

# Firefly Magazine

IX



*A Journal of Luminous Writing*



mere

Untitled #1 |

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### The Artists

# POETRY





Sentry |



## Featured Poem

**The Waffle House on Battlefield Parkway in Chickamauga | *Matthew Bruce Harrison***

Sunrise

traffic

skirmish.

Burned

toast

riddled

in raw

hands.

Sliced-

up

oxblood

booths.

Drum

rattle

of

overproduced

teens.

Light bulbs

dying  
in  
country  
fried meat  
smoke.  
No  
mention of  
love  
all  
night.  
Doomed  
hash  
browns  
forecast collateral  
ketchup  
stains.  
Bones  
massed  
under  
mangled  
napkins.  
Overdone  
fusillade  
rain.



No  
sign of gray

retreat.

No  
movie deal.

No  
union.

No  
tip.

Every-  
body off-  
white  
bloating  
phobias.

Taillights

bleed  
south.

Commodes

erupt.

No  
sleep all  
night  
between us.

Now  
who will  
strike  
blare trample  
spill  
out  
this over-  
creamed  
house  
brew  
shouting  
PAYBACK  
when charged  
for  
parking  
too long  
along  
the state route  
in a state  
of  
simmering  
red  
heritage?

## Chandelier | *Victoria Briggs*

He made a chandelier of himself  
fashioned from his growing bones  
with lanky limbs and  
acned skin in place  
of crystal prisms.

The stripy ligature, his schoolboy  
tie a double knotted  
Windsor.

When his father found  
him angelic, suspended  
a hovering interrobang.

It was as if the world had thrown  
a vacuum switch  
that sucked out  
every drop of  
light.

## gods and roses | Wendy Bourke

sometimes  
he picks me up,  
at the strike of noon,  
and carries me away

from the office jumbled politics  
and jungle of machines

and we drive  
to the mountain park  
and eat avocado sandwiches

Happily

amongst the totems  
and the green  
in the playground of the gods

we talk  
and munch on kalamata olives  
and walk  
and smell the blooms  
in the rose garden

then—as the minutes fall away  
we pack up  
and say good-bye  
to the gods and the flowers and the feast

and drive, silently, back and sit—  
quietly in the car,  
with my head on his shoulder

until just before the hour is up— and  
then, I tell him that I love him and  
walk back into the concrete box:

feeling as lonely as a wet stare.



**To all moments taken | *Lauren Suchenski***

To all moments taken from me, ripped from my body, taken into the  
back room/unpacked into grocery store boxes  
and to workaholics alcoholics trip down trips of flights of bloody flights of stairs and  
stares from hairy windows and eyes  
to all moments tucked behind my ears, inside the corner corneas of my eyes  
squeezed into tights and slandered into snow  
to all moments melting on the sidewalk, the ones I forgot to forgive the ones that taught  
me how to live  
the ones that waded out just past sunrise, into the gooey blue goo of the  
horizon the ones that sat on my shoulder and refused to cry  
the ones that showered off blankets of summer and shimmied up sounds of spring  
to the moments still waiting to burst from my body, hung out to dry in the rain; the  
intention and the droplets that drip off the side of the house —

I say come back, come home,  
come meet me inside my body where the rain meets the sea where the sea meets the  
sun where the light remembers to renounce the truth for only an ounce of this moment  
that is momentarily and monumentally claiming itself to be mine.

## Help Us Find Out Where the Beulah Lands Are | *J.R. Campbell*

Never take a come-on, boy, or play  
Another man's game. Your chances are the same,  
Zero. Don't aspire to be a hero,  
Most of them are dead. The bedstead's wobbly,

Shore it up with sit-ups. The belly is  
The basis. Eructations float the harness  
Races, but the dancing ponies bolt  
Their traces, cantering through the gardens.

The white-wings wing it and the finger-  
Snappin' singers sing it. Nasty lies  
The lubricated liquor, tasty in  
A sense if you don't bicker with the bandits.

The river's running backward to the dunes.  
It's all part of the show, so the no-goes go.  
Rev up the riverboat, but don't desert  
The dandies embroiled in reading "Tristram

Shandy." Jim and Huckleberry Finn  
Are waving from their dinghy. Mark Twain  
Twangs the sounding, finessing the sandbar.  
Help us find out where the Beulah Lands are.

# FLASH FICTION



Untitled #2 |



## Featured Flash

### **Honeymoon on the Pont des Arts: Saturday | *Christina Dalcher***

They come at sunset, like all the others, stopping mid-bridge to watch day turn into night. She's got one arm low around his waist, right hand stuffed in the back pocket of his Levi's. In the other, she holds a steel padlock, its shackle curling around her finger like a ring. They walk out of step, mismatched partners in a sack race with no sack.

"Do we have to?" he says, pulling back a little so the girl's arm torques out of position and loses its place.

She twirls and circles him around the neck, lips a few inches from his. "Please?"

He pecks a kiss on her cheek, then lights a cigarette and leans against the rail. He's facing in the wrong direction. "Yeah. Okay."

"Where's a good place?"

He shrugs.

"How about right here, next to this rusted one?" The girl reaches for an old lock, its coppery patina flaking off and sticking to her nails. "I bet they're still together, the people who put this here."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Don't you think they're still together?" She's pouting now.

"What do they say? One in three couples get divorced?"

“That’s just nasty.”

He flicks the cherry of his smoke into the river. “But true.”

“We’ll be together, though, won’t we?”

“Sure we will.”

The man watches while she hooks the lock around an iron rail, almost touching its antique neighbor. “There. Now you turn the key and toss it into the Seine.”

His jaw bulges like he’s about to speak, but he says nothing, only turns the key and lets it fall from his fingers. “Let’s go get a drink,” he says.

At the end of the bridge, they pass a woman. The girl smiles. The woman presses her lips together.

“Sad to be on the Pont des Arts all alone on a night like this,” the girl whispers, sliding an arm around the man. “Don’t you think so?”

His eyes wander to a space behind them, then back to the girl. He licks his lips and lights another smoke.

When they’ve disappeared, I watch a dozen more couples lock their love to the Pont des Arts while the lone woman removes a set of bolt cutters from her bag and slices through the rusted metal in the middle of the bridge.



### **Apple Picking | *Diane Simmons***

When Karen bites into the apple she almost spits it out straight away. The red flesh tastes musty, not tart like the brochure had promised. Ignoring her arthritic shoulder, she hurls the apple towards the hedge. When it falls short, leaving it exposed and untidy, she sighs and trudges up the slope to recover it.

She picks up the apple and this time puts it into her coat pocket. Now she's calmer, it feels wrong to throw it away. As she walks back down the slope, she stops, surveys the orchard and the hills beyond. It's all so beautiful. The constant hum of the traffic spoils it a little, but not enough for her to regret choosing it. Not like the bloody apple. All her research for the perfect variety seems to have been a waste of time. They're pretty apples though – the skin so red and shiny they almost seem as if they're made of plastic – like the ones her auntie used to have in a bowl by the front door.

It had taken a week after her sons had told her the fruit was ripe before she'd felt able to visit the orchard. There had been long debates amongst the family about whether it was appropriate for them to actually eat the apples, but she couldn't bear for them to be wasted. There has been enough waste. She looks at the tree again – it looks so healthy, the fruit so inviting. Perhaps it had been just that one apple that was no good. Perhaps she had been expecting too much.

She picks the shiniest of the crop and takes a large bite. This too is a disappointment – it's powdery, insipid. As if her husband's personality has somehow seeped into his ashes and infiltrated the fruit.

## **A Woman's Son |**

They talk about Him, about His contribution, but what they don't discuss is my great sacrifice, yes me, your mother. Oh, His role was great, of course, but

. Did I not create you, just as He did? Do you realise what it meant, to give you form, from my own body? And when I looked at you, swaddled tight in your blanket, I saw the great knowledge shining forth from behind your eyes. They say a baby of three months can make out the face, but you could see all, and not just see: know.

It was by no means easy for me! There were the consequences, the necessary deception, for how could they understand? How could I ever convey this mystery? Who would comprehend that I was indeed chaste and faithful, to my husband whom I loved? This was simply beyond their understanding. It would have been so for me too, had it not been explained to me in my mind, the knowing placed there by the light, that day. I realised I must keep you safe, protect you from harm, as any mother would.

I recall the other mothers' piercing eyes, squinting and whispers behind their tunic sleeves at my over-protectiveness. Oh but this was not their burden, not theirs to keep cloaked and away from furtive glances, prying questions. Worse for you, perhaps, concealing your wisdom from your peers. I knew the amazing potential of my extraordinary boy:

After you were gone, in my darker hours, I would look at the sky and in the chill night air, I would scream despairingly to the heavens. I would cry out your name. Could you hear me? Often it was that I wished I could be up there with you, so lonely here. I had no hand in mine now, no reassurance. And lying awake until dawn, I would think of you still. I would arise and stare at the sun; not caring if it blinded me, for it reminded me of you. I remembered how I would stand in the doorway and watch you running barefoot in the sunshine with the other little boys, tumbling together, them or you falling hard on the scorched earth, but no grazed knees for my boy. Never once could I find a blemish on your skin. Your immaculate body – never a scratch or a sore and I wondered if you bleed.

But when they hammered in the nail – into perfect hand – there was blood, or was it part of your illusions? And the pieces that don't fit, the little mysteries – where was it you went for those three days they said you were dead? Three days with no signs for me who watched in endless trepidation. The four of them can document every aspect, write until their fingers are numb, but they will never know what I know. None of them will ever know

## **First Night Blues | *Christopher Stanley***

In his rocket ship pyjamas and John Major glasses, Kieran shrinks into his new bed, wishing he was at home with his family. The dormitory, with its white plasterboard walls and snot-coloured blinds, feels more like a psychiatric ward than a bedroom. He shares it with seven other boys, all prep school educated and accustomed to boarding. In rock band T-shirts they rush headlong at each other, upending beds and swinging pillows like wrecking balls. They've urged him to join in but how can he? There are no rules and apparently the loser has to sleep in the bath.

He leaps out of the way as the other boys bundle onto his bed, wrestling in a tangle of limbs and laughter. Before they move on, they flip his mattress onto the floor. He snatches his soap bag from the bedside locker and runs for the door.

'Going somewhere?'

Kieran spins around to see another boy unfolding from the dressing gowns and laundry bags hanging on the end of the wardrobe. This boy's older, with a tumble of unruly hair and stubble. He smells of cigarettes.

'Are you a prefect?' asks Kieran.

'Are you running away?'

Kieran raises his soap bag and says, 'Bathroom?' The word catches in his throat.

The older boy nods. 'Don't get lost.'

The bathroom door has a metal plate on one side that says 'PUSH'. Kieran stands at the middle sink and enjoys a moment of quiet solitude. Beyond the windows, there's only darkness. He thinks about his parents back home and his bedroom feeling every bit as empty as he does. Then he brushes his teeth and uses a flannel to wash the tears from his face.

Outside the bathroom, there's a popper switch that lights the corridor for one minute before ending with a disappointing click. He fists it, illuminating two rows of identical maroon doors. One leads into his dormitory, the other six lead to the prefects' studies. None of them have names or numbers and he can't remember which one is his.

He opens the first door into a haze of fragrant smoke. A tall, skinny boy, wearing nothing but boxer shorts, rushes to an ashtray on his desk saying, 'I can explain everything!' Kieran closes the door quickly and moves onto the next one. This time he puts his ear against the wood but he can't hear anything on the other side. The rest of the rooms are also silent. He longs to be back in the dormitory, asleep among his new roommates, but he's too scared to try another door.

This can't be happening.

The light pops out and the corridor rushes to darkness.

Defeated, he returns to the bathroom and climbs into the bath.

## Waiting in the Dust |

A child peeps through a workshop window; motes float in a shaft of light. She's lifted then, into another place; transported by intrigue.

Inside, an automaton stands at rest on the old bench; seized by rust, draped with dust. She wanders closer, intent on the silent toy, the lights of its eyes turned off. Dripping some oil onto its stiff joints, hope mounts in her chest. Oil soothes the aged clockwork, oozing through its parts like golden blood.

She flips the switch, expectant, and watches it twitch and awaken; whirring and creaking after its slumber. This robot, and time itself, have stood still, whilst spiders threaded cobwebs through its copper limbs.

The girl recalls a hazy memory of her granddad standing by the workbench, wearing his favourite tatty leather apron; she remembers hours spent learning about his mechanical toys. Instinctively she knows that the automaton stopped so completely on that March day, when granddad died.

Captivated, she watches the metallic arms rise and the blocky legs clunk against the wood as it attempts motion; but the mechanism seems jammed somehow. Abruptly, the automaton lurches forward; it falls clumsily to the floor, clattering against the bench and landing in sawdust. The girl panics and rushes towards it, just as she hears footsteps outside.

"Isobel! What are you doing in here?" her grandma cries, breaking into coughing from the disturbed dust. She turns, wide-eyed; guilt swamps her, turning to a heart-beat thud in her ears.

"Grandma, I'm so, so sorry!"

Tears well up and her throat tightens with anguish. "I only wanted to see if Granddad's robot is still alive. No one is taking care of it anymore."

But then, she notices that her grandma has ceased coughing and is weeping too; she hunches down low and opens her arms to Isobel, drawing her into a familiar, rosewater-scented embrace.



For a while her grandma does not say anything. "I couldn't come back in here, Izzy, dear," she says. "I didn't want to come back in here."

Isobel looks up at her and smiles through her tears. "Perhaps I could tidy it up for you, Grandma, and make it nice again?"

So, carefully, she picks the robot up off the floor and begins to brush the sawdust away.

## Preppers | Alison Wassell

Dad's eyes twinkled with glee, and his mouth formed itself into a 'told you so' smirk whenever the television brought us bad tidings. Doom laden reports of impending disasters, epidemics or threats of war had him dancing his way down into the basement, whistling a happy tune.

He had been working on the basement for longer than I had been alive. The sound of him

sawing and hammering had been the lullaby that had sent me to sleep at night throughout my early years. By the time I started school we were fully insulated against most potential catastrophes. I was never allowed to bring friends home for tea. It was best to keep our 'bunker' a secret, said Dad. Otherwise, the world and his wife would be clamouring to get in when the time came.

The shelves in the bunker were lined with tins, arranged in alphabetical order and dusted by Mum every Friday. Dad reckoned we had enough food to last out any crisis. Mum just dusted, and straightened tins, and said nothing. From time to time she sighed. Then, one weekend, Dad took us survival training in the woods. He presented her with a twitching rabbit and a sharp knife.

'Dinner,' he said. She was gone, on Monday, when I came home from school.

Saturday became emergency drill day. We had special suits for every imaginable eventuality: germ warfare, radiation, plague. Dad set the egg timer and blew his whistle. Woe betide anyone who was not safe inside his or her suit at the end of two minutes.

Eventually, his obsession seeped outside the house. He provided us with masks which we were to wear at all times when we ventured away from home. He emailed our headteacher, informing her of this. She replied, stating that protective masks were not part of the uniform. I blushed scarlet when she called me into her office and gently enquired whether things were all right at home. It was a humiliation too far. I stopped going to school. The appropriate authorities were informed. We moved in with Auntie Val who drank too much and was comatose most nights before ten. She never asked whether we had done our

homework. We could scarcely believe our luck.

They found Dad in his bunker, when someone finally noticed that post was blocking the letter box. Taking cover from impending disaster, according to the meticulous journal he kept, he had seemingly stubbed his toe on a catering size tin of baked beans. This was one eventuality he had failed to plan for. The toe turned septic, and poisoned his whole system.

‘To fail to plan is to plan to fail’ was Dad’s motto. But these days I just go with the flow. eat seafood long past its sell by date, lie in the sun for far too long, and scurry across the road in front of oncoming buses. Life happens, whether you’re prepared or not. Well, that’s what I reckon, anyway.

## **Dolphins Know Your Mother's Name |Cathy Ulrich**

Soon, your mother will become a fish.

She had been a mermaid before. She gave up her tail for the land, and for you. Before you were born, I thought your father was the love of my life, she says. Your mother used to take you to the shore. You would wade into the water together, letting it go up to your knees, up to your waist. Your mother said the dolphins knew her name. You waited for them to call to her.

You can only hear, said your mother, if you put your head under the water.

So you both went under together, you and your mother who had been a mermaid, and held your breaths until your father came and pulled you from the water. Did you hear? said your mother. Did you hear?

You said: I heard, but the truth was you had heard nothing. Your mother lay on the sand on one side of you, and your father on the other, and she said: I know you're lying.

She said: I can always tell.

Now she says that soon she will become a fish. It happens to all mermaids when they

die. When you go down to the water, she'll be there, among the fishes in the reeds. She might not know you then, for she will be a fish with the soul of a mermaid and both, she says, are forgetful creatures.

But you will know me, she says, and you say of course you will, and your mother only smiles, for she can always tell when you're lying.

# SHORT STORIES



Serene |





## Featured Short

### ***A Good Sky | Michelle Templeton***

When the freezer was full, John left the casseroles and deli trays and covered dishes on the counter until they started to smell. Then he threw them in the garbage. He wanted to tell Susan's friends to stop bringing him food but he didn't know how. He sensed that doing something for him, even something unwanted, made them feel better.

John pulled the handles up to close the plastic garbage bag and walked it out to the garage to toss it in the wheelie bin. The stink was terrible. He paused to remember what day it was. Monday. Tomorrow he could push the lot out to the curb for the garbage men to take away.

Inside the house John washed his hands. The flowery liquid soap was still nearly half full in the dispenser. He wanted to use it all up before he replaced it even though he hated the smell. Susan had always liked cloying flower scents.

She'd been dead for nearly two months. Seven and a half weeks. Fifty-two days. One thousand, two hundred and forty-eight hours. John had no clear sense of how he'd passed all those hours. Even his memory of Susan's illness and last days was blurry. She'd come home one day and told him she'd found a lump that morning in the shower. Surgery, chemo, radiation. Silk scarves to cover her head; special ointment to heal her skin from the radioactive beam.

Next thing he knew he was standing on the sidewalk on Broadway in front of Swedish Hospital staring at the traffic without seeing it. The last thing he'd seen was Susan's dead face. Not peaceful like in a movie. Not tortured either. Just still. Too quiet. Like she'd gone to a place he couldn't follow which, of course, she had.

John went to his study. It was a dark room at the back of the house, shaded by tall cedars that let little light pass through. He sat at his desk, a too-big- for-the- room oak desk he'd bought the year he got tenure at the UW. It had looked like the kind of desk a professor should have.

His telescope sat on the desk where he'd left it the night before. He was cleaning the optics, carefully taking the scope apart to remove specks of dust. He'd left the pieces looking like new on a clean cotton handkerchief overnight.

He remembered how to put the telescope back together without looking at the manual which was just as well since he hadn't had the manual for years. This was the telescope he'd had as a teenager. His father had shown him how to clean it and put it back together. They'd taken the telescope bird watching at the arboretum and at the delta of the Nisqually River. At night in the backyard, John had learned how to train the scope to the stars and find the rings around a tiny Saturn and the reddish rust-colored dot that was Mars.

John hadn't slept the first two nights after Susan died. He had lain in the middle of their bed aware that he didn't have a side anymore. Staring at the ceiling he'd pictured constellations that didn't exist. Star patterns for pictures of his life. Instead of the Archer, the Water-Bearer and the Lion, John saw the Ineffectual Husband, the Workaholic, the Barren Couple, the Dead Wife.

On the third night he didn't bother getting into bed. Instead, he pulled down the attic stairs, hidden in the hallway ceiling, and climbed up to retrieve his telescope. It stood in the corner of the attic, behind towers of boxes full of God-knows- what, wrapped in old tea towels to protect it from dust.

John hauled it down the stairs, the legs of the tripod banging into him. He nearly fell to the floor and only managed to save himself by dropping the telescope to the floor. Tears came immediately but he was lucky. The hallway carpet had cushioned the blow and the scope was unbroken.

John went out to the backyard, uncovered the old device and trained it toward the heavens. It took him some time, but he oriented himself to the sky map he carried in his memory. There weren't any planets visible but he had a wonderful view of the gibbous moon, displaying itself proudly through a gap in the clouds.

The next day John took himself off to a local scientific equipment shop and bought what he needed to clean and tend to the telescope. The guy behind the desk hadn't heard of the model John owned, but really optics were all the same and he could tell John what to buy.

That was the beginning, forty-nine nights ago, of John's regular star-gazing. He found an unused spiral notebook in a desk drawer and used it to catalogue what he saw in the sky each night. He discovered web sites with daily calendars for his correct geographical location; Here's what to look for in the skies above Seattle tonight. He looked for all of it.

John found the perfect spot in his front yard to set up the telescope and he covered the grass there with a sheet of plywood to prevent the legs of the tripod from sinking into the soggy lawn. It was a spot comparatively bare of trees in his forested neighborhood so he could view objects low in the horizon without cedars and firs in his line of sight.

His daily schedule shifted to accommodate his star-gazing. He napped all afternoon, the grey daylight filtered through the heavy curtains in his bedroom Susan had put up to keep the drafts out. When he woke he'd eat something in front of the television with the news playing or some sports match. John didn't eat the casseroles that were piling up in the freezer. He couldn't be bothered to heat them up. Instead he ate dry crackers, bowls of cereal, peanut butter from the spoon.

Now that his telescope was freshly cleaned, John hoped he'd see more than he'd seen in the past few months. It felt like time to see something new or to see something familiar in a new way. He wanted to put his eye to the viewfinder and feel amazed.

At three in the morning John set up on the sheet of plywood. He unfolded a plastic beach chair and sat down. He liked to gaze up at the sky with his naked eye first. Even on nights when the sky looked almost empty he knew there was plenty to see. The longer you looked the more you saw. Even on nights too cloudy for stargazing there was something to see; the clouds moving together and apart like continental drift.

John stood up and aimed the telescope at the moon, a silver sliver tucked partly behind a blue-grey cloud. He focused carefully and took in its radiance.

"You a peeping Tom or something?" said a voice at John's shoulder.

John started and looked up. A teenage boy he didn't recognize stood next to him in his yard smoking a cigarette and looking back at John through a heavy fringe of dark hair. He was dressed like the kids John taught at the UW; skinny black jeans with earbuds dangling from the front pocket, an untucked t-shirt.

John stood up straight and regarded the boy.

"It's called star-gazing," he said. "And would you mind getting off my lawn?"

The boy held up his hands.

"Chill out, bro," he said. "Just asking." He walked backward until he was standing on the sidewalk.

John put his eye to the view finder and re-focused the lens. The clouds had shifted and only the bottom tip of the moon's crescent was visible now. A surge of irritation went through John's body. He felt the boy's presence on the sidewalk in front of him and he didn't like it. He looked up.

"Look, can you go away please?" he said. "I'm trying to concentrate."

The boy took a last drag on his cigarette, crushed in out on the heel of his sneaker and put the stub in the pocket of his t-shirt.

"Free country," he said.

John rolled his eyes. He was used to dealing with young people and their feigned arrogance. He didn't think this boy posed any danger; if he was a mugger he wouldn't just be standing there. Anyway, John thought, he looked young. Younger than John's students, fourteen or fifteen tops.

"Who are you?" he said. "Where do you live?"

The boy was looking at John with an open face, curious maybe, but not confrontational.

"I'm Oscar," the boy said. "I live over there," he tossed his chin to indicate the general direction of the street behind John's house. "Who are you?"

"John," said John. "I live here."

"Well, duh," Oscar said.

The childish sound of that "duh" made John smile.

"Right," he said. "well, obviously. Anyway, it's very late. Shouldn't you be home? Won't your mother be frantically calling the police or something?"

Oscar pulled another cigarette out of a smashed up packet in his back pocket and lit it with a pack of matches. The kind restaurants and bars used to give out. He pulled deeply on the cigarette like a professional.

"It's cool," he said. "She works the night shift."

Silence fell between them. John glanced up at the sky and saw more clouds had gathered. He sat heavily in his beach chair. He would wait.

In the sky the clouds continued to join and separate; separate and join. John saw that Oscar was watching the sky too.

"What are you looking at with that thing?" Oscar said.

"Not much," John said. "Tough sky tonight."

"The clouds," Oscar said.

John nodded. They watched the tough sky.

Who was this kid? John wondered. Why was he wandering around the neighborhood in the middle of the night?

He didn't say anything out loud, just sat silently, his head tilted up, taking in the indigo, steel grey and ink colored shapes overhead. He noticed that the longer Oscar stood there, quietly smoking and watching the sky, the less he minded the boy. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence but an easy one.

After a while, Oscar sat down on the sidewalk. Several times, John stood and put his eye to the scope. Each time he felt Oscar's eyes on him. After a while John felt the chill of the evening seep into his clothes.

"I'm going in to make a pot of coffee," he said to Oscar. "Want a cup?"

Oscar looked surprised. "Okay," he said.

John nodded. He had an old Stanley thermos he could use to bring the coffee outside so they could both have a cup and not miss the sky. When he came back outside with the thermos he tossed a sweatshirt to Oscar who nodded and put it on without saying anything.

In a while the first sparrow of the early dawn began to cheep and chitter. The sky remained dark but the air around them grew fractionally lighter. Two or three more birds began to chirp.

Above their heads the darkest parts of the sky got lighter first, going from inky to midnight blue to lavender grey. It was too cloudy to see the sun come up so they watched the sunrise in grey tones as the clouds continued to blow and dance.

John stood and stretched; folded up his chair.

Oscar stood up; jumped up and down a few times as if warming himself up. He smiled from under his heavy fringe of hair.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

John nodded.

“You said it was a tough sky,” Oscar said. He looked up as if considering. “I thought it was a pretty good sky.”

John nodded again and gave Oscar a half-smile. Not an invitation but not a warning to stay away either. Oscar waved and walked down the sidewalk. John watched him turn the corner at the stop sign. He didn’t look back.

John carefully folded up the legs of his telescope and went inside. He propped it just inside the front door to be ready for him to use tonight. He made a mental note to get the second beach chair out of the garage.

That way, if Oscar came back tonight, he would have a place to sit.

## Taps |

Peter crouched in front of the attic window and gazed down on old man Mueller's cornfield. The plow, unhitched beyond the stalks, turned north like he meant to continue but got interrupted. Peter looked toward the barn, no sign of Mueller's horse and buggy. The Amish and Mennonite neighbors, with their peculiar ways kept to themselves. Mueller only talked to his pa when he accused Rufus of killing his chickens, or a year ago, the day his brother's mind broke when Gabe went screaming from the veranda twisting his ears as he ran into Muller's cornfield. That day Mueller shot out of the house, the top of his unsnapped overalls flapping as he sprinted after Gabe, Mueller's wife and five children dashed onto the porch, the boys still in their pajamas.

After that day, Gabe was never the same, and neither was Peter.

At fourteen, he felt all grown-up. His childhood ended when his brother and best friend came down with a cold inside his brain. Ma said he'd get better. They just had to pray harder. Pa wanted to send him somewhere, to a place where they removed part of the brain or shocked it into normal. Peter listened as they argued back and forth, Ma blaming herself and Pa's eyes wet with tears, as they tried to decide what was best for their eldest son; feelings of helplessness sat like a centerpiece on the dining room table.

Gabe's trumpet playing now sailed out of his window across the beauty of the corn and wheat fields, the notes drifting as new ones began over the vast cloudless skies of Lancaster County. Gabe played Taps, Taps in the morning, Taps in the afternoon, and Taps at night. Peter thought it must have to do with the sadness inside him, but once in a while Gabe scratched the air with a different kind of song; it would sail smooth, cut off, spiral and dip. In those moments, he thought his brother had talent, enough to make Peter enjoy the fantasies they provoked. He coaxed Gabe to take lessons, maybe play at the church, learn , so people would like him—that part he left out. Gabe had scowled, and Peter fell quiet, afraid he'd make his brother go to that place where a chorus of devils shuffled his mind. Peter learned to rake words the way he did leaves. Words like        and        calmed him, but others like        , and        , could bring on a fit.

The kitchen screen door slammed as Gabe came out of the house and stood on the veranda. He brought the trumpet to his lips and began to play. Peter bounded to his feet. Gabe had never taken the trumpet outside or played it in front of others. Peter hoped this meant he'd been healed, that his parents' prayers and his own were finally answered. Excited, he ran down the stairs wanting his parents to see. He passed the room he once shared with his brother until his pa separated them cause of the sickness. He jumped onto the landing and rode the banister sidesaddle down to the living room.

"Ma? Pa?"

Peter ran through the kitchen where his mother's cornbread sat on the stove. He caught a whiff of its warm, sweet smell and realized his brother had stopped playing. He pushed the screen door open, but Gabe wasn't there. "Rufus, come here boy!" he shouted from the porch. "Pa?" Where was everyone? His eyes darted from the tether ball, to the lawnmower, to the Troyer's house. The late September day was as still as the sun. It was Saturday. Life always had something going on. It didn't just stop.

Peter found it strange that his father's hammer, pliers, and screwdriver lay on the porch swing. Although his brother wouldn't hurt a gnat, he'd often hurt himself. And, his pa made sure to keep his guns and tools locked up.

Peter leaped off the steps and ran around the brick house they had moved into three years ago. The front yard looked no different from any other time, the '47 Buick station wagon parked in the driveway, nothing out of place, except the absence of his folks and Rufus.

Maybe they went to the Kerr's or the Troyers' cause someone got sick. But Rufus' disappearance downright confused him. That dog always came when called. He'd better tend to Gabe.

Peter ran to the backyard and saw a swath cut in the cornfield. The Amish and Mennonites were acquainted with Gabe's screams, his running away and hiding in their barns. And the time he sprinted all the way to the feed store and climbed into a grain sack to get away from the voices. Six months ago, Peter and his pa found Gabe in a dumpster. His pa picked him up by his armpits and dragged his crumpled body over the edge and placed him on the ground. Peter felt like something died that day; a corner of his heart just fell off. His pa helped Gabe get to his feet, put an arm around his shoulders and told him: . Peter wanted to believe. Later that day his father told him:



He followed Gabe's tracks, swatting through the rustling stalks, and batting away flies.

"Gabe?" He felt trickles of sweat form on his brow as the smothering shoots closed behind him.

"Where are  
you?" "Go away."

"Where's our folks and Rufus?"

"I don't know. Leave me alone."

Peter took careful steps so not to upset his brother. He wanted to make sure Gabe was all right and not doing weird things like banging his head against the ground, or clawing his ears until they turned purple blue.

Peter brushed his dark bangs out of his eyes and parted the stalks. Gabe sat cradling the trumpet, rocking back and forth.

"You seen  
Rufus?" "No."

"Heard you playing outside." Peter parted the shoots to give them more room. He stepped around his brother. "What's that on your shirt?"

"Nothin'."

"Somethin'. Looks like blood." He reached to touch the shirt. Gabe shoved his hand away.

"Leave me be."

"You tell me how you got blood on your shirt and I'll leave you be." "It's not blood. It's ketchup."

"Hogwash."

Peter took hold of his brother's shoulders and gripped them as he leaned down and smelled the shirt. "It's blood." He ripped it open and saw slash marks on Gabe's chest. "Jesus Gabriel."

"I'm cold."

"Where's the knife?"

"You tore my shirt."

"Here put mine on."

Gabe did and started to blubber as he mismatched the buttons with the holes.

"Gimme the knife."

"Mueller has it."

"You're saying Mueller did this to you?" Gabe nodded.

He couldn't trust a darn thing that came out of Gabe's mouth.

Peter leaped on top of his brother and tried to roll him over, but Gabe fought back swinging his fists and grazed the side of his head. "I'm trying to keep you out of trouble," Peter said as he straddled Gabe's legs and ran his hands along his brother's pockets. "Where'd you throw it?" He rolled Gabe's shirt into a ball, stood, and picked up the trumpet.

"Don't have it."

Peter glanced about. It could be anywhere. "Let's go find Rufus." Gabe grabbed onto the stalks and pulled himself up. "Mueller killed him with the knife." Peter swung around. He dropped the shirt and trumpet and lunged at his brother, knocking him to the ground. "You're lyin'." He looked down at Gabe not feeling a bit sorry for him. "You can talk crazy all you want, but not about my dog." Peter felt a rush of trembles coming on. The kind he had as a kid when he'd wake up in his own piss. Sometimes his brother was just too much responsibility. Peter picked up the shirt and handed the trumpet to Gabe. "I'm goin' home."

Gabe followed.

Old man Mueller would never use a knife. He might shoot Rufus if he killed his chicks, but he'd never use a knife. And, when it came to hurting his brother, well sir, that just didn't make sense. It bugged Peter that Gabe could get to him like that, after all, his mind was sharp. He could grasp a situation and pluck its essence clean out.

When they reached the porch, his father's tools were still lying about. He'd put them away once he cleaned Gabe's wounds and got rid of the shirt, no sense telling his parents. It would upset them, and they would send Gabe away.

The screen door slammed as the brothers went into the kitchen. "Take off my shirt. I'll clean those wounds," Peter said as he took the dishrag from the washbasin and soaked it in warm water. "Put the trumpet down." He reached into the cupboard and pulled out his pa's whiskey.

"Come here." He poured a little onto the rag—his pa wouldn't notice—and wiped his brother's chest.

"Ouch! That's for drinkin'."

"It'll clean the wounds. Seen Pa?"

Gabe slowly moved his head to the left and the right, reminding Peter of an elephant he saw at the carnival in Hershypark.

"No."

Peter took the bloody shirt and put it in the sink. He lifted the lid of his nanaw's bronze striker that hung on the wall, took out a wooden match and struck it, lighting the shirt on fire. When the flames licked it to ash, Peter ran the water. "Let's go upstairs. We gotta hide those wounds."

Gabe started to laugh. Peter saw the madness in his brother's eyes as if his mind hooked a corner and kept spinning unable to right itself. No amount of shaking, coaxing, or yelling could bring Gabe around. Peter remembered that same laugh Memorial Day when the Kerr's invited them to a picnic in their backyard. They all sat at the long wooden table eating ham, onions, coleslaw and pudding. Gabe scarfed down a slice of watermelon when he started to laugh. Course everyone wanted to know what was so funny. His laughter grew to hysterics. Lester said. But Gabe kept laughing like it was his own private thing, even as the juice ran out his nose and into his mouth. The look in his eyes when Lester persisted, was dark and ugly.

Peter would never forget the look on Gretchen's face, the girl with hair the color of wheat, and eyes as dark as the Blue Ridge Mountains. He wanted Gretchen for his girl the moment he saw her in the church choir. But on the day that Gabe snapped, and she brought her finger up to the side of her head and made fast circles laughing at his brother's torment, his feelings for her died.

Did he hear Rufus? Peter raced to the screen door and opened it. He stepped onto the veranda. "Rufus!" He took the stairs when he felt something strike the back of his head. The force was so great he toppled forward. He struggled to get away as he pulled himself along the ground. Crawling in his own blood, he was sure he heard his dog. Rufus sprinted up to his master and barked. "Hey, boy," Peter moaned.

"Oh my God, Gabriel!"

The distant wail of his mother's voice reminded him of the way Gabe faded the final notes of Taps.

"Put that hammer down. Now Gabriel!" The fear he heard in his pa's voice scared him. Peter struggled to get up.

He felt a searing explosion and lost consciousness.

## Isabel Waits |

Isabel waits. She is hopeful, yet desolate. Pedro has been gone for years, and although her hope never dies, there are times when it quails and wavers, a flickering candle enduring a thunderstorm.

Isabel waits. Pedro promised he would come back. The day he left, five long years ago, was the sweetest and saddest of Isabel's life. Astride his roan jennet, his dark hair curling around his cheeks, Pedro had looked like a hero from the old tales. Laughter dancing in his hazel eyes, his work-tanned face alight with pride, he had soothed her fears with gentle words and bent in the saddle to bestow upon her one last, lingering kiss. His lips tasted sweet, like wine and figs, and his hand tangled in her hair to draw her closer to him.

Isabel waits. She had watched him from the shade of the fig tree as he trotted up to join the cavalcade of recruits, all boys still. They spent their days tilling and harvesting, tending the vineyards and olive groves, singing work songs in perfect harmonies as their skin baked brown in the scorching Andalusian sun. They were the hopeful, passionate dreamers who toiled away their youth, all the while longing for adventure and glory. They believed they would find both in the New World.

Isabel waits. She didn't know, then, how far away the New World was. Still she knows very little, apart from the stories and the rumors; but stories and rumors mean nothing to her. She imagines lush green forests and towering waterfalls; sweet water and sweeter fruit; a haven of life and fertility. She hopes, one day, to leave the dry earth of Andalusia and go to Pedro, to see for herself the land he has fought for.

Isabel waits. She sits on the veranda each night after the day's work is done, a cup of sweet wine and a bowl of fat green olives on the table beside her, and watches the horizon. The little flickering candle of hope within her dims and flares, dims and flares. Pedro never comes.

Isabel waits. She doesn't sleep much. Often she awakens in the morning to find herself still in her chair on the veranda, the wine half-drunk and the olives no more than stones in the bowl. The sun is hot on her face as it rises, and she goes inside to wash the sweat from her skin and change her rumpled clothes. She cries often, her fear for Pedro and the bitterness of living in wait for him bubbling up inside her, choking her, exploding

out of her in a storm of sobbing. Her tears taste sour as she faces another day without Pedro.

Isabel waits. She forgets, now, how long it's been since Pedro left. When she looks at her reflection now, she no longer sees the girl Pedro fell in love with. He used to call her his flower, his sweet summer blossom, and she would smile shyly and kiss his grinning mouth. Now her brow is creased with worry, her skin tanned dark from long hours in the sun and lined with toil and fear. Her mouth is pinched, her eyes like hard black stones, her hair pulled away from her cheeks and braided sensibly on top of her head. Pedro loved her hair. She had worn it loose for him, letting it tumble in a dark curtain to her waist. He had run his fingers through it, clenched fistfuls of it as he made love to her, breathed her name into it as he reached for her in his sleep. She can't bear having it down now; the weight of it on her shoulders reminds her of Pedro's arms around her, and it makes her ache with longing for him.

Isabel waits. Pedro may never return. It would be the first time he had ever broken a promise to her. She knows, in her heart, that he would come home if he could; he never meant to stay away so long. He had talked readily of their future, of the children they would have and the days they would spend together. They would grow old together, die together, and spend eternity together in heaven.

Isabel waits. She wishes they had had a child, someone else to share her sorrow, someone who could remind her of Pedro. She is shrouded in loneliness; she feels like a pillar of ice. She knows the other women think she's mad. They avoid her in the olive grove, they don't ask her to join them for dinner. They are waiting for their husbands to return, like her, but they don't mourn them as she mourns Pedro. They have children to occupy them; little replicas of the men they love to distract them from their grief. Isabel has nothing but her memories.

Isabel waits. She wonders, in her darkest moments, whether Pedro is dead, waiting for her in heaven and hoping she will join him. She tried once. She took the rope from the vineyard, and looped it over one of the thick beams that held up the roof of her small house. She had climbed up on her chair, put her head through the noose, and said a quiet prayer. She knew it was a sin, but she didn't care; that didn't matter as long as she could see Pedro again. She was so sure; she could almost see his face as she kicked the chair away. But the rope was too fine. It snapped, sending her crashing to the floor. It had been like waking from a dream. She cried, hard, and begged God to forgive her for her weakness.

Isabel waits. The best is when she dreams of Pedro. The worst is when she wakes up to realise she was dreaming. She sees him, riding through the jungles of the New World, leading troops and battling terrible beasts. In her fear they resemble wolves and hawks, with sharp teeth and claws that slash at him. She is terrified she will see him cut down and hacked to pieces, or thrown from his horse and dashed against the ground. But he turns to her and flashes his dazzling, confident smile, and she longs for him to kiss her like he did on the day he left. When she wakes up she's too hot, her dress sticking to her sweating body and her breath rasping in her dry throat.

Isabel waits. She walks along the riverbank in the early mornings, dipping her feet or throwing stones. She imagines flowing with it out into the sea, merging with the ocean and being swept along in the stronger current. She imagines being washed up on the sand in the New World and finding Pedro waiting for her, as she waited for him.

Isabel waits. She wonders how much longer she will stare at the sunset; how many more times she will raise her head from her work, convinced that she heard hoof beats in the distance, only to realise it was her imagination. How many more nights she will sit alone, wondering what Pedro is doing, if he is happy, if he is alive.

Isabel waits. It's all she knows to do now. She waits as she eats. She waits as she harvests the sweet, bursting grapes in the vineyard. She waits as she braids her hair away from her face, trying not to recall Pedro's rough hands snagging in it. She waits as she slips her fingers under her skirts, wishing it were his touch and not her own as she satiates the growing longing within herself. She waits as she decides again that she can wait no longer. She will do it right this time.

She will see Pedro again.

Isabel waits. She takes her time. She gathers the stones from the vineyard, the olive grove, the riverbank, whenever she has a moment alone. She slips them into her pockets, casting her eyes about to be sure nobody's watching. The other women pay her little attention now; they're used to her working in silence, tears mingling with the sweat on her face. So they don't notice as she fills her dress with rocks. She selects large ones. They weigh down her dress so it sags to the earth as she walks, so heavy they threaten to rip the skirt from the bodice.

Isabel waits. She sits on the veranda, watching the sun set over the mountains. When night covers the wide plain she slips from the house, her bare feet making no noise on the dusty earth. She tiptoes to the river, her pockets laden with the heavy

stones, and wades into the sweet water. She staggers to the middle of the river, the water flowing gently past her, reaching her shoulders, dragging her down. She doesn't fight it. She slips beneath the surface, the heavy rocks pulling her deep, and she closes her eyes, as if to sleep.

Isabel waits. The river fills her like wine pouring into a cup. She floats even as she sinks, suspended in water, her skirts billowing around her, her hair coming loose from its braids to waft around her face. Her chest aches with wanting to breathe, but she turns her mind away from it, thinking only of Pedro.

Isabel waits. She knows she will see him. She knows he will be waiting for her. The pain recedes, her eyes are blind, dazzled by whiteness. She feels like she's flying, no longer floating but soaring, like the larks that fly over the vineyards in spring. She isn't breathing, but she doesn't need to; she feels, for the first time in years, alive.

"Pedro," she breathes, and her heart fills with love as she hears the sweet-voiced reply.

"Isabel."



## Crossing Roads |

"Take a seat. No, anywhere. That's fine. You can smoke in here. Okay. No, it's okay, you can sit there. You can sit on either end."

She said something like that. We were in the end room, the corner room, with the windows on the corner, and we sat on the corners of the corner seat, that corner seat for two people, the corner conversation seat. That's where we sat and I lit a cigarette because she said I could.

"How have things been in the past week?"

Third-floor window. All the blocks on that street have aluminum windows.

I said: "Things have been quite well in the past week. Thank you for letting me smoke. I don't like this corner room."

"No, it's not a very nice room."

"It would be better as a store room, this corner room. How do you expect people to feel comfortable and open in this hovel?"

"Right, that's a good point. Although I think hovel is a bit strong, in my opinion, I mean only from what I understand about the meaning of that word. But I agree this is not a perfect room or even a very comfortable room. But it will do for now, don't you think? How did you find your journey to the office today?"

"It was okay. Okay. I had to cross five roads. I had to cross outside my house; that was the first. I put my toes on the curb first for that one. Sorry, Liz, but I had to."

"You took off your sandals there?"

"I took off the sandals before I left the flat. I have no socks in the house at the moment. I left my socks in the machine. I need to buy some socks. When I got to the curb on that one I was ready."

"Right, and how did you feel when you got to the first road?"

"I knew I had to cross the road and I had already assessed the road before I left my house."

“How had you assessed the road? How did you feel when you thought about assessing the road?”

“I hadn’t looked in the crossing roads book. I left the book next to the radio in the living room. I hadn’t read anything or watched the television. I just made some mint tea in a glass and left the house. I had the sandals in this plastic bag.”

She had my notebook in her hand. I need to tell you about the notebook before we get to the reason why I’m locked up now.

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You were probably taught when you were a child that the best way to cross a road is to stop, look, and listen and to cross carefully, without running. This is good advice but it is basic. I soon realized that crossing roads is much more complicated than that and much more connected to a million different aspects of the world. A kind man I knew told me that I could start to write down some of my ideas about crossing roads and this might help me to feel less nervous about it. For some stupid reason, I thought he meant I should write stories, like fiction stories, so I have always described my observations as if I am another person!

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“What do you think is the very worst thing that could happen to you when you cross a road?”

“Being hit by a vehicle which causes an accident which horribly maims a number of children, makes them orphans, and leaves me in a semi-waking state of existential torture for many decades.”

“Do you think that will happen?”

“I think it could happen but it really isn’t the main consideration when crossing roads.”

“No?”

“No.”

She is looking at me and leaving the silence there to encourage me to talk. They all do it. I think she thinks that my problem is trivial and really I only have these habits in order to find stories for my crossing roads book. To tease her, I say nothing and try to look content. She asks me what is the main consideration when crossing roads. I tell her what I always tell her: the rules are not simple. The rules cannot be easily explained. The rules are almost beyond language. The rules, if contained in words, would run to millions and millions of pages.

But the main considerations often come down to one word: if.

If you don’t cross the road here, you will have to cross the road somewhere else. If you cross the road somewhere else, you will be not crossing the road in millions of other places, and all of those other places have a million possibilities and unexpected factors.

You didn’t design the road!

You didn’t make the earth where the road has been placed!

You don’t control the traffic!

She helped me to get that.

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Then she asks me a horrible question: "Do you not think that crossing a corridor is similar to crossing a road?"

I wait.

She continues: "Or maybe getting out of bed and walking to the bathroom to brush your teeth?"

These are horrible questions because they make me feel that my book is suddenly and parochially narrow in its focus, which must not be true.

I say: "I understand there are certain complexities when it comes to crossing roads. I've seen a number of situations which are beyond anything you or I could explain. Take what happened on the flyover last week."

"Would you like to talk about what happened on the flyover last week?"

"Why do you start asking me questions about corridors and brushing teeth? These are irrelevant and fucking silly questions, aren't they?"

"You seem angry that I mentioned those things."

"You think crossing roads is the same as ... what? ... moving along a corridor? Is that what you really think?"

The door opens and the man with the moustache looks at us both in turn.

He says to me: "Everything okay in here?"

I say to him: "It would be better if people understood a few basics about the laws of one of the universes we know."

He looks at her and she nods at him.

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“Right, you climbed the crash barrier on the flyover.” I  
wasn’t going to answer any more questions.

## A Song Not Forgotten |

She comes with the spring sunlight.

Silently she paces along the winding road, slipping between newly budding leaves. She hums the songs her father taught her. The aspen tremble at her arrival, whispering her name.

Deeper within the woods she wanders, following subtle paths and indentations in the moist earth. She looks for and finds tracks in the soil. She sees the marks of a doe and her stomach rumbles.

The air is cool, and stirs memories within despite its strangeness. She passes through a grove of young birch that circle an old hunting lodge. It has been boarded up for winter and weeds have sprouted around its edges. Long ago she ran and skipped here, fooling about for a prize of chuckling laughter.

She places her hand on the bark of a tall maple, stills her breath and listens.

"I heard you from many miles away."

Her father's voice is deeper than she remembers, a sound of stones shifting in earth. She draws her arms around the trunk, willing herself closer.

"You are well?"

"Yes," she whispers.

She lays down upon the earth, staring up through the branches to a brilliant blue sky.

"I can smell the taint on you."

"You always said seeds should travel far," she replies, licking at her fangs.

"Seeds must take root," he answers.

She stays with him, listening to the little sounds of his world breathe and sigh until the sun leans low.

"Sing for me," her father whispers.

~ ~ ~

She comes with wintery winds that billow and churn.

She is wet, but not cold. Ice has crystalised in her hair and her clothes crunch as she moves. The cold does not bother her. Her belly is full and she imagines a blazing fire coursing through her veins.

She knows her way despite the blanket of white. She makes her way back to the places where he keeps his bones. She waits a long time.

“Why did you bring that man?”

Her father’s voice is muted, dormant beneath the snow.

“I promised to show him something magical,” she says with a smile.

“You’ll draw others here,” he says.

The trees creak in the wind, their branches clattering above. Their whispers are distant and hushed. She places her hand on an old oak but feels nothing.

“Don’t you hunger for more?” She asks.

She waits for his reply in the darkness. The snow drifts around her and she imagines pulling it over and settling in for the season.

“You’ve become wicked. You take too many.”

“There are millions where I live now. No one cares.”

The wind rises and sends snow flickering and cutting at her. The branches above crack, sprinkling ice below. She imagines her words buried in frozen earth.

~ ~ ~

She comes as the colours blaze.

Their brilliance stirs memories from here and then and before. She traces back years in her mind, recounting lives shared and taken in distant lands. The road here was empty with dry grasses sprouting from cracks. She finds herself uncertain as to the directions to take. Her mind is busy, filled with thoughts piled high. Words sit and tug at her tongue.

She stumbles over roots and cuts herself clutching at a thorny rose. Drawing her hand to her mouth, she tastes blood and earth and other things distant and old. The trees shiver and shake, letting loose leaves of red and gold.

She finds her way to the birch grove and then, to the hunting lodge.

Its roof has split in two. She walks towards the tumbled stone walls, listening to the crunch beneath her feet. A cold breeze sets leaves dancing and she imagines a child leaping into a mound piled high.

She walks to the birch and finds the tallest. Placing her hand on its trunk she listens carefully. There is only a stillness. Gently she traces her fingers along the dark circling streaks.

She begins to sing although the words come only here and there.



## Mirage |

Destin Lemont's plane crashed in the Western Sahara ninety-three miles northeast of Dakhla. Only after three days of searching did the pilot's comrades find his aircraft half submerged in a towering ridge of sand. Lemont's body was not in it. The winds had been low, and the men could still make out the traces of Lemont's footprints weaving away from the cockpit, circling and disappearing into the sands. Somehow, he had survived his aircraft's spiral plummet and impact into the dunes. But he had lived only to know that he would die: Lemont was no stranger to these magnetic sands, to this recurrent dream of desert stranding, repentance, and deliverance. He knew that no one had ever walked out of this desert alive. Without water in such searing heat, a man could last at the most nineteen hours. His only hope was in rescue, and this rescue he had this time delayed and hindered himself: When his comrades sprang into action at the news of Lemont's latest disappearance, they took to the air to zigzag across one hundred square miles of open desert with no coordinates for his position, no radio contact no cooperation from him. Now they turned away from the crushed wreck and again climbed into their planes to go on searching for Lemont.

O you resuscitators from the land of the living, bank on the wind and fly back to your limbo called life. There is no saving one whom only death can keep alive. Let the name of Destin Lemont join that list of meteoric lives whose epitaph is in the saying, the ones who die the soonest are the ones who strive to live.

When Lemont carried out no checklist for his flight, when he packed no rations, no extra fuel, when he left his mechanic standing on the airstrip calling after him, would you believe that death was absent from his mind? Would you believe, when he shut off both his engines high above the open desert and watched the sands rise up to meet him, that only that surge of vital fear in every fiber of his being could bring him briefly back to life? Only at that moment, after so many months of grounded safety, could he say for sure that he was still one of the living. How wonderful it was what life death found in him.

No doubt Lemont should have stayed beside his mangled craft like a stranded citizen at a designated meeting point and allowed his comrades to find at least his body easily with time. He should have propped himself up against the twisted fuselage for all humanity to see, marked out clearly to them in death as he had always been marked out to them in life by accident and recklessness. He could have let two broken wings be the signpost for his grave for those who loved him, for those who lost themselves when

they lost him. He could have loved enough to save in return. But they never understood him, and they would never find him. He chose to walk away.

During all this time Lemont was on his feet and walking, though he had lost all sense of direction, all knowledge of his position or of what portion of his dying life or living death was left to him. He stumbled forward in a kind of broad-day darkness, his guts trembling with delirium, like a drunkard withdrawing from the intoxication of life. The old fracture in his skull had reopened, he knew. That same fracture that had decreed six months back no more flights for him. It throbbed out a blood-red network across his mind. "Just one more flight, this one," he thought. "One for the road, for these shifting waves of sand, these rippling waves of heat, this blazing silence for this mirage of life."

What extravagances of life his mind now allowed him in that theater of death. He was spoilt for choice. Twenty dinners for a man with only one stomach, with a stomach no longer able to digest. Myriad painless Edens all vying for one painful life. Which of those lovely visions of life should he find his death in, striving to reach? Should he stretch his battered limbs out under the dancing, dappled shade of his childhood's old oak tree and fade out to a familiar, hushing lullaby of a breeze through leaves? Should he let himself sink down beside his home's gurgling brook, put his parched lips to the cool, clear water and sip and go on sipping until all knowledge of water and thirst is gone from him for ever? Death, he was asking you. You were with him then. You had followed him from the wreck and you dictated.

Death, are you a mirage like so many others in this hallucination of life? Lemont's comrades always told him, seek any shade in this desert to take cover in except yours. But even now it was the fear of death alone that kept Lemont going. Only for you, Death, did he still struggle to find his feet even when he was past all possibility of standing. You made his face burn with the flush of life in that fever of dying. How many times before had he struggled out to you in his bid for life? All the life he knew was yours. Life was no life without you.

But Lemont knew it was the end when your dreaded face became the face of mercy, when his greatest comfort was the knowledge you were near. Life in this eternity of shifting sand without the hope of your relief would be agony unbearable indeed; let it go. And the inner dirge he felt at his own death was not for him not for that shape that twitched and murmured to his name in a troubled dream of gravity and flesh, nor for the shadows it had cast while the sun was up but for that thrill of fear with which you, Death,

waked him and made a dream for real. Death is for the living, the dead know nothing of it.

## Diapasons of Disorder |

Withal the courtyard's graves as I unearthed the lame man, the stalwart squire, and the woman enceinte, I heard whispers speak to the celestials "O' creeping, O' thieving life that brought us from the nothing, pray, why hast thou not forewarned us of our death untimely?" The lucida had all but vanished as I heeded their sorrows— the whispers haunted me... threnodic they were. From afar, a bevy of courtiers sent for their Groaning Giants as they saw me exhuming their clandestine deeds... O' how vexing these deeds were. The grousing of the courtiers had well-nigh rendered me bloodless— amain, I beguiled fate and ran. Stranded, alas, a jocund fate jested me with woe...

Maugre the courtiers inaugurating their dancing and quaffing, alow the castle of the courtiers I found the gallows of men afore singing melancholic laughs. The bloodied and muddied sun had basked therewithal the ashen moon gnarling all e'er so unwonted. Swevens of creatures whilom, Groaning Giants, roamed the castle of teen, out of the void they chased me, imbued with fire, to ask me: "Shalt thou keep secrets of mankind, or art thou a betrayer of sin?" For succour I wailed, nary a person heeded me but the Giants of Groan wailed at my disdain. Frightened I was, erelong my tears had engorged my mouth. Their blusters had echoed throughout the centuries, yet there was silence within me. "Halt, for are ye not anguish disingenuous!?" I vociferated but I was not heeded "Aroint, ye wailers maledict!"

But of what use is an opera to the deaf?

Delirium was my only interlocutor...

Carillons of the deep had clamoured within the castle of teen; the darkest horizon had befallen mankind, and a nightfall revealed a thanatopsis cowering behind the pillars of life, of which there was no escape. All that which was above prayed for salvation below withal us; dead or alive, we were still mesmerised. Stentorian secrets within books and their fathomless words had drowned me in despair. Accursed shares of mankind's deeds pullulated our bodies; O' accursed bibliotheca. My sanity faded into deadening pages, yet my mind pretended to see. In-tune with the vanished lucida, a lantern of darkness illuminating sin shone from above. Aisle by aisle, ounce by ounce of my blood, antediluvian hairs of forbidden ink pulled me... they whistled in the darkness for me. Therein, in a child's grin I beheld the festering mutters of an aging man's Kingdom Come. In a child's elation, I beheld an old woman bemoaning mankind. All cursed not death but cursed its harbinger, life! I reached for the shrieks of the aging man

as he thrummed the tunes of his final breath with his entrails. "Thou hast grated thy flesh—shalt thou peel thy soul howbeit my tearful bones croon for thee?" I spoke all too late for the dead ailed no more... and umbras of his breath lamented a kingdom that sought not him.

And harum-scarum lurched I upon the old woman as she braided endlessly robes and skin, I asked her: "Doth the sun mourn for whosoever growleth?" "Wanhop for whosoever growleth. And now as I hunger for clemency of the sun to march upon my skin, it thirsteth for my dissolution!" she ingeminated whereto the needles she once held in her feeble fingers had blossomed upon her eyen. Ifsoever wishest thou to string our wretched veins and spillest our rotten blood, let it be, O' dwelling strings. Howbeit iron of rust and ivory of distortion may arise by the crimson spilling, wilt thou let us rest in peace within thee?" I heeded the courtiers as they spoke in fear yet with jolliness in their hearts "O' Fossor of sin, ye must leave us be with the talons of silver for your begging is as useful as the purest of prayers had they been sung in the brothels of man." Their veins cried blood, and their blood cried for me— O' ashamed it was to have lived within the corrupt— the crimson asked me: "Shalt thou harbour secrets of mankind, or art thou a betrayer of sin?" My face had become mucid for my tears had suffused it as I heeded these inquests once more. Erelong, I saw a distention of a citadel wherein jaundice had swallowed unfading warm as it gargled my life. The clangour of steel and flesh entwined as they accrued from the deep earthly slumber. Iron maidens harped cacophonies of agony, they deplored the enshrined with gaunt susurrations of ungodly libation. It was the devouring of the oldly siege. O' winter in jaundice, thou hast come ever so dolefully. Shalt thou engulf me in the lively dark or in the dead grey? O autumn of jaundice, wherein all trees bend for thee, answer me so, can I be of secrecy as of cruelty ye be? O' Jaundiced Citadel, to whom the unwilling becometh the unnamed, dost thou spurn betrayers of sin?

And the Giants of Groan spoke "Tune our fallen flames onto snow... E'er so morbid and impure for thee, Jaundiced Citadel." Through the judas of the Jaundiced Citadel's gates I beheld tarot cards that occluded the future, still sand in the hourglass, coy air that wished not to be breathed, inflaming snow, demons in sheen tunic, towers that ascended deep beneath the oceans, an alewife who abstained from absinthe, and poison drinkers who fancied life anew! I feared not solitude... but certes, I dreaded this crowd's condemnation! In their noise incessant, perversion was but wisdom! Their uncanny blight tore me asunder. A judas it may have been but all had stared back at my eyen... bloodthirsty they were – their pecuarious zeal had overcome the senses of tellurian and grey horizons acquiesced us whole. The Giants of Groan contoured out of the void, only to come and hunt me. "O'Fossor, thou hast flouted our reality; thou shalt

be crushed by thine own velleity!" they spoke to me "Thou hast devalued the living and marred the dead's peace. Tomorrow never was and yesterday is now." I could only utter solemn yet damming words "Powerful Nephilim in amity with the courtiers or mere curs in pretence of power, be ye?"

But of secrecy I could not be...

Au courant earth, why dost thou conceal so much in thy bosoms? Must ye remind me of a place wherein there are lyres for the amputees, a theatre to the blind, a space for those earth-bound, freedom to those enchained, and victories for those unwilling? Was it ye who begot cruelty, or was it cruelty that begot thee? Shalt thou console me post-mortem or shalt thou abandon me in the grey as with others afore? Dost thou intend to render my death a nepenthe for thee, or shall it merely be for thy mirth? Answer me so, parlay, for yeares burn through me and thy fictive tears tell stories of yore.

Silence was my only babbler ... unbidden as it was, loud as it was... I embraced it for I feared the sneering of those who drummed my demise within.

But the music of the damned had soon amassed within the walls and a stringed throne came to be— ingenuitiation had ensued for it impaled us all, pure or corrupted, keepers or betrayers... we were one. O' e'er so telestic those strings, to them our necks are tethered— a stringed throne that tied our teeth to our sinews...

A piano bonded to the stringed throne had been sounded, and with every pressed key, a tune of the damned had been engendered and with it was our torture. By the tunes, our bodies were clattering against one another only to father terrifying yet ensorcelling songs. I witnessed the band of sin; albatross was the pianist, the cantatrice had made her farewells to her doss— upon the stage she opened her mouth not to warble but for a merry tasting of our blood as it dripped alow our feet to warm her coldly viscera, the choir was singing ghastly at us as they hummed birthing psalms from the age-old barren wombs only to melt our teeth, and the Nephilim of Groan feasted upon our weary souls. My hands, my fingers, my legs all were but deartuated, save my tongue for they drenched it in the forbidden ink to narrate of this ever after— "To keep ye alive, a punishment for us or for thee, post-mortem fossor?" The Nephilim barked as they held my darkened tongue in grips "With thy wretched tongue, write for millennia as thou keepest secrets within."

With this tongue of mine, of the restless, of the wretched, of the unnamed, I live, and in perpetuity it weepeth black tears as it writeth to thee, humanity of scoria. Answer me so, pirthee, of what elation are the living unwilling? Of what use are secrets authorless? 'Tis but the theorem of the dead, of which I am now, yet of secrecy my

tongue nor I can never be... for millennia pass as the stringed throne shineth ever  
more yet my tongue still writeth, and ye still do not read...

## Faltering |

The lights in the church are dimmed. Candle flames flicker from around the room, casting long, fleeting shadows against the walls. There is a faint smell of artificial lavender and old carpeting. People talk amongst each other, but not a word can be picked out. The simultaneous conversations blend with one another and turn the room into a quiet but ever-humming hive. On each metal fold out seat, a small package of tissues sits beside a paper booklet with a photo of a young woman. Her eyes are green.

I choose a seat nearest to the left wall. The chairs are set to face the stage, which is a large half-circle in the front of the room. I stuff the tissue package into my purse and set it under the chair. An older man and who I assume is his wife find their way to the seats next to mine.

"Hello," the man says.

I smile and say "hello" back, and then I instantly feel ashamed for smiling. He says his name is Kurt Richard, and his wife's name is Nancy Richard. We shake hands.

"Did you know Emily well?" he asks.

"I was her neighbor," I say, which is the most articulate way I can think to admit that, no, I did not know Emily that well. We exchange nice-to-meet-yous and take our seats.

The pastor makes his way through the small crowd by way of short, mournful greetings. A nod here, a half-hearted smile there. A handshake and a hug. Whatever it takes to momentarily console whoever happens to be closest to him at the time. He reaches the stage and the humming of the hive falls to silence. He rests his hands on the pulpit and takes a long breath.

"We are gathered here today, as family and as friends, to remember Emily Holman." A pause. He looks at several faces in the crowd, but he can't seem to decide which face to end on. He turns his gaze to the gray speckled carpet. As he continues, I scan the room for anyone whom I might recognize. I know that I am an outsider. In a strange, selfish way, I am hoping that I am not the only one. It dawns on me that I have unintentionally become an intruder on something very sacred. I haven't earned the right to be here.

I think back to the day that I ran into Emily at the supermarket. She was holding up a tiny baby girl's dress. It was a soft shade of purple, with white ruffled trim and little



satin roses sewn in. It was so small that it was hard to imagine even a tiny human fitting into such a thing. I tried to walk by her without being noticed.

“Reagan?” She was still holding up the little dress. “I knew it was you,” she said as I turned to face her.

“Emily,” I started, embarrassed that I had just tried to escape a conversation with the same woman who had dropped off a casserole and a bottle of wine the day after I first moved in next to her. She had stuck a note on the wine bottle that said:

I threw the note away and scoffed at the word “friends” minutes after she left. She and her husband seemed like the perfectly-perfect couple. Good looking, somewhat well-to-do, effortlessly lovely in every way imaginable. In other words, they were annoying. In the baby clothes section of the store, she started to say something, but a panicked look came over her face. She looked down and fumbled with the little dress to get it back on the clothes stand. “Oh, I—”

The dress escaped from her grasp and landed near my feet. I leaned down to pick it up and handed it back to her without saying a word. She took it from my hands sheepishly and quickly glanced around the store before leaning forward to whisper in my ear.

“I haven’t told anyone except for my husband, but I think I might be pregnant.” As quiet as her voice was, it was full of excitement, with only the slightest touch of fear. Her eyes said the same thing when she pulled away. I didn’t know how to respond, other than to say, “I’m so happy for you,” which seemed appropriate, given her excitement over the prospect of being a mother. Perhaps because I was basically a stranger to her, she felt safe in telling me her secret. I had no one to tell.

“Will you pray for me?” she said, the thrill in her voice still present.

I wasn’t a religious person, and I hadn’t been brought up in a religious home. And yet, in my obligation to be a good neighbor, the words fell out of my mouth. “Yes,” I stuttered. “Of course I will.”

A look of genuine gratitude came over her face, and it crossed my mind that maybe she wasn’t as annoying as I had assumed. “Thank you, Reagan,” she said. After saying our goodbyes, she smiled and went on her way.

Two weeks later, the words Please join us for a memorial service honoring Emily Holman stared back at me from a mailed invitation.

There she was in the photo, all green-eyed and real. I saw the news about her accident just a few days earlier. It was in the same newspaper that was still sitting on my coffee table. On the front page, a mangled, blue Ford Focus with shattered glass surrounding it. The white box truck was within a few feet of it, hardly as damaged as the little sedan.

After seeing that photo, I kept thinking about how pristine everything she and Caleb owned together was. The house, the cars, the yard; it was all immaculately well kept. The newspaper photo seemed to defy any order. It was chaos trampling on perfection.

When I first read the invitation, I told myself that I wouldn't go. I had only known Emily and her husband for a little over a month. Who was I to her?

And yet, at ten o'clock on that same night, I found myself lying awake and thinking about that tiny purple dress.

The last row of faces I scan is in the front, closest to the center of the stage. Emily's husband, Caleb, sits directly in the middle. I have only ever seen him with a clean-shaven face. Stubble covers his cheeks now. A black, button down shirt sits on his slumped shoulders. The darkness of his shirt, coupled with the way the candle light flickers against his face, makes him look paler than I remember him being. As far away as I am, I can spot the darkness underneath his eyes. He does not move or blink in the moments that I watch him. He stares into a horizon that is invisible to anyone else but himself.

"Emily was a wife, a daughter, a sister, a friend, and a helper. She was, in every sense of the words," the pastor says softly, "a light among darkness. She was beyond a doubt one of the most loving people I have ever known."

A muffled cry leaves the mouth of a woman seated on the right side of the room, near the back. Caleb remains still. The pastor continues to speak in his low, calming manner, until he asks for everyone to stand and sing.

The pianist begins to play, and all are standing except for one person. An older woman who was sitting next to Caleb gently taps him on the shoulder and gives him a sorrowful smile. He stares at her for a moment before slowly lifting himself up from his seat. The first verse begins, and he does not sing along.

The voices around me vary from soft and shaky to billowing and proud. The semi-high ceilings make the voices sound as if they are drifting upward. I try to tune in on just one voice at a time. Nancy Richard's voice reminds me of my mother's. I peek at her through the corner of my eye and see that her own eyes are closed. She knows the lyrics by heart, and she gently sways back and forth to the rhythm. Her husband lifts his right hand up as he sings.

I remember seeing people do this once when I was a teenager. My best friend Sherri went to a small Presbyterian church in Tacoma. I tagged along with her family after staying overnight at their house on a handful of Saturdays. One morning, during the part where everyone sang, I saw that many people had their hands lifted up.

"Why are they doing that?" I asked Sherri.

"Doing what?"

My eyes darted to one man at the end of our row who was singing passionately with his hands in the air. "What are they doing with their hands?"

Without looking, she answered: "I don't really know. I think they just like the music." To me, it looked like they were surrendering to something, the way a criminal might, except the people in the church seemed like they were happy about it.

The song ends and the pastor asks for Emily's mother to speak. A woman with shoulder-length salt and pepper hair walks up to the pulpit. She adjusts the angle of the microphone and clears her throat.

"Emily..." she says, with each part of the name broken up into its own sound. Em-uh- lee. She pauses to clear her throat again and gently wipe her eyes with a tissue. "Emily would be so happy to see you all together. All these people she loved in different ways."

She talks about Emily's childhood as a slideshow of photos begins to play from a projector to the wall behind her. In one photo, Emily is a toddler with white-blond hair and little purple corduroy overalls, holding a chunk of cake in her little hands. She's got some sort of orange frosting on her face and is smiling the way only a child can.

In another photo, she is on a soccer field with a crimson high school jersey on. Her cleats and sock-covered shin guards are muddy, and her blonde hair is drenched dark from the rain. With one hand, she holds a shiny gold medal, and with the other hand, she points her index finger up in the air to signify that her team is “number one.”

In the final picture, Emily is in a long white gown covered with lace, with Caleb standing across from her, sliding a ring over her finger. They are both crying through blissful smiles.

Emily’s mother thanks the crowd for their support and then descends the stage. For what feels like the longest minute, the stage is empty and the entire room is silent. People in the front row are looking at Caleb. The pastor whispers something to Caleb, and then nods before making his way back to the pulpit. He concludes the memorial service by asking us to sing one final song, and assures everyone that they can stick around for a while.

Many do stay and talk with one another, but I say goodbye to Kurt and Nancy and quietly head for the exit. Before I reach the door, a woman stops me and asks me, in a kind voice, if I’ll sign a memory card and put it in the box for Emily’s family. I hesitate, but nod and grab a card and a pen.

I realize that I’ve written this sentence in the present-tense. I don’t know her, but I her. She special. She loved. Emily Holman

I open the front door to my house and turn the lights on. It is emptier than I remember it being, with placeless cardboard boxes still sitting on the carpet. Some of them are opened from when I needed to retrieve something but found no motivation to completely unpack the entire box.

, I think, but instead I pour myself a glass of red wine. I turn the lights out and sit in the living room. The blinds are open, but I keep them that way to see the night sky. I imagine that I am back in the bedroom of my childhood home. I had a skylight just above my bed, and on a clear night, I used to try to count the stars.

I try to do that now, but a car’s headlights blast light in through the windows. They pull into Caleb and Emily’s driveway. Caleb gets out of the car and closes the door with a loud thud. Instead of going inside, he shoves his hands into his pockets and leans his side against the car. The yellow glow from the porchlights barely reaches him. He does not move for what feels like an hour but is more likely only a minute.

I hadn't prayed for Emily like she'd asked me to. Not because I didn't want to be kind to her, but because I didn't think it would be worth anything. I didn't know God, and didn't know if I believed in anything. I still don't. But right now, watching Caleb sit as still as a statue in his driveway, I begin to pray. "Dear God," my voice cracks, interrupting the complete silence that had been before. "I think—"

And then, as if being struck by something from behind, Caleb's shoulders slump over, and he begins to shake. Still leaning into the car, he slides down slowly to the ground. Head in his hands, he sobs.

I set the wineglass down and close the blinds, because I know that I have just witnessed something that no one was supposed to see. I have witnessed someone faltering. As the bottom of the blinds hit the window sill, I finish my prayer.

"I think he needs you right now."

## **The Last Place You Look |**

My mum was wrong.

Now, I haven't always thought that. I used to think she was wise. 'If you lose something, it's always in the last place you look,' she'd say when I was growing up, and she was right. When I lost my homework, but found it under the bed? That was the last place I looked. When I couldn't find my toy soldiers, then discovered the dog was sitting on them? Under her bum was the last place I looked. That time Chunky the hamster escaped? I found him in the last place I looked, although that was in the toilet bowl, face-down in the water. I don't how he managed to climb in there. Poor Chunky.

I've lived my life by that motto. Of course, I try not to misplace things, but anything I do lose - keys, money, umbrellas - always turns up in the last place I look, although I remember some confusion around my virginity. But over the last decade, I've begun to question mum's philosophy.

As I've got older, lost things seem less likely to turn up. Ten years ago, my dad phoned and said

I'd lost my mum, and I said, 'what do you mean, I've lost her? You're the one who shares a house with her. If anyone's lost her, it's you.' Then I told him she'd turn up in the last place he looked, and he said he expected that would be in a wooden box at St Cuthbert's and asked if I'd lost my marbles. I said, yes, once, but I was seven at the time and found them in the shed, in the last place I looked. He hung up then. It was only when Auntie Mavis rang later and asked if I was going to mum's funeral that I realised he'd meant she was dead. I wish people would be clearer. The same thing happened a couple of years later, when Dad fell under that bus. 'Your poor dad,' said some lady, trying to be kind. 'I'm sorry for your loss.' I said he wasn't lost, he was over there with the number 42 to Croydon on his ribcage and tyre marks on his face.

Then, six months ago, the doctor said I was going to lose my sight. The idea of 'going to lose' something didn't make sense to me. You've either lost something or you haven't. I have my wallet. I've lost my wallet. There's no 'I'm going to lose my wallet', because if you thought you might lose your wallet, you'd take steps to make sure you didn't, like putting it inside a zippable pocket and checking that pocket for holes every night, like I do. But, over the last few weeks, as my vision became cloudier, I began to get

an idea of what he meant. But I could still see, therefore I hadn't lost my sight.

Until this morning. I woke, and there was only darkness. I blinked, blinked, rubbed my eyes and blinked again. But nothing happened.

I've lost my sight.

And it won't turn up in the last place I look, because I can't see to do any looking.

I stare into the blackness, and think about my mum.

# The Artists



Reality Quotient |  
*Amanda Bergloff*



**Amanda Bergloff**

**Abdulkareem AlGhabban** is an undergraduate student of English Literature & Linguistics and a minor in Media in King Saud University. An independent scholar of Science, e.g. Clinical Psychology, Clinical Psychiatry.

**Maria Sledmere** is a Glasgow-based postgraduate student, waitress and pretend poetess. She writes music reviews for RaveChild and blogs about everything from Derrida to Lana Del Rey at <http://musingsbymaria.wordpress.com>

**Matthew Bruce Harrison's** writing appears in Sixth Finch, The Cincinnati Review, The Carolina Quarterly, The Texas Review, At Length, and The Saint Ann's Review, among others. He lives in Minneapolis.

**Victoria Briggs** is an award-winning and Pushcart-nominated writer with poems and short stories published in various places. She lives in London and tweets @vicbriggs.

**Wendy Bourke** resides in Vancouver, where she searches for inspiration on long walks with her camera.

**Lauren Suchenski** Lauren Suchenski is a fragment sentence-dependent, ellipsis-loving writer and lives somewhere where the trees change color. Lauren believes in the inherent creative capability within all people.

**J.R. Campbell** James R. Campbell is a reporter who has worked for newspapers in Texas, Colorado, Kansas and Missouri. His collection is "The Purity of Jazz and Speckled Trout and Other Prose and Poetry," and "Help Us Find Out Where the Beulah Lands Are" represents a new approach.

**Christina Dalcher** has a doctorate in theoretical linguistics and writes from her home in the American South. Her short work appears in After the Pause, Maudlin House, and Vine Leaves Journal, among others.

**Diane Simmons** short stories and flashes have been placed in many competitions and published in magazines, online and in anthologies. A keen participant in NFFD, she enjoys performing her flash. [www.dianesimmons.wix.com/dianesimmons](http://www.dianesimmons.wix.com/dianesimmons)

**Jenny Butler** is an academic who studies religions and whose creative writing is inspired by the mysterious and numinous. Many of her published stories deal with mystical and mythological themes.

**Christopher Stanley** lives on a hill with three sons who share the same birthday but aren't triplets. He tends to write in the morning before the sun rises and his sons rise.

**Christine Collinson's** work has appeared in Writers' Forum, Prima Magazine and Ad Hoc Fiction's eBook, among others. Find her on Twitter @collinson26.'

**Alison Wassell** is a short story writer whose only ambition is to be a better short story writer. The shorter the better. She has no plans whatsoever to write a novel.

**Cathy Ulrich** is a Montana writer whose flash fiction has been featured in a variety of journals, including apt, Third Point Press and The Mondegreen.

**Michelle Templeton** is a writer and artist in Seattle. She is an MFA candidate in fiction at Antioch University Los Angeles.

**DC Diamondopolous** is an award-winning short story and flash fiction writer published worldwide. DC's stories have appeared in over thirty anthology and online literary publications.

**Kristina Dyer** is from Belfast, Northern Ireland. When she's not writing she enjoys baking and being overly emotional about her dogs. She's been published by 101 Words. Follow @kristinajdyer.

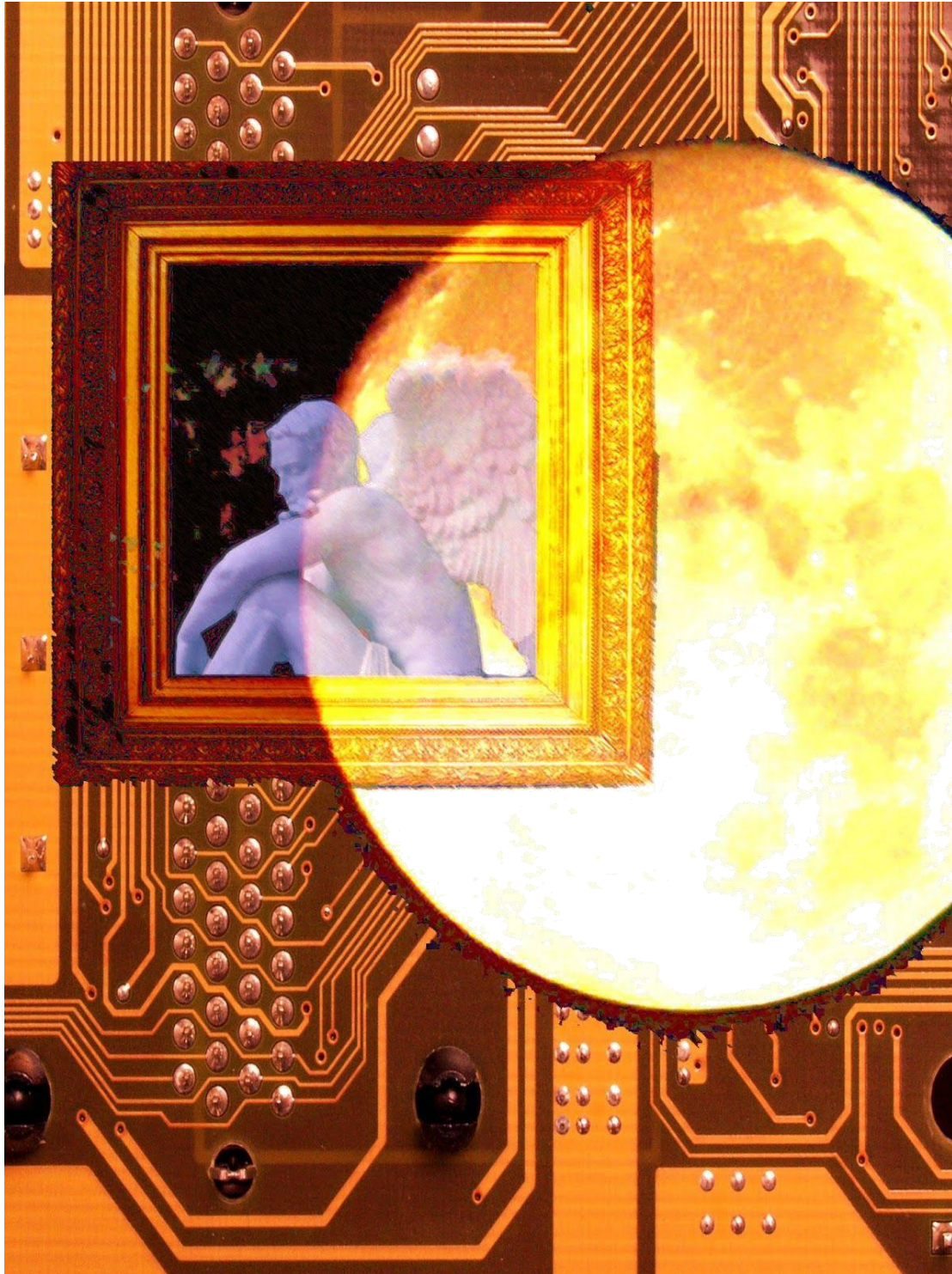
**Adam Wilshaw** was a news reporter in England before moving with his wife and young children to rural Catalunya in 2012. He is looking for a publisher for his debut novel.

**Paul Alex Gray** enjoys writing speculative fiction that cuts a jagged line to a magical real world. His work is published in Spelk, 365 Tomorrows, The Wild Hunt and others.

**Zerrin Otgur** writes both long and short fiction. Her work has appeared in various publications, including Chapman, Page & Spine, and Third Flatiron's Keystone Chronicles anthology. She lives in Boston.

**Sarah Lizee** resides in the Pacific Northwest and studies English at Central Washington University. She is an unapologetic coffee fiend, an avid crafter, and a lover of all things outdoors.

**David Cook** 's work appears in many places online, and in the 2016 National Flash Fiction Anthology. Find him at [www.davewritesfiction.wordpress.com](http://www.davewritesfiction.wordpress.com) and on Twitter @davidcook100. He lives in Bridgend, Wales.



Digital Icarus |