

Firefly Magazine

X



A Journal of Luminous Writing

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POETRY



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Featured Poem

IN THE ABSENCE OF DARKNESS | *Laurel Paige*

You think the moon
is just the back of the sun.
Everything has two sides, you say.
Each one ripples and pulses,

energy that can be licked up
and tasted. But one side has just a little bit
more clarity
than the other, is just a little bit
more clean.

I can never sleep
with your heat so close
to mine, your arm across my naked
chest, heavier than any part
of you should be.

One handed
I crack the moon, watch
the stars drip slowly
out, drops stain the sky.

You let them lodge between your teeth
so every smile flashes quick and bright.
Night another thing
you've yanked away and claimed
as yours.

not the time | *Mark Mayers*

It's too early to speak of what happened
to you; too raw, despite three winters dying
in the earth.

It's too late to speak to you,
as once I did into a dead afternoon
a life away,
where you had grown so small
and I would no longer visit,
the shame too great for another goodbye.

Shame & fear & desire for escape - all
intrinsic to that rush for the ledge,
rum-deadened, blank-faced,
till brought low and slapped
away from death
for now.

cancel | *Michael Pihoda*

you start
to like

the taste
of Advil.

it is January
or some other

shitty
month.

when two
voices

speak
together

they cancel,
become

so much earth
at the outskirts

of a salad
spinner.

THE ESCAPE ARTIST | *Dakota Galvin*

For you
I would build
wings out of wire,
leaves, & twigs and hollow
my bones to fly
straight into the sun
like Icarus

or tightrope
across the Chicago skyline,
to dance above the face-
less crowd below
my shaking knees

I would deny any illusion
or sleight of hand
& catch a bullet in my teeth, for you,

I would Houdini
my way into your room

& eventually out of your life

CINNABAR MOTHS | *Robert Ford*

Up here is where I'm sure it was, all the
muted fluttering, on the ledges shouldered
beneath the newly-converted mills, lording it
over the gritted teeth of the stone-dark town.

I followed her, behind by a breath that still
tasted of kiss, enjoying the view, through a
chain of fields thigh-deep in flowers, the sky
both scrubbed blue and punched with bruises

at the same time. She seemed to know
all their names, the cornflowers, loosestrife,
pointed out the ragwort – *poisonous to cattle* –
and the liquorice-striped caterpillars urgently

stripping its leaves. I fell back, now winded
with the effort, rolling their names on my tongue.
She seemed to know everything that mattered,
all except what was hatching away inside her.

STILL LIFE WITH STACKED PRODUCE | *William James*

The bars are lonelier than he cares to handle
 & the park shuts itself at sunset,
so he spends his nights in grocery stores
 not to be alone. Inoffensive music plays
over the loudspeakers as he pores over
 selections of imported cheeses with names
he can't pronounce & stares at his reflection
 in the glass doors sheltering rows of frozen peas,
carrots, the occasional salmon. He runs his fingers
 along the waxy green skin of mangoes
stacked like cannonballs on a courthouse lawn.
 Young couples so very much in love hold hands
next to huge vats of dried beans, wild rice,
 granola, filling plastic bags with assorted grains.
He remembers the pomegranates are in season
 & slowly walks back to the produce department.
Chooses the one with sunset at its throat,
 the one with a king's crown. In case he is met
with an unexpected need to share,
 he selects a mate to hold in his empty hand,
his eyes staring coldly back at him
 from the polish on the tile floor.

THE PESSIMIST'S HOROSCOPE | Jonathan Taylor

This month Saturn and Jupiter are in conjunction
so if you set yourself goals you won't achieve them.

Be honest and assertive in your professional life
and Neptune and your bosses will shaft you anyway.

The Moon is shadowing unpredictable Uranus
so watch out for bankruptcy on Monday.

Keep hold of your worries: with ascendant Mercury
your ticket stands no chance of winning the lottery.

Single? Venus is sinking in your chart
so romance will probably flip you the bird.

Attached? The evening star will ensure
you won't be for much longer

and with your constellation below the horizon
you will cry
and cry
and cry.

FLASH FICTION



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Featured Flash

THE OTHER SORT | *Sandra Arnold*

We hadn't been there five minutes before the first arrivals started drifting through the doors: a man staring out the window muttering about somebody who was late; a woman searching for something she'd lost, but she'd forgotten what it was.

While Auntie Jane was showing Mum around the garden I wandered off to explore an old shed. That's when I saw the boy hanging from the doorway. I must have yelled because Auntie Jane and Mum came charging back. When I realised they couldn't see him I told them what was there. Mum started telling me off for making things up again. The building used to be a school, Auntie Jane interrupted, before she bought it and renovated it. She'd read that a boy had hanged himself here a century ago after a ferocious beating from the headmaster for being late. Ask him what he wants, she said, ignoring Mum's protests. I did. He said he couldn't find his mother to say he was sorry. It was a long shot, but I told him to follow me.

The minute the woman saw the boy she stopped searching and held out her arms. The man at the window started crying. I supposed he felt differently now about the importance of punctuality. I returned to the garden to tell Auntie Jane that she would have three fewer residents. Oh good, she said. I did feel that it was a bit crowded at times.

When Mum parked the car in the driveway of our modern semi-detached, she said she'd been worrying about Jane living all alone in that big old house. It was too

easy to imagine things. Those dark rooms. And Jane had always been a bit...well... And by the way she didn't want to hear that kind of nonsense from me again. I'd almost scared the life out of her. She turned the key in our front door and said she would try to persuade Jane to sell up and buy that nice new house opposite ours. I looked round at the house. A real estate agent was ushering a couple of people up the driveway. Two of the other sort were looking out the window. They saw me staring and waved.

INTERIORS | *Tim Love*

With my white stick I knocked on her thatched cottage's yellow door, and asked if she needed her piano tuned. She was even more beautiful than I'd anticipated.

"I don't actually believe you're blind," she said, inviting me in, "Can you even play?"

"A bit."

"Prove it, and I won't call the police. It needs testing anyway. Nobody's played it for ages."

So I tinkled the only piece I knew. When I finished I saw she was crying.

"Why me?" she asked.

"When I cycled past on the way to work I sometimes saw your silhouette, or an arm as you watered the flowerbox. One summer's day I heard you sneeze and discovered you had a piano - it resonated. Then I became ill. The doctors thought I was going to lose my sight. The memories of you consoled me. I tried to recreate you from them. When I recovered I wanted to see how right I was, so I peered inside but it was too dingy. I'm sorry."

"Yes, that's me," she said, wiping her eyes, "look through the little front

window and all you see is the back one. I didn't used to be like that. Nice garden there though, don't you think? What made you choose that tune?"

"I don't know. It was my mother's favourite."

"My mother's too. If we're long-lost siblings we'd better not fall in love."

"They say that love is blind."

"Do they? Well, leave your stick when you go. I've lost mine."

STICKY | Nod Ghosh

You could say it's a problem, though some would call it a gift.

Things stick to me.

When I roll in the dirt, I pick up all sorts. I don't mean just grit and feathers and dust. I've had nickels and dimes, sadness and hunger, broken-hearts and the pain of a lost child stuck to me. One time, I even had a rabbit fixed to my pelt. But that's what we're like, our kind. Sometimes it takes a whole moonlit night to peel all that dreck off.

I drift in and out of people's lives. Often the more they push me away the worse we become entangled.

"Why don't you just leave it," Brother Coyote says, his stopwatch tickin' like a time bomb.

"Leave what?"

"All that badness you pick up." He scratches in the dirt. "You ain't never gonna get clean anyway." When he says it, I'm trying to take pain of a jealous neighbour from that space between my ribs and what lies beneath. "*Let* the cares of the world gather on you," he grins. "Don't even try shuckin' 'em off." Coyote takes a puff from his pipe. It's a wonder he don't catch fire from them sparks that shower

over him like fireflies.

But I got my pride. I'm famous, don't you know? I'm the patron saint of my kind. People look up to me. Use me to learn their kids a lesson: how to get what you want by pretending not to care.

See, I was the first. A wily fox fashioned me from roadside garbage. That sly creature moulded me in his slippery paws. He made me to last. And last I did.

I've seen big changes in my time. Roads got wider. Young'uns got bolder, not respectin' their Maws and Paws. See that's one of my jobs. I get wind one of 'em's been misbehavin', I go round and take their mischief, roll around in it, and it sticks to me. And then off I go with it.

That's what I do.

I walk away, leavin' nothin' but a dark stain on the doorstep, and the faint smell of turpentine in the air.

A PART OF THE LANDSCAPE | *Paul Beckman*

Betsy tossed all her mail on the kitchen counter but took the large envelope that had to be a wedding invitation and put it in her gym bag. The return address was her estranged daughter, Terri's and all attempts to make things better had gone unanswered. But now, with a joyous heart, she planned to open her invitation with her morning coffee after her gym workout.

She sat with her coffee and played with the envelope and finally opened it. It was an invitation to Terri's wedding alright, but in every conceivable place was written in NOT. You are NOT invited to the wedding of Terri and . . .

The return card was filled out for her. I will NOT be attending . . .

The meal choices were X-ed over as was the invitation for brunch the following day.

Written in Terri's hand at the bottom of the non-invitation was a note:

Please read the letter I also sent for an explanation.

The letter stayed unopened on Betsy's counter along with the flyers, bills and magazines. It was there for so many days she no longer saw it—like a pair of socks on the stairs waiting to be carried up to the laundry it became part of the landscape after a while.

The following month, on the day of the wedding, Betsy opened a bottle of wine and poured herself a glass—her first drink in over three years of sobriety—and she sat down to read the letter she knew would lambaste her even more.

Betsy was half way through the bottle when she had the courage to open the letter. She poured one more full glass and read:

Mom, I sent you the invitation so you can feel some of the hurt you have unleashed on me over the years. Your years of drinking and embarrassment and humiliation that have caused me pain both personally and professionally had made me your bitter child. Betsy wept and poured another finishing the bottle. But now, I've decided to forgive you and I want you to know how proud of you I am for sticking

with your sober life. I want you at my wedding to walk me down the aisle. It will mean so much to both of us—I just know it. I love you.

Your loving daughter, Terri.

Betsy was crying out loud by the time she finished reading the letter and looked over at the grandfather clock. It was blurry and she couldn't make out the time but she knew her daughter wanted and needed her. She got up and staggered towards her bedroom to find something to wear that would pass as a mother-of-the-bride dress and made her face up and hurried to the hall where the wedding was taking place.

Unfortunately, she made it in time driving drunk, fast and erratically, without the good fortune of being pulled over and arrested, as she had so often in her past.

SHORT STORIES



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Featured Short

DOGWOOD DREAMS | Robert Walton

A scent of dogwood drifts on dawn air. I waken with tears in my eyes.

When I was a little girl, we walked from Tennessee into Northern Alabama. It was April of 1933. My uncle had a farm near Athens. We planned to stay with him until times got better.

We walked on back roads and paths through the woods. My father and mother carried our belongings on their backs. My job was to keep track of Dan my little brother. He was four and jumpy as a cricket.

Toward the end of our third walking day, my parents lowered their gunnysacks and slumped down on fragrant grass to rest. Like most little boys, Dan wouldn't stop moving until he couldn't. He hopped off into the trees as soon as my parents put down their sacks. I trotted after him. My father called after me, "Don't go too far, Mary Lou. Call if you need me."

I waved to him as I passed from sunlight into cool shade. After a few steps, I slowed and called, "Dan?" but he didn't answer me. I walked some way into the trees. There was a rustle behind me. I turned and Dan's grin popped out at me. "Boo!" he shouted. A huge black man, shoulders round like a bear's, leaned out from a tree behind Dan. "Boo, yourself!"

We screamed and clutched each other.

The big man laughed like a booming drum. "Easy, children, easy. I'm Henry Jefferson and I mean you no harm."

Dan and I looked at him. He was far darker than my mother and father. He seemed tall as a barn door and at least that wide. His arms were thick as young trees.

He grinned at us and dangled a dead hen by her legs. "I got a chicken? Your momma got a pot?"

Henry Falstaff Jefferson sat beside our campfire and plucked his chicken. He threw the feathers into the flames. They made an awful stink. My mother wrinkled her nose, but she didn't say anything. She was thankful that chicken came along for us.

After supper, we sat happy and full beside the fire. Chicken-hominy stew

and cornbread ease many troubles. Cool, springtime dusk grew around us. Henry Jefferson warmed his hands over the fire, opened his eyes wide and grinned. "'Bout dark enough to tell a story, you think?"

Dan and I nodded.

Henry leaned closer to the flames. "Do you children believe in ghosts?"

Of course we did.

Men on horses woke us in the morning. The men wore white shirts, brown pants and long boots. Their hats had wide brims and their faces were in shadow. One man shouted, "Smell that campfire smoke? There's thieving niggers in these woods. Caleb, take your boys around to the other side. We'll drive 'em in your direction."

Well, we ran. The big horses blew and snorted behind us. We dodged between trees and around boulders. I remember thinking it might be best to hide under a trunk when some roots grabbed my foot and jerked me down. Red Alabama earth smacked the breath out of me. I lost Dan's hand.

When I could breathe again, a horse taller than a mountain was standing over me. Its rider reached down and gripped my arm. He hauled me out of those woods like a sack of potatoes and dumped me on the grass beside my mother.

I looked up and saw Henry hanging from a tree limb. His feet were still twitching, but I knew they wouldn't much longer. I told my mother we ought to tell the men that my father didn't steal their chicken. She put her hand over my mouth and whispered, "Hush."

The men hanged my father alongside Henry. They dangled together like ripe peaches, two of those strange fruit Billie Holiday sang about.

Dogwood blossoms are white, not like snow, but warm like a biscuit. We found Dan near an April dogwood tree. Its blossoms fell on him, covered him with their creamy silk. A horse had stepped on his chest. He was still alive, but he was broken. I spent the longest hour I lived on this earth listening to Dan try to breathe. He died before noon. We buried him there beneath that dogwood.

I dreamed of dogwood blossoms again last night.

DIVERSITY | *Rose Docherty*

I'm sitting at a table of my peers.

Across from me, Nathan opines on the value of free media, gesturing effusively with his glass of red wine. He's a reviewer for a culture webzine - well, he's a barista at the Nero's down the road, but the zine is his real passion. His look is stylish in an effortless way that begs for compliments but allows him to completely deny it, and there's a pen sticking out of the top of his jacket pocket that might as well be a label saying 'Ask me about my novel.' I like him, but I'm not sure I could identify any of his definitive personality traits. This is his flat, small and pokey but homey, filled with photos and knick-knacks and mementos from trips abroad with his girlfriend Marnie.

Marnie sits beside him, the trendy girl from Brooklyn, smart and fashionable and so effortlessly cool, with a slim figure that she carries with upmost elegance. She met Nathan through the zine - she's an occasional contributor of political opinion pieces which are markedly less popular than the movie reviews. His arm is slung across her chair in a gesture that's just possessive enough to be uncomfortable, and when he hits on a point she finds worthy of her attention she cuts in, leaning slightly closer to the table in a move mimicked by everyone else

around her. She pauses, waving her hand in the air as she searches for the perfect word. Finally she finishes, and we all nod appreciatively except Nathan, who is likely annoyed that she'd repeated what he'd said but with far better phrasing.

Sarah picks it up from here in that sandy, husky voice of hers, stabbing the air with a fork as she's swept up in her own argument. She dresses somewhat conservatively in dark blue slacks and a tucked in shirt buttoned to her neck, but the masculine look is elegant on her slim frame. It's an irony, I know, a challenge to her father who always wanted a son. Besides, it makes her look more like the journalist she knows she's going to be just as soon as she finishes her degree.

Unfortunately, Sarah's also prone to writers block and she trails off, finishing weakly as she takes another bite of steak to try to cover her shame. Joelene steps in, brushing her long hair out of her eyes as she speaks. She just finished her transition last year and we were all there to support her every step of the way; well, we were all busy with our own things so it's not as though we could be there all the time, but we saw her when we could. She's a playwright, and is in the middle of writing her first play now. The hope is that it'll be a success so she can drop one of her two part-time jobs. I sometimes wonder if we could have worked a little harder to help her, but then I remember that we're all struggling, aren't we, and no one's struggle is more painful than anyone else's, and why should I be responsible for

helping other people when I'm disenfranchised too?

Joelene pauses too long in conversation and Marek steps in, erasing her annoyed expression with a wave of his hand. As he speaks he becomes animated, like a statue springing into life. He's such a passionate individual, so filled with ideas and thoughts and feelings; he's the kind of person you just know could change the world for the better. He writes a left-wing political blog which actually has quite a few readers - he's shown me the page view statistics. Professionally he writes click-bait articles for some knock-off of BuzzFeed, but like he says it's just to gather experience and all he needs is a few more years in journalism before he can be the political pundit he was born to be. We always look forward to Marek's turn in the conversation because his tone is so forceful you don't even have to listen to the words to understand what he's saying.

And now Katarina breaks in with some much needed levity, her easy smile and kind eyes reminding us that there are good-hearted people like her in the world. Her points aren't necessarily brilliant or insightful - in fact, she's mostly saying what Sarah said before - but she says it in such a charming way it doesn't really matter. Every word she says reminds me why I fell in love with her, and I find myself examining the contours of her face rather than really listening. She's a class assistant at one of those posh nurseries where they teach toddlers to speak

French. It's hard work sometimes, but the hours aren't too bad and the pay is good and it gives her time to work on her novel.

My hand falls into the small of her back and it's only because I can feel her body turn towards me that I realise she's stopped talking. It's my turn. I haven't been listening, really, not since ... well, not since Nathan first brought up the topic, but I look out at their blank but well-meaning faces and it occurs to me that it doesn't really matter. What do they expect me to say? Something new? We had this same talk a month ago and I never listened to anyone then either, instead leaning back in my chair, sipping my wine, and sneaking smiles at my pretty girlfriend. I'd felt peaceful, unthreatened, unchallenged, content to drink and smile and plan the next scene in the film script I was writing (I'm about halfway through it now, though I'm starting to feel like it's a bit too ambitious for a first script) and when it came my time to talk I just opened my heart and spoke my mind, passionately delivering the same views I've held since university. They'd nodded thoughtfully, chewing their food and sipping their wine and laughing in unison at the little joke I'd slid in there. Then Nathan had announced the next topic of conversation and we'd all started mentally rehearsing what we were going to say when it was our turn.

But now I'm tired. We're reaching the end of the night, the last few sips in

the bottle. I just had a brilliant idea for a new script, something bold and daring and political, and all I want to do is go home, sit at my desk, and think about writing. So instead I smile and move my hands in that same gesture that's been travelling around the table like a Mexican wave or a Chinese whisper or something less culturally offensive and say, "You know, I really don't feel like I have anything else to add. Should we move on to dessert?"

They blink at me, all perfected expressions of surprise, then with a murmur of agreement we push away from the table and collect our plates, moving in a strangely organised train to the kitchen. We all smile awkwardly and make our apologies as we try to navigate our way past each other to the kitchen sink, and for a second I feel oddly like I'm in a mirror maze, constantly bumping into my reflection. Finally we sit down again with dessert, a rich cheesecake Sarah bought from that independent organic vegan bakery she swears by.

"A toast," Nathan cries, lifting a newly filled glass of wine, "to friends and unity, and to sitting and listening to everyone's opinion, even if you might not agree!"

We all raise our glasses and shout out "Cheers!" and take a hearty sip of wine and comment on what a great meal this has been.

FUDGE | *James Wall*

‘There’s a pizza in the freezer,’ she says. ‘Make sure you clean up after yourself, mind. Don’t want crumbs everywhere.’

He can see her in the mirror on the wall behind him, putting her earring in, and then flicking her hair. She does that thing with her lips: pursing and pouting. They’re very red. She has a lot of makeup on.

She bends over the back of the sofa. ‘About 20 minutes for the pizza,’ she says. ‘Don’t need to tell you how to cook a pizza now, do I? Now you’re all grown up.’

She ruffles his hair and clasps her arms around him.

‘Get off,’ he says in a singsong voice.

‘My boy!’

Her perfume smells like flowers and engulfs him, and he can’t breathe. She kisses him hard on his cheek and he knows he will be left with a big red mark there. He usually is. He’ll look at it in the mirror when she’s gone but won’t wipe it off until later, before he goes to bed. As she stands up, the smell of alcohol fights through the perfume to reach him. It’s stronger than normal, and he sees she’s a bit wobbly on her feet as she puts on more lipstick.

She’s got the black dress on tonight, the one with bits of gold dotted about it,

and a gold necklace. Tights, and black high heel shoes. Going for a meal with a friend, she said. No-one he knows.

He tried to guess but she just shook her head, laughing.

There's a car horn outside.

'That'll be my lift,' she says, gathering her lipstick into her handbag. 'How do I look?' she says, posing in front of him, and adjusting her dress.

'Fine,' he says, leaning to one side to see the telly.

'Oh, Johnny, tell me. Does your mum look nice? Not too old? I don't look old do I?

'Mum, you look very nice.'

'Just nice?'

'You look great. What're you so bothered about? You're only going for something to eat with a friend.'

There's a beep outside again, and with a reminder to do keep everything tidy and to do his homework, she is gone.

The sound of the door closing still reverberating in his head, he wanders around the living room like he's in a gallery, examining the dvds in the cupboard, the magazines neatly lined up on the coffee table, and the notepad by the telephone to record any messages for her when she's out. She gets a lot calls from men now,

and she grabs the phone off him if he answers it first. He can tell they're from men even when he doesn't speak to them: her voice is different, lighter, and she laughs a lot.

Back by eleven, she said. She always says that but never is. And he's really going to do some homework on a Friday night, isn't he?

Snitch texts later, and Johnny brightens. *U still coming over tomorrow?*

Yeah. CU @ 2

He hears her come in: she's singing, and there's lots of banging, followed by quieter movements. The clock on his bedside table says 3:52. He listens carefully to see if she's on her own, and it's when he hears no one else that he realises his body is tense, and he lets it relax. His bedroom door opens slowly and he narrows his eyes to pretend he is asleep but wide enough to see the light from the landing spread over his room like a new day.

She brings smells into his room: perfume, drink, and another, sweeter smell that he recognises from her before but doesn't know what it is. She's by him now.

'My little man,' she whispers. The words sound conjoined.

In the half-light he can see that she's swaying, and then she slumps down on the carpet in front of him, her dress up to her thighs. She leans forward and her hand

lightly touches his hair, brushing it back over his ear, and he fights the desire to put it back.

A little later, his eyes begin to droop and when he flickers them open, she is still there, her legs splayed out, leaning against the wall, her head on one side her and eyes closed. Her breathing is heavy and she begins to snore. He takes his pillow and places it on the floor by his mother, and then gently pulls at her hand to encourage her to lie down. She murmurs and shuffles, and arranges herself on the carpet, her head sinking into the pillow. He pushes the door so there is just a thin shaft of light against the bedroom wall, just enough to see by should she need to go to the bathroom.

She's not there in the morning. She brings him tea and toast on a tray and they both sit on his bed munching. He has one slice buttered and one with lemon curd on it, which he has second. It's nearly 11am and he can't wake up.

Her eyes are heavy and drawn. She has no makeup on and looks tired and old. They don't say anything while they're eating, both staring at the wall. He glances over and smiles to see them both with their legs straight out on the bed, and their right hands clutching the plate while they hold the toast with their left. Their mugs are on the bedside table.

‘You got any plans today?’ she asks.

‘Going to see Snitch.’

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘What time?’

‘Why?’

‘Friend of mine might be coming over. Thought you’d like to meet him.’

‘Him?’

‘He’s really nice.’

‘You said that Paul was really nice.’

She doesn’t answer, then gathers up the plates and puts them on the tray.

‘What?’ she says, meeting his eye. She’d been avoiding it.

‘They’re all nice. Until they’re not.’

‘That’s enough. Greg is different. The others seemed very kind and generous at first I grant you but, I don’t know, they quickly change their minds, get scared off for some reason.’ He glances at her to see her doing the same. For a second, he wonders whether she means it’s him that puts them off. Then she continues: ‘But that’s men for you. Just look at your father.’ She pauses. ‘Sorry, I shouldn’t say that.’

He shrugs. He’s not seen his dad for years, not since his tenth birthday. Occasionally he wonders what he’s doing, but then finds something else to think

about.

‘What time is he coming round?’

‘About lunchtime,’ she says. ‘Thought I might make something here, and you can meet him.’

‘Going round to Snitch’s then.’

‘Couldn’t you change it, go see him later?’

‘His mum is making us lunch. It’s Snitch’s birthday. And we’re going to watch a film after.’

‘Oh go on, Johnny. For your mum.’

Snitch’s mother is older than his own. She’s got some grey hair but isn’t bothered about it. Johnny’s mum found one the other week and went mad. She was there in the mirror for ages pulling it out and then searching for any more.

‘I’m a bit early,’ he says.

‘That’s alright,’ Helen says. ‘You can come anytime. He’s upstairs in his room.’

He leaves his bike in the hallway. He’s half way up the stairs when she calls, ‘You boys want some tea?’

‘Hooray!’ Snitch appears on the landing from his bedroom, and hangs over the bannister. ‘Tea! That’ll be fantastic, our mam,’ he says putting on a broad

Yorkshire accent. 'And cake n'all? Did you say cake, our mam?'

'Shut it, useless,' she calls back and disappears into the kitchen.

Snitch, now adopting a posh BBC voice, says, 'That's no way to talk to one's offspring. I shall have her reported and flogged, you see that I don't.'

Still laughing, they go into Snitch's bedroom. The curtains are closed, but there's a gap at the windowsill where a triangle of light comes in. His bed is unmade and there are T-shirts and jeans on the floor. Johnny would love to be able to leave his room like this. Poking out from under his bed is a thumbed magazine with a topless woman on the front. Johnny's mum found one in his room a while back and she ripped it up page by page in front of him. Said something about pathetic men and threw it on the floor. That was just after she said that Paul wouldn't be coming round any more.

The TV is on, and in front of it is the games console. They're playing when Snitch's mum comes in with tea and cake. Snitch doesn't look round or say anything so Johnny thanks her.

'You see,' she says to Snitch. 'You should take a leaf out of Johnny's book. Manners!'

He still doesn't answer and his mother grabs an exercise book off the table that Snitch uses as a desk, and playfully hits him on the head with it.

‘See that?’ he says. ‘Abuse. Reporting her for that.’ His eyes don’t leave the screen.

After the game, they sit on the floor leaning against the bed in the aftermath. Their latest tea is nearly finished. There’s a clatter of plates downstairs.

‘You alright, Mum?’ Snitch calls, his head lifted to hear.

There’s silence, and then, ‘Yeah.’

‘You trying to climb into the cupboard again? Poor old thing.’

‘Watch it you, I’ll poison your dinner.’

‘She’s alright, your mum,’ says Johnny.

‘Not bad for an old dear.’ He stretches, his arms reaching out to the ceiling.

‘Does she miss your dad?’ He stares at the carpet.

‘She kicked him out so I’d say no.’

Snitch’s dad works away down south somewhere, but he comes up to see him every month or so.

Johnny nods. ‘So she’s happy on her own.’

Snitch shrugs. ‘Guess so.’

He looks at him. ‘Why, you thinking of asking her out?’

Johnny feels his cheeks explode.

‘Fuck off! She’s old enough to be my mother!’ They both laugh, clutching their

tummies as more laughter comes in waves.

Helen is at the door.

‘What you boys laughing at?’

With his eyes, Johnny begs Snitch not to say anything. Then the laughter comes again, stronger this time, and they can’t stop. It subsides and Helen asks if Johnny is staying for tea. ‘There’s plenty,’ she says.

His mum had said she was going out tonight so he shouldn’t be late.

He pauses, and then says, ‘Thank you. That’ll be great.’

‘We can watch that film,’ says Snitch.

She brings the Shepherd’s Pie into the living room on a big tray, and they each take a plate, and balance it on their laps in front of the TV. The fire is on, and Helen sits by it. At home, Johnny and his mum eat at the table in the kitchen. There’s a TV in there but it isn’t wired in for digital and so they can’t watch it. It just sits there, permanently off. His mum often has Radio 4 on, which he can’t stand, apart from some of the comedy, which is quite good. Sometimes, when she’s in a good mood she puts Radio 2 on and dances to the music. He leaves the room then.

‘Great this, Mum,’ says Snitch.

Johnny nods, his mouth full of food. And it is. Helen’s meals always taste

fantastic. He's suggested his mum asks her for her recipes but she never has. They've never met. Johnny doesn't think his mum would like her or their higgledy-piggledy house much. She likes everything neat, everything put away. Like a showroom. At Snitch's house, Johnny loves that none of the chairs match. In the living room, there's a big dark wooden sideboard at the back with Snitch's birthday cards from a few weeks ago still on it, and an oval mirror above it. It looks very old and he wonders whether it's an heirloom, but guesses that it was reduced in a shop and Helen just had to have it, like his mum does with shoes. The carpet is brown with swirls in it, and the overhead light doesn't have a shade so everything looks really bright. Snitch turns it off when they watch the film.

It's past 8pm when Johnny leaves. He turns on his phone when the door closes behind him; there are two missed calls and three texts from his mum asking where he is and telling him to come home. It's dark as he cycles back, and he replays the day with Snitch in his head. It warms him like porridge, and he laughs again at Snitch and Helen.

His mum's face is red and snarly when he gets home; he's not surprised.

'I'm going out,' she says. 'Or did that slip your mind?'

She's wearing a skirt and a top. Her hair is done up and she's got lots of makeup on again.

‘I don’t remember you telling me.’

‘Well I did. And I’ve been ringing and texting you. You should give me Twitch’s home phone number.’

‘It’s Snitch. I’ve told you this millions of times. And I don’t know his home number.’

‘Snitch, Twitch, whatever his name is. His mobile then. Look, I’m late. Greg’s picking me up in a minute.’

She keeps fixing her hair in the living room mirror even though it doesn’t look any different, and she wipes at the corner of her mouth with the tip of her little finger.

‘I’m not back tonight, remember. There’s a pizza in the freezer. And some chips.’

‘You’re staying out?’

‘What are you like? I told you, I’m sure I did.’ She gazes out beyond the walls, a frown briefly appearing on her forehead. ‘Anyway.’ She glances at her overnight bag on the floor.

‘When are you back?’

‘I don’t know. Some time tomorrow. Probably late. I’ll text you.’ She’s giddy and moves a lot. She gets like this. ‘You’ll be alright, won’t you? Besides, you

don't want to be in with your mum on a Saturday night do you? You're old enough now. You'll be out in the pubs soon, chatting up the girls. Won't see you at all then.' She laughs and squeezes his cheek. He wishes she wouldn't do that. He told her not to once and she got upset, saying that he didn't love her anymore. He doesn't tell her now.

'Oh, I nearly forgot. I've got you this. A little present while I'm away.'

She hands him a small rectangular brown box, about the size of his palm. It has *Thorntons* on the side.

'What is it?' he says although he knows what it is.

She always gets him fudge. He's got unopened boxes and bags of it under his bed from her previous trips. She sometimes goes away for a whole week. When he was younger, he used to stay with his gran. She's dead now. When she was away for her longer trips, she'd get him a bigger box. Once, he ate it all in one evening, shoving one piece after another into his mouth. Then he was sick. He hasn't eaten any since.

'Open it and you'll see.' He lifts up the flap at the top and inside there are cubes of brown fudge like rubble.

'Your favourite,' she says.

He offers her one.

‘No thanks, love,’ she says, and pats her stomach. ‘Watching my weight. They’re for you. Think of me when you’re tucking into them won’t you?’ She smiles and then turns to rearrange her hair in the mirror and check her makeup.

‘Maybe we could go to the pictures tomorrow,’ he says. ‘Or get something to eat?’

Mmm?’

‘Tomorrow,’ he says. ‘Shall we do something tomorrow?’

‘We’ll see.’

After a restless evening, Johnny has a restless night. He wakes and sleeps intermittently, hears noises downstairs and voices outside. In the morning he checks his phone but there is nothing from his mum. It’s quiet in the house on his own, and he can’t sit still.

The sky is grey overhead and although it looks like it might rain, he decides to ride over to Snitch’s house.

‘Hello, Johnny,’ Helen says at the door. She’s in her cream dressing gown. Her hair is tussled. ‘Didn’t know you were coming round.’

She moves to let him in, and he props his bike against the wall.

‘It’s OK isn’t it?’ he says. ‘You don’t mind?’

‘No, not at all. Think he’s still in bed though. You might want to jump on him to wake him up. In fact you should definitely do that.’

She flashes a cheeky grin at him, mischievousness bright in her eyes.

‘I’ve got you this,’ he says, pulling the box of fudge from his coat pocket.

‘What’s this for?’ He shrugs. ‘That’s lovely,’ she says. ‘Thank you.’

‘Would you like one now?’ he says, slipping open the box and offering it to her.

‘It’s a bit early isn’t it,’ she says. There’s a conspiratorial look about her. ‘What the hell. It’s never too early for fudge.’

She delicately picks out a piece with her thumb and forefinger and slips it into her mouth. She gestures for Johnny to do the same. He hesitates but she tells him to go ahead. ‘Oh that’s lovely, isn’t it?’ she says.

She closes her eyes, and Johnny does too. There in the hallway, standing with her, it tastes wonderful, even better than he has imagined.

All of the children in Ms. O'Malley's second grade class gather on the sharing rug for show-and-tell. They sit in a nearly perfect circle, nine girls and ten boys. Ms. O'Malley sits behind them in an antique, slender-spindled rocker, unsmiling and iron-eyed. She doesn't rock. She is unsettlingly still, like a crocodile about to lunge. No second grader has ever dared cross her in her thirty-two-year tenure at St. Patrick's Elementary. She doesn't wear a ring, but the children are too young to notice this or ponder its significance.

Elliot is the only child who hasn't brought anything for show-and-tell. He simply forgot. The other kids see that he has nothing to share. They clutch their Pound Puppies and Nerf footballs and Malibu Barbie dolls tightly to their chests and shift away from him like he has something they don't want to catch. They eye him with suspicion and disapproval and that shadowy brand of hostility reserved for those who are clearly not members of the tribe but somehow still exist within it. He dodges their wounding glances, studies the small, pinwheel-shaped birthmark that spans the webbing between his right thumb and index finger. "I'll remember next week," he tells himself.

*

The following week, he does remember. He brings in a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle depicting Van Gogh's "Starry Night." He tells his classmates that it's his

favorite puzzle and that Van Gogh is his favorite artist. When he shares that he and his mother like to do the puzzle together, Keith, a beefy boy with slick blonde hair and densely freckled cheeks, snorts and mutters something under his breath. A few kids giggle. Elliott senses that they're giggling at him, but he doesn't know why.

“Cut it out,” snaps Ms. O'Malley.

There is silence. Elliott looks down at the picture of “Starry Night” on the front of the puzzle box. There was something else he wanted to say about the puzzle, but he can't remember what it was now. He doesn't really want to talk anymore anyway. He doesn't really want to be here at all, in the sharer's chair, in front of all of these kids. He wants to disappear. He wants to drift into Van Gogh's night sky and dissolve in the swirling eddies of blue and white and yellow—a radiant, astral immolation.

*

Forty minutes later Elliot is out on the playground at recess. He's by himself as usual, standing a few feet away from Grant and Mike and Ray who are crouched in the woodchips near the foot of the twisty slide playing with medieval knight figurines. Grant is the leader of the trio. He's the one who brought the toys. At the beginning of recess, Elliott asked Grant if he could play with him and his

friends, and Grant said “No.” He said it without meanness, as if Elliott had just asked him if he knew what time it was.

Elliott still likes Grant. Everybody does. He’s handsome and funny, and he’s the best artist in the class. Whenever Ms. O’Malley gives the class free time, Grant gets out his 64-pack of crayons and draws knights decked out in elaborate plate armor and castles with battlements and turrets and sections of wall cut away so you can see the rooms inside. The Middle Ages is Grant’s thing.

Elliott is working up the nerve to ask Grant again if he can join his group when he’s shoved from behind. He turns around to find Keith leering down at him.

“Hey, Smelliott,” says Keith. “You like doing puzzles with your mommy?” He laughs, and the two boys with him, Finn and Brandon, laugh as well.

Elliott feels a few drops of urine slide out and wet the front of his Ninja Turtle underpants. He stiffens. He can’t let any more out. Wetting himself would instantly solidify his status as class pariah. He closes his eyes and concentrates on holding it.

“What’s wrong with you?” says Keith. “Why are you so weird?”

He is right in Elliott’s face now, so close that Elliot can smell the Fruit Roll-up on his breath.

“Keith, leave that boy alone,” says a man’s voice. It’s Mr. Banks, the recess

monitor.

Elliott doesn't open his eyes until he's sure Keith and Finn and Brandon are gone.

*

Monday is Columbus Day, and there is no school. Elliott's mom couldn't find a babysitter, so he comes to work with her. She is the curator of the Special Collections and Archives at the university library. Her department has two offices (one for her and one for her assistant, Paul), a large reading room out front, and a back room called the stacks where the library keeps its oldest and most valuable books. Only library staff is allowed back in the stacks, but Elliott's mom lets him go back there provided he's careful and puts everything back where he finds it.

Elliott loves exploring the stacks, plucking dusty tomes from the shelves and flipping through their brittle, warped, water-damaged pages. He loves the smell of the books, the loamy, sour stink of their antiquity. He loves the rough texture of the old paper, and the crackling sound the pages make as he turns them. He loves hunting for publication dates and trying to decode the Roman numerals when he finds them. He once found a book from 1698, but he's sure there's an older one in here somewhere.

Today Elliott is not wandering around back in the stacks. He is out in the

reading room, sitting at a table, working on a pencil sketch of a medieval knight. If he learns how to draw a knight well enough, he thinks, maybe Grant will want to be friends with him.

Paul walks up behind him and watches him draw for a minute. “That’s a pretty good knight,” he says. “I like the detail of the armor and the shading on the helmet.”

“Thanks,” says Elliott.

“Are you interested in knights?” he asks.

“Yes,” says Elliott.

“I have something you might like to look at,” he says.

Elliott follows Paul to his office. On Paul’s desk is a shiny wooden box about the size of his mother’s record player. Paul reaches into the box and lifts out a small leather bound book. He handles the book delicately, like it might crumble in his hands if he’s not careful enough. “This is the university’s latest acquisition,” he says, smiling at Elliott. “It’s a very special book.”

Elliott likes the way Paul uses big words like “acquisition” around him. He talks to Elliott like he would talk to any other grownup. He takes Elliott seriously. Sometimes Elliott pretends Paul is his dad. He’s never met his real dad, and his mother says it’s better that way.

“What’s it about?” asks Elliott.

“God, I suppose,” says Paul. “It’s a prayer book. It’s called the Beaumont Book of Hours. It belonged to a real medieval knight.”

Elliott doesn’t believe it at first. Could that little book really be so old? He wants proof. “What knight did it belong to?” he asks.

“The Duke of Beaumont,” says Paul. “He was a French knight. This book was made for him by an artist called the Bedford Master and was presented to him and his wife, Eleanor, in honor of their marriage. He died at the Battle of Agincourt back in 1415—575 years ago this October 25th.”

Elliott is sufficiently convinced. “Can I hold it?” he asks.

“Sure,” says Paul. “Be gentle, though. It’s very fragile.”

As Elliott takes the book, he feels a surge of excitement, an electric zing up the back of his neck. He knows his mom would not approve of Paul letting him touch a book like this, and that makes touching it all the more thrilling. He’s sure Paul also knows his mom would forbid this. That’s why he closed his office door when they came in.

Elliott opens the book and begins turning the pages. It is the most gorgeous book he has ever seen, full of intricate paintings of weeping penitents kneeling before altars, winged angels whispering to halo-ringed worshippers, and richly

attired princes feasting with their courtiers. The writing in the book is almost as lovely as the pictures. The letters are rust colored and gold with elegantly slanting stems. Each line of text begins with a large capital letter that has been embellished to resemble a serpent or a lion or the writing desk of a monk. The fact that Elliott cannot read the writing does nothing to detract from his enjoyment of its appearance. He moves his hands over the smooth vellum pages and thinks, “This is beauty.”

*

Stealing the Beaumont Book of Hours is not hard. Elliott waits until Paul leaves to use the bathroom and then slips into his office. He puts the book in his backpack. His mother is too busy talking on the phone to notice what he is doing. He returns to his table in the reading room, and a few minutes later, Paul comes back. Elliott is certain Paul will discover the book is gone and come out to find him, but the minutes tick by, and all is quiet. At five, his mom strides out of her office with her purse and announces it is time to go.

*

The next day at show-and-tell, Elliott is so anxious to get up and show the class the book that he cannot sit still. He sits Indian style on the sharing rug, rocking back and forth, The Beaumont Book of Hours in his lap. He is sure that when he

shows his classmates the book, when he tells them that it belonged to a real knight, they will be impressed. They will realize that he's an interesting person who has interesting things. Grant will probably ask to see the book after show-and-tell, and Elliott will probably let him see it. Later, to show his gratitude for letting him look at a real medieval book, Grant will invite Elliott to play with him and his friends.

Ms. O'Malley calls Elliot's name, and Elliott gets up and walks to the sharer's chair. He sits down and holds the book out in front of him with both hands.

"This is the Beaumont Book of Hours," he says. His voice is stronger and more assured than it normally is. He is confident this will go well. He opens the book and shows the class a grisly picture of Christ's crucifixion. "It's a prayer book, and so a lot of the pictures in it have to do with Jesus and Mary and the angels." He flips to another page showing a group of robed pilgrims passing through a gate into a walled city. He holds the book up again so everyone can see. "The coolest thing about this book," he says, "is that it belonged to a real medieval knight named the Duke of Beaumont who died at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415."

He pauses and glances at his classmates to see how he's doing. None of them look stunned or awed or intrigued like he imagined they would. They just look bored and distracted. Ray fiddles absently with a loose incisor. Megan examines a lock of chewed hair. Grant's eyes look glassy and uncomprehending, fixed on him

but not seeing him. The only one in the room who shows any emotion at all is Ms. O'Malley who is wearing an expression Elliott has never seen before. Her drawn-on eyebrows are high on her wrinkled forehead, far above the rims of her cat-eye spectacles. Her mouth is hanging open, a black portal that reminds Elliott of a mouse hole in a cartoon. At length, she closes her mouth and pushes her spectacles up on the bridge of her nose.

“Where did you get that book, Elliott?” she asks.

“From my mom’s work,” says Elliott. “She works at the Special Collections and Archives at the university. This book is her new acquisition.” He’s never said the word acquisition before, and it feels strange coming out of his mouth. He’s not sure he’s pronounced it correctly.

“Does your mother know you’ve brought this to school?” asks Ms. O'Malley.

“She does,” says Elliott.

Ms. O'Malley doesn't press him. She just shakes her head and exhales through her mouth. “Well I wouldn't let anybody else touch that if I were you. If you want me to hold onto it until the end of the day for you, I'm happy to do that.”

“It's okay,” says Elliott.

He stands and goes back to his place in the circle. Maria gets up next and moves to the sharer's chair. She holds up her Cabbage Patch doll, and all of the

kids in the circle except Elliott perk up and lean toward her.

“This is Roxy,” she says proudly and makes the doll’s hand wave.

*

At the beginning of recess, Elliott asks Grant if he can play with him and Mike and Ray. Grant says “No” again. This rejection hurts more than the last one.

Elliott had been positive that the Beaumont Book of Hours would win him admission into Grant’s group. He’d been positive Grant would welcome him into his society of second grade medieval enthusiasts. Now he realizes it’s hopeless.

He could bring in a full suit of armor—sword, shield, and all—and still Grant would reject him.

He stands there with his hands in the pockets of his jean jacket, watching Grant play. He feels tears gathering behind his eyes and tries to think of something happy to make them go away. He thinks of putting together “Starry Night” with his mother. They always do the puzzle on the dining room table. They start by constructing the border because the border pieces are easy to identify with their flat sides. Then they work on filling in the center. They don’t talk while they work. They listen to Miles Davis on his mother’s record player. *Kind of Blue* is the one she plays the most. Elliott’s heard the album all the way through at least a

thousand times.

“Hey, Smelliot.”

Elliott turns and sees Keith smirking at him. He’s got the Beaumont Book of Hours in his left hand, and he’s waving it like a stick he’s about to toss for a dog. Finn and Brandon are behind him. They’re both in hysterics. “Look what I found,” he says.

“Give it to me,” says Elliott.

“Make me,” says Keith.

A tear rolls down Elliot’s cheek. He looks for Mr. Banks, but Mr. Banks is nowhere to be seen.

“Awe, is Momma’s little baby boy crying?” says Keith.

Elliott wipes the tear away with his hand and walks up to Keith. He reaches for the book, and Keith bats his hand away. “You’re going to have to do better than that, wimp,” he says.

If Keith damages the book, if he tears the pages or rips off the cover, Elliott knows he’ll be in deep trouble with his mother. It dawns on him then that his mother will also be in deep trouble. She’s the one who’s ultimately responsible for the book. If something happens to it, she’ll get blamed. She might lose her job. They’ll both be out on street, and it will be his fault. He can’t let her lose her job.

He has to get that book back.

“Give it to me,” he repeats more sternly.

Keith shoves him in the chest with his free hand. “If you want the book back,” he says, “you’re going to have to take it.”

Elliott has never been in a fight before. He has no idea how to fight. But he has no choice now. He turns like he is going to walk away, curls his left hand into a tight fist, whips around, and wallops Keith in the nose. There is a popping sound, like an ice cube cracking in cold water. Keith staggers back a couple of steps and drops the book in the woodchips. Blood starts rushing from his nose. The blood is bright vermilion—the exact hue of Christ’s blood in the crucifixion scene Elliott showed the class. Keith sees the blood on his coat and howls. He takes off in the direction of the school building, but only makes it about twenty feet before he stumbles and falls.

Within seconds, Mr. Banks is on the scene, kneeling beside Keith, trying to staunch the blood flow with the sleeve of his L.L. Bean windbreaker. Elliott picks up the book and brushes the woodchips and dirt off the cover. He inspects it quickly to make sure it is okay. It is.

Elliott’s okay, too. In fact, he feels better at this moment than he’s ever felt in his life.

“He hit me,” Keith moans through blood and tears.

“Who hit you?” Mr. Banks asks.

Elliott puts the book under his arm and marches over to the recess monitor, his head held high.

OF GOLDEN FIELDS AND THE LANDS BEYOND | *Ethan Danner*

Afternoon passed on an autumn day, but to the young boy there had been no sense of time. The grey-brown dock on which he sat was an island of isolation as the rest of the world overlooked his existence. The bamboo fishing pole, a scepter in his small hand, aided in his rule of the pond. The free fingers from the other hand dismantled his seat piece by piece, casting the grey fragments to the aquatic floor below. Dangled legs led a waltz through the water, breaking the mirror and distorting the crystalline image of the world above. His older brother disturbing the world in a system all his own further down the pier.

Though autumn had come in force to assault his summer adventures and freedom, the hydration was a refreshment, flooding his mind with memories of light, laughter, and love. Orchestras of squirrels and deer echoed in the expanse. Overtures of birds crescendo as the symphonies of leaves faded, their winded conductor giving them a moment for recuperation. All the while, his older brother's simple, whistled melody carried above them all.

A splash broke through the tranquil veil, leaving the boy stunned. A striped bass, the zebra of fresh water, leapt after a water-bug daring to stand on the sheer surface. He gave a mind to moving but resolved against it. Summer days lent to the

far bank. The ashen oaks shielded those below from a blistering sun, casting a net of shadow over an extensive swath. Yet the bright emerald armor had faded to dull over the passing days. The limbs tossing aside the Castleton green for deep crimsons and golds. Each blast the wind delivered pitched out a conglomeration of foliage. Leaves fell in a myriad pirouette to the ballroom floor below, floating on the water in choreographed chaos.

The boy's red plaid shirt blew open at an uninvited gust. Crisp air surged among his limbs and through a tangle of dark hair, searching with unseen hands. The tale of leaves and dirt carried to his nose- stories of times passed with promises of tomorrow.

He checked his older brother who struggled with his own blue-buttoned shirt. The fabric hung heavy off the thin frame as a worn tapestry on tired battlements. His brother's gaze, unyielding eyes of stone and marble, turned west. West was the road beaten by the feet of a thousand journeys, dark sanguine pines, hafts of corn spearing from the dirt, and home. He shuddered at the concept.

The pole popped against the boy's grip. Ecstatic eyes hunted for the yellow cork missing beneath the dark pool. Instinct took over and he drew the line back with impetus. The tension on the bamboo soared to breaking heights. It climbed. It snapped. He fell against the dock. Blue skies filled the emptiness of his eyes. The

plastic cork bounded on the dock, a silver paperclip further down the line.

The boy regained his posture, but not his composure. Heat rose to the lobes of his ears and molars ground behind sealed lips. Trembling fists bashed the traitorous pole against the water. Bamboo bent beneath unrelenting force, the line and hook cracking through the air. Distant thunder rumbled over the western horizon, and he gave the apparatus a respite from the lashing.

The dock sighed beneath heavy feet. The older brother paused at the boy's side, his toes hanging precariously over the edge of the pier, a subtle and wordless introduction. Water ran in rivers through forest of hair off the shins and onto the surface below. A dark stain spread from the epicenter under his feet. He coughed and took a seat at the boy's right. He set a coffee can between them; red Folger's paint peeled off the brittle tin. Worms writhed in moist dirt gathered from the roots of the pecan tree behind the house. The annelids had no understanding of their fate, past, or future. They merely existed.

Chattering leaves on limbs and lapping waves fractured the quiet that now hung over the pond like a blanket of malcontent. Yet the boy's eyes and mind were beyond the fishing hole, gazing east. Beyond the line of trees, a barbed sable fence cut across golden sunlit fields. Bushels of wheat created a sea of yellow, stretching east away from the setting sun, a forlorn and final goodbye. His's imagination felt

the grain give way under running feet, chasing the furthest hills and running into the valleys beyond, beneath the building storm. He wondered whether the lands were full of honey or snakes. He would have thought either to be preferable to his current state.

He looked back at golden shafts pouring over the tops of the pines. Strokes of lavender and rosemary brushed the western half of the sky, the creation of an artist blessed by Divinity. The boy felt drawn to the majesty, but west was a hopeless path. The surety it gave was not a gift to be desired, so much as a scorned curse.

The older brother shattered the unwavering silence. “You know,” he began, “you ain’t going catch much without a worm on the line.” The calm tone in his voice owned a sense tranquility, each word a soothing whisper in the boy’s mind.

He rebaited the boy’s hook and returned it to the water to join his own in the patient hunt. “Bet you’ll have better luck with that one,” Ron said. “There’s still light out.”

He gave his brother an unperceivable thought of appreciation, letting the pause settle in while he pondered his next words. In time, the boy chimed in with a minor question to press on the momentum. “What do you think is on the other side of those hills?”

His brother glanced east. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Reckon mom knows?”

The other brother paused and the world around him froze. At sixteen the older brother was twice the boy’s age, knew twice as much, but at times spoke less than half the words, especially the half he should say.

“Brother?” the boy pressed.

He popped back. “I suppose she’d know better than any of us. She ain’t come back from that way yet.”

“You think we ought to go over there?”

He looked down at with a content half-smile. “We’re going make it over there, but I don’t think it’s going be today.”

Thunder rumbled in the clouds overhead with lightning casting silhouetted shadows. The older brother looked at the sky with furrowed eyes. “It’s about time for us to head out.”

The boys gathered their things and strode down the dock as sheets of rain poured in, furiously beating at the boy. A shotgun discharge tore the scene asunder, then another, halting them in their tracks. They stood, waiting and listening. The rain ceased and thunder grew faint and distant toward the west. The effluvium of gunpowder filled the boy’s nostrils. Dogs bayed, but the sound faded as the hounds

ran farther west into the pines away from the house. The older brother dropped his pole and the can, letting them crash onto the dock below. The boy did the same.

The older brother continued on and the younger stayed close behind. At the cross roads the older sibling turned down the road less traveled, running away from home.

“Brother,” the boy began, “where are we going?”

“To see what’s on the other side of your hills.”

“But I thought you said we weren’t going over there today?”

“I did,” he said. He kept up a brisk pace, almost a jog. “But it ain’t today no more, look.”

The boy took time to glance east as he weaved through the sagging pines that lined the western waterline. Dawning sunlight besieged and broke down the cloud portcullis and poured out into the courtyard, flooding the landscape in a tide of gold and warmth. Tendrils of fire revived his cold toes as the light surged through him. The boughs of the oak trees bore their immaculate green plates as the soldier pines heralded the coming of dawn. A new season and a new day had come.

The wheat gave way before them as they pressed on east, providing a carpet for their bare feet. At the fence he looked back at the fishing hole. It seemed small then, but he figured that it had always been that way. Passing over the fence, the

boys went up and over the furthest hill, fading away into the wheat fields beyond.

The Artists

POETRY

Robert Ford lives on the east coast of Scotland. His poetry has appeared in both print and online publications in the UK and US, including *Antiphon*, *Dime Show Review*, *Homestead Review* and *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*. More of his work can be found at <https://wezzlehead.wordpress.com/>

Dakota Galvin is an aspiring poet with work appearing in *PEGASUS Literary Magazine*, a few county-wide anthologies from grade school, and her grandma's fridge. She lives in central Florida.

William James is the editor-in-chief of *Beech Street Review* & the author of "rebel hearts & restless ghosts" (*Timber Mouse*, 2015). Follow him on Twitter (@thebilljim) or at <http://www.williamjamespoetry.com>

Mark Mayes has published numerous poems and stories in magazines and anthologies. His work has also featured on BBC Radio. Mark's debut novel, 'The Gift Maker', publishes with Urbane, 23 February 2017.

Laurel Paige lives in Madison, WI where she works at a software company and gives readings at Meaderys. She is also an MFA candidate at Queens University of Charlotte.

Michael Prihoda is a full-time human from Wisconsin who can't seem to stop roaming the Midwest.

Johnathan Taylor's books include the novels *Melissa* (Salt, 2015), and *Entertaining Strangers* (Salt, 2012), the memoir *Take Me Home* (Granta, 2007), and the poetry collection *Musicolepsy* (Shoestring, 2013). He is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Leicester in the UK. His website is www.jonathanptaylor.co.uk.

FLASH FICTION

Sandra Arnold is a New Zealand novelist and short story writer with a PhD in Creative Writing. Her work has been widely published and anthologised in New Zealand and internationally.

Paul Beckman is an award winning author with over 300 published stories to his credit, online, in print, and via audio. He hosts the FBomb NY flash fiction reading series.

Nod Ghosh's work features in various New Zealand and international publications. Nod is an associate editor for Flash Frontier, an Adventure in Short Fiction. Further details: <http://www.nodghosh.com/about/>

Tim Love lives in Cambridge, UK, teaching computing. He's appeared in Necessary Fiction, Journal of Microliterature, etc. He blogs at <http://litrefs.blogspot.com>, tweets at @TimLoveWriter

SHORT STORIES

Rose Docherty is a History undergraduate in London who writes too much and thrives on pipe dreams. This is her first published story, and she hopes not the last.

Jack Somers' work has appeared in a variety of publications including Midwestern Gothic, decomP magazinE, and The Atticus Review. You can find him on Twitter @jsomers530.

James Wall's fiction has previously been published in the Best British Short Stories 2013 anthology, Unthology 6, Fictive Dream, Tears in the Fence, The View from Here, Lakeview International Journal of Literature and Arts, The Nottingham Review, Prole, and in Matter Magazine. He was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize in 2010, and has an MA in Creative Writing from Sheffield Hallam University.

Robert Walton is a retired teacher, lifelong mountaineer and experienced writer. His novel *Dawn Drums* won the 2014 New Mexico Book Awards Tony Hillerman Prize for best fiction.