, she walks over to the bathroom to ask if her lipstick matches her outfit or to ask if she can pee, to which I always respond *yes, of course; you know you can kick me out whenever*. Still, she asks anyway. Or I walk over to her room to ask if my shoes match my shorts. Or we meet in the middle to belt out the last verse of a Cardi B song playing on our TV in the living room.

We are separate, but together.

Of course, we need each other's help too. I don't know that I'd enjoy our routine nearly as much if not for Morgan's reassuring "yes" to the choker necklaces I'm fond of wearing. "Yes, to the choker always," she says. Or her brutal honesty when telling me that a white blazer dress makes me look like I'm "trying to be a sexy scientist, but it's not exactly working, and it's also not Halloween." Maybe we don't necessarily need each other's help because we are grown women, but it doesn't take away from the fact that we are lucky to have each other there as an option.

There's a moment right when we leave the house—right before we pull the string on the small lamp near our front door that we keep on for a night lite—where I feel as though the rest of the night won't live up to what we've fantasized in our heads. That the best part was in the trying, the putting an effort into our looks, making ourselves feel beautiful for a night, the sipping on a pre-made margarita mix and listening to music as we try on clothes we never wear but will never throw away either because

maybe one day that bralette will have the perfect occasion to wear it to, or maybe one day those jeans will fit again. There's a moment when I worry that the best part of the night has already happened, and the rest will be a letdown. A built-up, idealized fabrication. There's a purity to the getting ready, to the small routine before we go out, the idea that it's the early end of a late night and anything could happen, and I think that perhaps I prefer that place of limbo, of opportunity—the place where nothing untoward or even *good* has happened yet—more than I do the overcrowded, quotidian bar. I know this. Every time we get ready, I know this to be true, and though Morgan and I have never really talked about it out loud, she knows this to be true too.

Still, we can't help ourselves. We pull the string on the lamp by the front door and we go out anyway.

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CAPPED

Brooks Robards

I was running down the embankment in my best friend's backyard. Then I wasn't. I was lying on my back, my mouth full of blood and bits of front teeth. I screamed the rest of the way down to her house. I screamed until my father picked me up.

It was 1952, and I was 10. I had run smack into a wire strung between two trees for the chain on a puppy run. I wasn't perfect any more.

"I'll never be a movie star," I said between sobs.

"That's not so," my father assured me. "Lots of movie stars have their teeth capped." My friend's father handed him a towel, and he wiped the blood off my face. Then he carried me to the car and took me home to my mother.

I didn't go back to school for weeks, while my mouth healed and I went to the dentist. Dr. Vredenburg was a nice man, but those were the days before high-speed drills. I could only sit in the dentist's chair for so long with my mouth numb from Novocain as he drilled down the jagged edges of the two broken teeth and inserted posts. Once I started crying, he had to stop. The dental work went on for weeks, the high-pitched whine of the drill, the pressure and vibration on my broken teeth sending me into paroxysms of anguish. In time, the teeth were capped, and I healed. But not from the grief. My front teeth looked funny, and I didn't like to smile. Once playing spin the bottle, my boyfriend hooked his braces on one of my caps. I was lucky the dog wire hadn't severed my neck and killed me, but I didn't realize that until much later. There were so many ifs.

Life went on, and the next year I had Mr. Holmes as my teacher. He liked to pick on me, and I hated him for it. Nobody else in the class liked him either. He would ridicule me for talking to my friends, announcing contemptuously in front of the whole class, “The queen has fallen off her throne.” Then he would send me out to a little cubbyhole of a room next to the auditorium, where I had to sit until the end of class. I don’t know why he singled me out.

On good days, the class built a village out of clay, turning pieces of it into missiles when Mr. Holmes wasn’t looking. One time during recess, he chased Peter, the red-haired boy, all the way home for some unidentified misbehavior. We girls watched but stayed busy playing hopscotch and jump rope and tossing balls against the side of the school building. One of the boys, Creighton, always had money, and he’d pass it out to all of us on the merry-go-round so we could run to the Good Humor truck for toasted almond-covered ice cream on a stick.

At 17 the bone above the capped teeth grew infected, and I had to have surgery to clean it out. More Novocain. A scalpel this time. More pain. My face blew up, and both eyes turned black and blue. It was the week of my junior prom, so I told everyone I’d been in an auto accident. My face healed a week or two after the stitches came out, another ordeal. For each stitch the dentist painfully pulled up my upper lip. Forgetting took longer, and I hoped this surgery would be the last.

But as it turned out, every seven years I would get a new infection—and the dentists could never explain why.

At 24, I was married and pregnant when a new dentist said the bone was infected again. This time a dental surgeon sent me out the back door so the patients in his waiting room wouldn’t see me sobbing. I was working at a magazine in a job I loved, but I had to quit six weeks before the

baby came. He was a big one, and it took 23 hours to deliver him. I wasn't really ready to be a mother, especially with a baby who cried a lot.

When the baby was five months old, we moved to northern Maine, where I hardly knew a soul until an elderly woman named Elizabeth befriended me. I would invite her over to tea, and she would tell me gossip about the town where we lived. Everyone drank vanilla extract on Sundays because the liquor stores were closed. An artist friend of Elizabeth's had bought a little house to use as her studio, and when she went to plant a garden in the backyard, she had to dig up dozens of quart-sized vanilla extract bottles.

The Indians—they didn't call them Native Americans—who came over the Canadian border as migrant workers, were treated like animals. When one of them, drunk, beat to death his girlfriend while she was lying in bed next to him, the town's women took up his cause because he painted on black velvet. After Elizabeth stopped coming, I learned she had died of heart failure. I was heartbroken.

I had turned 31 when I developed the next infection. I had three children, and my marriage was on the rocks after my husband had tried to seduce a friend who was sleeping over. This time I asked my closest friend to come with me for the surgery. She was just out of a mental hospital for being suicidal. Whatever was I thinking to make her share my agony?

When seven years came around again at 38, I was divorced. Once more, I found a new surgeon, but this one tried to shame me, insisting it couldn't hurt that much. These surgeries took place right under my nose. In the middle of my face. A giant scar under my upper lip and a gum that turned gray. How could it help but make anyone miserable? I went home and lay on the couch for a week, while my ex-husband took care of our kids. I was teaching then, but it was hard to talk normally

with front teeth that always seemed to be on the verge of another infection. My students always asked me to speak louder.

Why every seven years? Was it the posts they inserted to secure the caps? A crack in one of the teeth? Some mystical form of fate just for me? Each time I thought I was healed—then seven years later I'd find out I wasn't.

At 45 the infection came back once again. I found a specialist, an endodontist, who finally understood my anxiety and fear. Instead of novocaine, he gave me nitrous oxide—laughing gas—that sent me into lala-land. I didn't laugh, but I didn't suffer as much either. Dentistry had improved by leaps and bounds. I was so thankful to suffer less this time, and I had at least developed a sense of humor. I sent the endodontist a copy of Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan*. I had finally accepted that I might have these infections every seven years for the rest of my life.

By 52 I had remarried, and my new husband went with me for the next surgery. He held my hand, and sedation kept me semi-conscious. After another seven years, the capped teeth had grown loose, and the dentist decided it was time to replace them with implants. Something new, and only one tooth at a time. I had lost so much bone the periodontist had to replace it around the implant. They took it from my jaw, and the pain afterwards was excruciating. Replacing bone in preparation for an implant requires time for healing. During the healing process, I wore a flipper, a false tooth that I removed at night. One day I went to see the owner of the barn where I kept my horse, and I forgot to put the flipper back in. While I was talking to him I suddenly realized it and turned around to keep him from seeing my missing front tooth. I still wonder what he thought, talking to my back! Another time I was eating corn on the cob, probably not a good idea, because the flipper got stuck

in the corn. I shoved it back in for a temporary fix and went to the dentist. Then, at last, I had my first bionic tooth. And before too long, a second one. What a relief. No more infections. No trouble eating corn on the cob or any other food, although I always avoided biting down with the implants. I never used an electric toothbrush, because I couldn't stand the vibration.

Many years after, I was visiting my daughter in Canada, and one of the implants came loose. I could push it back in place, but most of the time it wiggled. I couldn't eat normally. I had nightmares. Once home, I went off to the periodontist, terrified, and ready for a new implant. He took x-rays. "Don't worry," he said. "There's nothing really wrong. We just have to screw it back in place." I can't express how deep my relief was.

A happy ending of sorts. But the history of those seven-year surgeries stays with me. I have to be sedated for dental procedures as simple as repairing a cavity. Even the semi-annual cleanings make me anxious, but the bone surgeries are over. At least I hope so.

Brooks Robards has published 5 poetry collections and numerous film and art reviews . She has taught film at at Westfield State University for 21 years.

THE APPOINTMENT

Allen Davis

I arrived early for my appointment. I swung in on crutches, left foot in a cast from a running mishap. An old man was playing the accordion in the lobby. He wore a black cap that said USS something-or-other in faded yellow. He was a terrible accordionist. He may have been playing “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” but he was so bad I couldn’t be sure. He was smiling though, happy to be providing comfort. I took the elevator to the sixth floor, feeling guilty that my injury was not a war wound. A large, unfriendly woman sat behind the counter. I gave her my name and number. She frowned into the computer screen and after tapping a few keys shook her head and declared Nope, you’re not in here. I told the unfriendly woman I had an appointment and wasn’t leaving. She glared at me and bellowed Who made this appointment? I handed her my appointment card and said Dr. Smith at the West Side ER. She jumped out of her chair, placed her hands on her hips and screeched at someone across the hall: We gotta do somethin’ about that West Side! That West Side is gettin’ outta hand! My mind drifted to the nearby animal hospital and I imagined myself in a cage, panting with sad eyes. Three hours later I found myself in an examining room with a doctor who looked like Danica Patrick, the race car driver and cover girl. She had a warm smile, lustrous black hair and a perfect, round ass in black pants. She assured me my foot would heal just fine and I would soon be back on the road. You’re the cream of the crop, she said, catching me off guard. Her unexpected compliment made me feel grand but on the way down the elevator my spirits went down too. I recalled our tanks and armored personnel carriers advancing toward the village of women, children and old

men, and remembered what we did there. I recalled bad things I had done here, Back In The World. Not cream of the crop after all. There was no music in the lobby this time. I heard some gentle sobbing and there on a bench sat an old man rubbing his hand over his face. I looked away to give him privacy but noticed a boxy contraption and a cap on the bench beside him. It was the bad accordionist! Did he carry the burden of shame and guilt too? Was he crying for lost comrades, lost loved ones? He wiped an eye with the back of his hand and slowly strapped his accordion back on. He put his hat on and stood up, lighter now, and began to play.

Allen X. Davis' recent stories appear in *Qu Literary Magazine*, *Ragazine*, *Tinge Magazine*, *Gravel*, *BlazeVox*, and the *Sanctuary Anthology* from Darkhouse Books.

THE TIMBER MOTOR INN

Virginia Watts

For a town with a famous amusement park and chocolate factory offering tours, free samples included, there were relatively few lodging options in my hometown. The Timber Motor Inn, located close to the attractions and local Italian restaurants, was much more affordable than the opulent Hershey Hotel or the equally pricey Hershey Motor Lodge. Summer tourists seeking roller coasters, bumper cars and merry-go-round rides filled The Timber's rooms, often arriving inside something with an engine that had limped cross-country, dragging its exhaust pipe and duct-tapped ass all the way from Oklahoma or Missouri. Year round, though, the red-lettered sign in the motel's office window winked the same message: NO VACANCY. The Timber existed for the locals too. When you had nowhere else to go, that's where you ended up.

The two-storied, pale brick building had shiny red doors that became shiny black doors near the end of the 1970s; slanted parking spaces lined the lot. The crumbling macadam featured more than cars and pickup trucks: bicycles, rusting tricycles, metal lawn chairs with plastic woven seats, kiddie pools, hula hoops, chalked-in hopscotch boards, squat, charcoal grills that looked like a pack of little, alert dogs from a distance.

My parents complained about The Timber, finding the establishment out of place in our central Pennsylvania, rural-fringed town. I couldn't see one reason why. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the place as we drove past it year after year. Sometimes, I caught a glimpse of what was the standard issue inside those rooms. Either rust colored or pea green shag carpeting, two twin beds, one small desk, one brass table

lamp, one window facing another building's red brick, pleated curtains of yellow fabric featuring either leaping horses or soaring eagles, it was hard to tell.

Other items that usually don't belong inside motel rooms sometimes inhabited those rooms. Cribs, highchairs, multicolored afghans, card tables set with paper cups, a record player revolving 45s on the ground near the front stoop, a white-haired person dozing in the corner chair, once a row of head-sized hairdryers, a makeshift salon, a child about my age sitting cross-legged on the bed, hunched over homework, pencil nodding.

The Timber and a convenience store stood back-to-back four steps away from each other, warped plastic garbage cans, wooden stools for workers' breaks, empty milk crates wedged between them. I imagined the motor inn's rooms smelled the same as the inside of that store: a combination of cigarette smoke, brewed coffee, rotisserie hot dogs, mustard and chopped onions.

That store had the kind of food I wanted to eat as a child and wasn't allowed often: Slim Jims, chili dogs, Mallo Cups, the syrupy sweet, crushed ice drinks you made yourself from the ICEE machine, later the Slurpee machine. A Suicide Slurpee was when you mixed a bit of every flavor from the row of dispensers. The frozen concoctions turned my tongue red or blue. Everyone collected buttons with the names of the most popular Slurpees: Pink Fink, Kissin' Cousin, Sticky Icky. Inside the machines, bright colors rotated like cheerful beach towels tumbling inside magic dryers.

As a little girl, I sometimes wished I had someplace else to go other than my boring home. I daydreamed of packing bags and moving five miles away to The Timber. What an adventure it would be, camping out beside a 24-hour companion, lingering in the toy aisle with glittery-

handled jump ropes, jeweled bracelets, cap guns, Old Maid cards, Jacks. It felt comforting, the idea of falling asleep beside a place that never shut its lights out. Even on Christmas day, the refrigerated cases would be humming along with piped-in tunes of the Bee Gee brothers. The Timber felt warm of heart, more alive than my currently running real life story.

As I grew older, there were occasional rumors about the area around The Timber: a noisy drinking party, empty liquor bottles strewn in the parking lot when the sun came up, a fist fight. I did see the patriotic whirl of a police car stopped there, driving past The Timber with my high school friends late at night, but only a few times. I didn't know anything about the people who came and left from those rooms, if they had anything to do with the rumors and anyway, tales get out of hand quick in tiny towns. I didn't believe the grapevine told true stories.

Once, there was a hold up at the store involving a real gun. No shots were fired. The local newspapers ran the story front page for months. Everyone in the community felt better when they learned the person responsible was just passing through, a stocking-capped West Virginia resident down on his luck. After that, my parents began complaining about the convenience store too, believing retail businesses open all night attracted dangerous people to safe, pretty havens.

Someone I loved lived inside a room at The Timber for a few months. His father could never keep the names of his own children straight. His mother grew tired of her husband's antics, gathered the children together and left the marriage. Later, she fell seriously ill with multiple sclerosis. As a young teen, this boy began losing ground, never an engaged student, too wild, too angry, not enough direction, a daredevil's idea of good judgment. He was in a tailspin.

The local family managing The Timber offered him a room he didn't pay much, if anything for, until a path materialized before him, revealing a sun winking over a fresh horizon. He hurried toward it. This meant returning to his native country and the promise of a future that awaited him there, but until he could discover his way, he needed a roof, a bed, a hot shower, a mustard-slathered soft pretzel and a Suicide Slurpee.

When you had nowhere else to go, you got what you needed the most, a key to one of the rooms always available at The Timber Motor Inn.

Virginia Watts is the author of poetry and stories found or forthcoming in *The Burningwood Literary Review*, *Temenos*, *Halcyone Magazine*, *Green Briar Review*, *the same*, *The Moon City Review*, *The Florida Review* and others. Her essay "Marti's Father" was nominated for a 2018 Pushcart Prize by the Ponder Review. She received honorable mention in Passenger's 2018 Poetry Contest. Virginia currently resides near Philadelphia, PA.

