

# THE AFTER HAPPY HOUR REVIEW

ISSUE 1 // SPRING 2014



THE  
AFTER  
HAPPY  
HOUR  
REVIEW

Issue 1 • Spring 2014

COVER PHOTO BY MAX SEGAL

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\* Submitted through the Hour After Happy Hour Writing Workshop

# FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

The work featured in the first *After Happy Hour Review* convinced 13 underfed, overworked writers to forgo dinner, to procrastinate emails, homework, maybe ignore loved ones, and often to stay out late even when every bit of common sense told us to go home. Whether “late” turned midnight or midnight turned to 2am, whether “the bartender” usurped “common sense,” is no longer relevant, because now it is up to you to find errands to postpone within these pages.

The *After Happy Hour Review* was driven by a tight-knit group of writers who encouraged one another’s craft through the Hour After Happy Hour Writing Workshop. Workshop members that became editors rightly believed that we could produce more than a great writing workshop together. Then they made it happen.

While this is the first of many issues the *After Happy Hour Review* plans to produce, it may be a couple years before I have the personal pleasure to sweat over another. Next fall, I will be attending Hollins University’s MFA program for Creative Writing. My admission into this program is due largely to the people associated with this journal, and I cannot overstate my gratitude.

I hope the work you read strikes a chord within you and that you also find inspiration in its pages, because it did all of this, and much more, for me. It is my pleasure to offer the debut issue of the *After Happy Hour Review*.

Sincerely,

Mike Good

Co-founder of the Hour After Happy Hour Writing Workshop



NEIL KOHL

## Night Storms

BY KARA HELMICK-NELSON

It's the sound  
of life.  
Starts in  
the distance  
the crescendo  
the climax.  
It's what you hear  
right before  
your first breath.

The wind blows right  
I turn into it.  
There is a seam  
of sea and sky.  
In the charcoal  
pink volts tickle  
shadow crests  
and everything rolls.

Turns silver  
the horizon a border  
a display of energy.  
The sky pulls rank  
but the Atlantic rises  
tearing away shore  
dispersing electricity  
to protect the red drum.

Grey clouds blown in  
a truce. They carry  
the ocean across the sky  
release it  
onto faded roofs  
stilted porches. Baptized  
with charged salts  
the men  
the land reborn.

## Letter to Chris

BY AMY HAYES

(I).

Dear Chris,

I was ordained Pope  
last night in a dream,  
standing on the third  
step of a set of airstairs.

You were there giving me  
thimbles full of 80-year-old wine  
scheming, arguing  
about making change  
subtly so that no one would notice  
too much,  
and figuring out when it  
would be okay for me to let  
the priests marry.

(II).

Dear Chris,

There is an invisible  
six foot rabbit hanging  
in a portrait of my great-uncle  
in a beach house  
in a sitting room in Canada.  
This seems important for you to know.  
The sitting room has blue  
and white wallpaper  
that is ubiquitous with all  
beach houses where it is cold  
most of the time.  
The painting is not very good—  
half-hearted attempt at impasto.  
My mother used to say  
Jimmy Stewart reminded  
her of Dad. Chris, everybody's dead.  
Uncle Paul is dead.

# Estimates on Algorithmic Curiosity

BY DEAN MATTHEWS

Dance is a dismantling of the Self.  
The dress she chose to wear alone  
is a heartache. A black-veiled apparition  
skulking her clavicles, she compulsively  
checks for revisions to ongoing research

on the dance floor. Think of the words less  
as links in a chain. Think of the words more  
as battered piers sagging beneath their own weight.  
I'm trying to concentrate, but I am a thousand  
congressmen organizing filibusters up here. On one hand  
dance began as a way to tell myths. On the other  
it hasn't changed much. The bedroom jazz on the horizon  
is not framed by necessity but by the way we stare  
at each other. I can see a tiny filament  
of churchgoer still attached to the way she dances.

Symptoms of dance may include malaise, myalgia,  
fiancées, and/or headdresses. Think of my gestures  
less as kinks in a chain and more as simply obedient  
carbohydrates. The sniper is behind the speakers  
and his parallax-free sight grazes my hairline with algorithmic

curiosity. On his count, we crowded into the parking  
garage and everyone was instructed to siphon with vigor.  
The soundtrack becomes diegetic the moment the actor  
taps his feet. Under his lead, we snuck into the breeding  
rotation and everyone was assigned a number. The trick is

to try to pretend that you'll be shot in the head  
if you don't take it seriously. Think of these people less.  
Think of them more as scattered pilgrimages dragging  
behind their own white whales. On one hand, Gause's Law  
states that two species competing for a limited resource

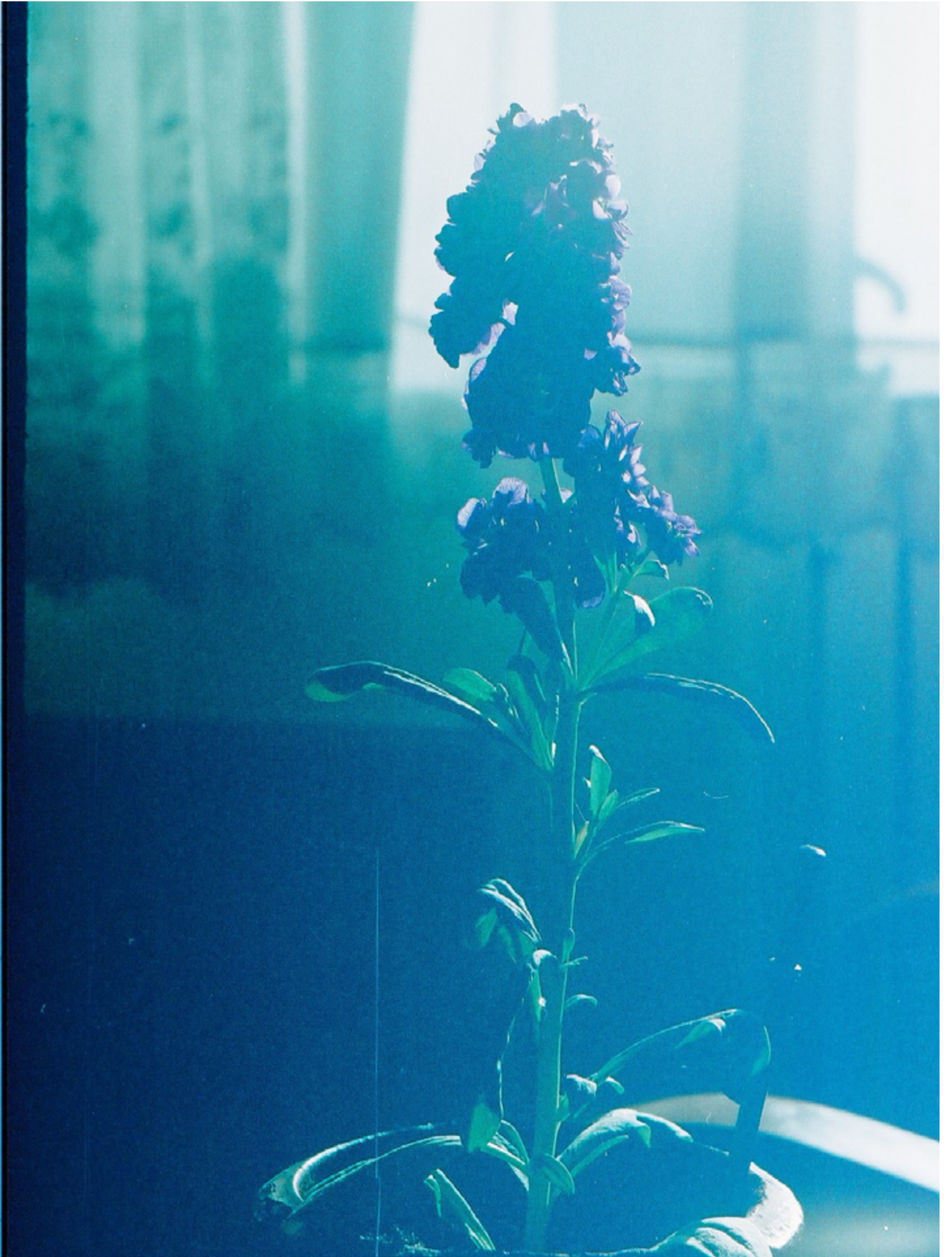
(tryptophan, sugar, lip gloss, hips, attention) cannot co-exist:  
one will gain a slight competitive edge and triumph, resulting  
in the extinction of the other. On the other hand, think  
of this selective force more as tarnished pennies traded  
beneath our own omissions: little, almost meaningless exchanges.





MAX SEGAL





SILA OZKARA

# The Blue

BY BETH HALEY

My fortune-tellers have had a key to my apartment, in case of emergency, since they foretold my mother's death when I was seventeen. We have a special friendship and I knew they would come urgently when I called them. Despite the clutter, my apartment was only one floor and hardly a maze for psychics. Hiding in the closet made my panic feel contained but they would still know where to find me. As Madame said, "Your soul is like a perfumed fingerprint that solicits the five senses." My aura, my sense of self, was buzzing in their ears like tinnitus.

In less than fifteen minutes, they stood in the living room before me dripping with rainwater and reaching out their hands to help me stand. The carpet in my front hallway was squishy and rank with their wet shoe soles crossing, tracking in the first signs of winter. The sky opened to the lightening outside.

"Madame," I stammered. "A reading, please? Something is not right with my cards."

She spread a deck of tarot cards out on my end table. They were arranged into a shape that looked like a tree, old and cranky with long branches. I sat on the couch while the two women, wrapped inside one overstuffed animal fur, stared at me with pity from a plush loveseat across the table. Madame on the right had fingers covered from nail to palm with gold rings. She said I was a tree oozing oxygen into the air, then proceeded to manipulate the cards, reading my future with nonchalance. I was always surprised with her frankness at this task. The tarot cards were as commonplace as pages from a Webster's Dictionary, thin as cellophane, instead of my very future at her nails' rounded edges. She was looking up a synonym, maybe a word she couldn't quite place to explain the rest of my life away.

"Energy is seeping out of you," she repeated ceremoniously tapping the first card. A smug looking empress with a crown made of flowers looked up at me. A small tree in the background, but one brighter than the rest made quick strides toward the three-dimensional world outside the card. The second card featured a lion tamer, sweat dripping down his face, the rivulets guided by the space in between his eyebrows. These were not cards I had seen before. The refrigerator in the next room hummed in tune with the flicker of fluorescent lights overhead.

"Well?" I stammered, my voice uncooperative.

“Congratulations,” said Madame. “You’re pregnant with him. The family relic.”

My fears were confirmed. Anthony was a one-night stand, a mirror of my present self, and so full of pity for himself that his disdain for other people made the air shake. I wanted nothing to do with him anymore. But worse than unplanned pregnancy, there’s magic in my family and it only passes on in full form through the boys. Only twenty-three, I knew in my bones I was too young to have a child, especially this one. I thought of the doctor sliding cold steel in between my legs and leaving my belly empty but I couldn’t do it. This baby was meant to be, and it would find a way to be.

Madame tried to settle my quaky figure. “Don’t worry, you’ll grow into it. Every heartbeat from now on shapes you into a mother,” she said. Minutes again passed in silence and flickering lights. It seemed as though my couch had changed shape in the last hour to accommodate the new weight in my belly. I imagined the baby kicking at my insides, already unable to love it even when I reached down into the deepest echoes from under my skull.

It was the first and last time Eloise spoke to me directly in the twenty-three years I’d known her. “You can rely on us, child.”

But there was poison in her pocket. She was laced with envy and I was about to feel her fury.

I called them the Illusionists. Every member of the Asbury Park community also knew the women, but for different reasons relative to their own destiny. The townies called them Madame-Eloise for lack of a better euphemism. The women started out as distinct piles of skin in the womb but their insides from the diaphragms down never separated and they conjoined. Bastardized examples of symmetry, skewed opposites, they were leashed together like dogs to a stick in the ground. Madame once told me that she could remember her time in the womb. She had rolled around dense and incomplete in their mother’s gut, but Eloise sacrificed herself in lieu of growing up lonely. I always understood them as a demented byproduct. Madame had greedily overcompensated. She was the heavier of the two, her skin the deep yellow of a broken yolk and boasting high cholesterol. Her taut blood vessels pushed the red into her cheeks. Eloise, on the other hand, was as thin and unassuming as an egg white burnt to a crisp on the griddle.

“Life begins in the genes, I swear it,” preached Madame when I was fourteen and she thought I was finally old enough to understand Truth. “I was a bitch even as an egg, a born cannibal. Well, at least a parsimonious one. I only took the parts I needed to

manage enough life to breathe: toes, nose, a brain, and the blood that collects around it.”

“Is that why she never speaks?” I asked this looking over at Eloise who had a monk’s deep stare and rested lips.

“No, no,” Madame responded. “She speaks but only in desperation. The problem is she can see her words falling from her lips like bricks hurdling down from the sky instead of rain. They turn sunlight into shadow. She can see them even with her eyes shut and the visions make her feel too much all at once. The last time the pain was so bad she tried to burn her eyes off against the stovetop.”

“Why do they still look...” I paused. I was a shy adolescent back then. Just old enough to start realizing that pitying people was not the kind thing I thought it was at first.

“Normal?” Madame finished my sentence for me. “They look normal, honey, because her magic was the one damn thing I couldn’t take all for my own.”

For eight and a half months after the reading, some equivocal force of a veiled origin supervised me through a deep depression. My body was a stranger to me. It held onto food like a wild animal. The blood vessels in my belly bulged and constricted. Toes, webbed and swollen, displaced the pale living room carpet beneath me. My apartment habited me cautiously as if it was worried I’d grow talons and a temper. Filmy kitchen walls the diluted pallor of a thirsty lawn developed a nose pinching stench. I craved calcium-enriched orange juice like the baby’s life depended on it. Everything else made me nauseated. I consumed bottle after bottle with vigor unsatisfied until empty cartons cluttered the floor around my couch. Every time I stood up, I kicked them away from my path afraid they would pop like balloons if I stepped on them. My hair became alive. Wriggling fish on a lure. The luminous oils in my skin gave me extra dimension, like a walking painting. My nails grew long and translucent. So much of my energy was sent to my extremities that it was difficult to catch my breath, though my heart beat strong.

When I left the apartment, people on the street paused, tapped their companion’s shoulders, and whispered, “How nice. She’s glowing.” But every day when dawn came, sweat glistened like the tip of a flame on my forehead. The spot it marked felt like the breaking point of a tectonic plate. The rumble started in my left temple and worked its way diagonally down my face. My expression turned a deep blue as the veins underneath it crept towards the surface. Imagine having a seizure of the psyche with stiff and immobile body parts. My insides lashed wildly around beating against my skin and



bruising my consciousness. The sun set. The glow returned.

This panic lasted into the middle of the second trimester. Sometimes, my throat could only produce a buzz that sounded like the other end of a dead telephone connection. I took to falling asleep against the refrigerator with the kitchen phone's pink receiver cradled between my neck and a pillow. The sound of a dial tone was my only companion. I sat there so long without moving that confusion set in about whether the buzzing was from the phone or my own throat. Seven days passed largely this way before I knew it was time to ask for another emergency visit.

"Hurry," I said, my body becoming more and more twisted in the phone cord as I paced around the kitchen. The OJ cartons skipped around me like rocks on a calm lake. My breath on the receiver made the side of my cheek feel sticky against the phone.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes. Hold tight." I hung up the phone and took refuge against the fridge again. I had been having strange urges of fleeing the country but so far only imagined as much as locking the front door behind me.

When Jeremiah was finally born, he chewed on everything within his grasp. I noticed the blue first on the edge of the baby blanket my mother had made for me. The embellishment, a tan lace on the outer edge of the blanket, was frayed and discolored from his saliva. As soon as his mouth touched the fabric, its threads turned a deep cerulean blue. His dwarf sized forks and spoons permanently adopted the blue. Everything that graced the space past his lips turned the same color. It was not long before the other colors surfaced. Those colors made their way into everything except for Jeremiah's pale skin. The darkest was a green that crept down the side of his pillow at night as his hair grew longer.

Red came from his fingertips. When I held him, he would paw at me, leaving crimson lines all over my tee shirts. The color was a deepness that rivaled the wine stains left on my lips at the end of every day. After I put Jeremiah to bed, feeling woozy and lips bitter with the fermented grapes, I'd see the vast red outline of the sun falling into the earth and felt sure Jeremiah had traced the skyline with his fingertip.

During bath time, the colors would seep out of his pores and meet in the warm water until it turned the effervescent black of tar before it dries. When I drained the tub it looked like a prism. There was a slightly off color rainbow in a ring around the porcelain. When I attempted to clean the ring, the vinegar sizzled upon contact and expanded rapidly like it was being beaten back with bare hands. In moments, the entire

bathroom flooded with bubbles. They forced their way out through a crack in the window that separated the shower from the back yard. The garden living under the window was completely snuffed out in minutes. The flowers buried underneath never sprouted again. It's been so long, I forget if they were petunias or lilies.

As he grew older, he was better able to manipulate the colors. He left shadows like finger puppets all over the walls. Their subtle outlines flickered and moved as the light changed throughout the day. Finally, when the days started to grow shorter the figures would fall still at night. There would be peace from the colors until the sun rose again in the morning. I would sit in my darkened kitchen, waiting for them to return, my glass clinking as it made shaky contact with the dark green tip of the bottle.

The Illusionists, of course, visited regularly. After Jeremiah was born, they stopped charging for visits and said being around such a special boy was enough payment. He was clearly aloof from mediocrity, fog gathering in the distance between himself and normal. The Illusionists were the proudest I had ever seen them. "My little darling," Madame called him, dangling her gold plated finger in his face while they cuddled on the couch. He scrunched his nose up and blue spittle dripped out of the side of his mouth. "The colors are remarkable," she said as I held up a silk nightgown that his green pillowcase had accidentally mingled with in the washer. It was dyed the color of vomited-up green play dough, and my knuckles clung to it, white with frustration.

"That's not all. It started last week. Set him down in his crib and I'll show you." My voice was shaking. I led the way to his nursery and Madame swaddled him in blankets before she set him down in his crib. I rested my hand on his upper back to slowly rock him to sleep. After a few minutes, Jeremiah began to breathe heavily, unwavering like a rock unbroken by the waves.

I backed out of his bedroom quietly even though Jeremiah was a heavy sleeper and nothing ever seemed to wake him except his own internal clock. But motherhood provided a certain gentle instinct that had taken me over like the wind displaces trees. Some instinct gets to the brainstem earlier than understanding. Even though I knew he'd sleep through the sound of footsteps, I was quiet. Even though I knew what I'd see when I returned to the living room, I was startled. There he was, his body asleep in the crib but his soul was sitting Indian style on the living room floor laughing from the belly. He didn't smile when he appeared to me like this, only laughed from the crease on the right side of his mouth almost like he was hissing and grinding his teeth at the same time. I never approached him in this state. Usually I would spend his naptime

circling the rest of the apartment, trying to avoid his phantom, but Eloise's love was unconditional in contrast. She held her hands out and he ran toward her spindly fingers. She waved them through the air in the space his real body would have occupied. He was reflected on the tips of Eloise's fingernails as though they were trapped inside a prism. I called his apparition The Hologram.

"Remarkable" said Madame. "Absolutely splendid little boy!" While Madame cooed over my baby, Eloise looked at him cross-eyed as though strabismus would give his image dimension. It never did. He remained flat and ran around her in circles, still laughing as she beamed with pride over the son she had foretold. If she was imagining his future, she kept it a secret from me. I tried to foster hope that my relationship with him would thrive, but faith was slipping through my fingers.

"He's still mute. I'm thinking of taking him to the doctor's. A specialist." It was the first time I'd mentioned anything of the sort.

"No, no, honey, no. They'll not know what to do with him at all. He'll end up locked away from you somewhere scared and alone." The thought frightened me. No mother, no matter how distressed, wishes their own state of mind transferred to their son.

The winter he turned eight, the days were so short they seemed to stop before they started. The sun anchored itself to the horizon, never really rising or setting. Jeremiah's maturity had developed, and with it, his magic rested for the winter. It was as though it froze with the atmosphere, taking forty winks from the cold. And it was then, when he was stripped of it all, that I realized my maternal side. He would sit in my lap and he felt for the first time like a real, complete boy. I'd take him for runs in the park to watch him finally sweat translucence instead of colors. Afterwards, we would go to the public library where he gestured to the other mothers for permission to push their baby carriages. Even though he was eight at the time, he still had the frame of a baby himself. He never grew very thick. His wrists were small and clumsy but he was careful when he pushed the carriages. Moms were so relieved at the chance for a break that they let him walk back and forth for hours and hours with the little ones. But, happy though he was with the kids, I think he missed the colors. He would play with bubbles, blowing them at the fussing babies. One or two small ones might get stuck on their eyelashes or reddened cheeks. But rather than pop them or wipe them away, Jeremiah would stare longingly at their rainbow edges. After I'd put him to bed, sometimes I heard him crying in his sleep through the crack in the bottom of the door that let his nightlight shine



through to the hallway.

Though I felt guilty about the wish, I spent the whole winter praying his magic was spent. But, the spring filled the dark lines in the leaves with color. The sun rose and set. He was nine now and the supernatural coursed through him again. This happened every year, his magic leaving us in the winter and returning on the first day of spring. Every single year. And, until puberty hit him, it happened much the same way.

On his thirteenth birthday things changed. That was when the smells started and shortly thereafter, I left for the first time. The first smell reminded me of orange peels. His skin reeked some strange mix between a chemical floor cleaner and the real thing. Although the smell was real, his entire room was so marred with the scent I could feel it in between my toes like juice seeping up from under the carpet. It made my feet sticky. The sticky smell attracted so much dirt from walking around the apartment that despite furious scrubbing, feet hanging over the side of the tub for hours, the bottoms were dyed a brownish gray. Madame told me they smelled it too. Everyone who passed him did, even strangers.

I started having dreams again about leaving in the middle of the night and driving away. Deep in sleep, I would let coin flips navigate lefts and rights. In Asbury Park it's called a Holy Spirit drive. But the spirit was left side minded that night so my car kept spinning around the block in circles. When I woke up the next morning, I really left. I made no turns, instead driving straight to a motel seven streets away. I was afraid to go too far and get lost without a map. A fear, I realized, that could only exist if some part of me planned to return home.

After I checked in, I saw Jeremiah everywhere. The place was cursed with his ghost, The Hologram. When I was in bed I would look up at the mirrored ceiling of the motel room only to see the apparition of my abandoned son. If he would just go away and leave only my baby's warm skin behind, I could have never left home in the first place. I'd have felt him and known he was okay. Instead his belly laugh haunted me without the physical boundary of his pelt to muffle it. I was wishing the next day would never come. Three days was too long to be gone. Two days, even in its slightness, was somehow more unbearable. I made it only one night in the hotel. I was home before the fingertip tracings appeared to signal the start of a new day.

The second time I left he was several weeks into fifteen. I abandoned the car in the driveway this time. Somehow I thought if I didn't traverse too many miles the

transgression was forgivable. Really, I was too upset to drive, starting to think maybe I had gotten lost when I left the first time. Maybe I'd never truly come back at all. If I was born with my own hologram it must have been off dancing somewhere deep inside the woods.

It was the year he smelled like cinnamon buns and the sticky feeling moved upwards from my feet to my nose. Every breath was clogging up my system just a little bit more like plaque in an obese artery. Exhausted from trying to survive, I stopped going into his bedroom altogether. Madame-Eloise, on the other hand, found the smell endearing and as a result they also found it nuanced. It did not overtake them the way it had me, the way too much attention paid turns a small cold into a debilitating Bronchitis. They cherished the smell and hugged him just to leave his essence all over them. They sought some reminder of their love throughout the day.

When I left this time, I went straight to them. It was dawn, when the most beautiful thing in the sky was the deep purple pollution that the New Jersey shoreline cradles. Neon lights were extinguished this early in the morning except for *Madame-Eloise Fortune Tellers; Future Makers*. The letters in "tune" flickered, so in the brief moments in between the sign actually said *Madame-Eloise For Tellers; Future Makers*. The crusty rubber tip at the bottom of their broken screen door made a slapping noise against the boardwalk. It ushered me in. For a second I felt a friend to the weather again. "Come rest," said the wind using the door for a mouthpiece. "Take a load off." It knew I was growing too antique to take care of my son. My psyche had transformed into something thin and primordial. Slowly, he had turned me to dust.

Madame-Eloise, true psychics, were not surprised to see me. Madame waved me deeper into their rickety establishment. She immediately sat me down for a reading.

"Next year it will be the subtle smell of a fireplace, burning, as he approaches puberty." Madame reached forward to grip my palms. The brief friction between our skins recalled the scent she spoke of. The season of barbecues in backyards was almost over. All that was left was the smell of burnt charcoal.

"My temples hurt constantly. It's worse than when I was pregnant."

She reached up to cup my face with her fingertips, wiping away the tears before I even realized I'd been crying.

"Don't worry. We know you love him. He's perceptive about your fear, though."

He is special, but no one said that he is dumb. Everyone meets him with hesitation,” said Madame. “No one is sure what to think of something that extraordinary.”

The gully between high and low tides was widening. I felt like the only one terrified of the unnatural coursing through his blood. She wasn't mistaken. Others had guessed at what was “wrong” with him. A string of disabilities over the years: autism, clinical mute, hyperthyroidism, hygiene disorder, hearing loss. A nametag is a comforting thing to a stranger. I was less comforted by the unsolicited diagnostics, enough to the point of homeschooling. I longed for winter to bring some semblance of normal. Even at a distance, a whiff of the cinnamon was enough to make me choke each morning.

“I think,” said Madame, “well, I think we ought to try a bit of hypnosis.”

I had never agreed before and I felt even less inclined now.

“There's nothing but disappointment in there, Madame-Eloise.”

“Please, no need to be afraid. Eloise is the one who holds the secrets. Your trust for us is built on years because it would pain her more than anything to hurt you.”

“And you?”

“Why of course, nothing would be worse than seeing you distressed.”

She pulled out a small glass jar that held a bright purple flower petal inside. “Stare deeply into the vein in the petal. Find the deepest purple you can.”

Without the strength to resist anything anymore, I relaxed my eye muscles and slowly felt the grief slip away from me. I could read Madame's lips but the words were meaningless. Random images of what my life could have been flashed before my eyes. Trips to other beaches, chalk covered fingers from kindergarten lectures, marriage and fresh baked bread. I sensed enlightenment in this alternate life. I felt jealous to be so distanced from it.

It felt like fingertips were massaging the bends in my brain. It was euphoric until a fingernail caught. Despite the vapid hypnotic state, some commissure to reality was still intact. Where did the pain come from? I stiffened before my gaze drifted to Eloise whose pupils were growing smaller and smaller until they disappeared altogether. Some conjured spirit was borrowing her body for the moment. I cleared my mind worried she could hear my thoughts. I was especially worried that if she did she would no longer love me. I waited, certain that she would reprimand my contemplations but instead she maintained

silence.

They glanced at one another then Madame's grip on my palms suddenly grew tighter than a pair of stockings on thighs. "Go lie down in the back, Annabelle. We'll check on your little one." It had been a long time since I heard my own name. It was comforting and disorienting at the same time. I walked into the back room where there was a bed hidden under velvet blankets. I knew it well from childhood; the blankets were red except for where the velvety plush material had bent with wear over the years, turned to a shade of rust to accommodate my sleepless nights as a newly orphaned girl. I fell into the rusted cranny and slept soundly for the first time in motherhood.

My sleep was undisturbed for a full day and into the next night. When I woke up, my mind was groggy, cognizant of its own hibernation. Madame-Eloise sat in a chair alongside my bed. Next to the chair was an ashtray full of butts. I was confused. I had never seen either of the Illusionists partake but my mother had seen Eloise smoke. Like an old steam engine, she had smoked so often back in the day that her exhales were still tinted grey. She quit in anticipation of the first child, Annabelle. Me. I wanted to ask her why she had gone back. Instead I asked, "Have you been waiting long?" Eloise looked through my cloudy eyes.

"We got home just in time to see you wake. Are you hungry?" Madame replied.

I shook my head and Eloise shifted her side in the chair uncomfortably and pulled out two small pink pills from her back pocket, still warm from her body. I swallowed them before falling back onto the pillow.

"What day is it?" I asked.

"Two days until Thanksgiving, love," replied Madame. It was the day of the end of fall party, a shore tradition. The clock next to the bed read five to eight and I knew the fireworks would start soon. They happened first at the Thanksgiving festival and again on the first day of winter to signal the end of the season. They were always Jeremiah's favorite part of the celebration. After the finale, he would be so spent it was as though he was the energy behind the explosions.

"The phaeerworks," I slurred feeling woozy, likely still waking up from the nap. "Fuh'ere ish he?" I asked. I could smell the cinnamon on them.

Madame started to mouth a reply but suddenly I was too disturbed by the attention my heart required to listen. It was beating fast and hard making my whole

body shake. I tried to crawl out of bed but it was difficult to stand without knowing which direction was sideways. I fell down on my palms and knees. The sharp pain elicited a groan. Eloise stood towering over me and laughed, venomous, sinister and vindictive. She brushed the hair off my face but her fingernails felt like talons and my body recoiled at her touch. I began to feel conflicted as though my body and brain were attached to puppeteer's strings controlled by two different people. Did dreaming hold me in its grasp? What did they feed me? Fear ripped through the muscles in my lower back. I began to hallucinate demons with slanted eyes standing before me and the only antidote was in Jeremiah. I longed for my son. If only The Hologram was something I could have grasped onto. The world slowed down.

The Illusionists had made their way back into the chair alongside the bed. They were watching me trying to stand and sending cruel waves of thought in my direction to subdue me. Madame lit a cigarette for her sister with a candle that sat on the nightstand next to the bed. It was a green money candle, for good luck. The smoke from her cigarette filled my eyes with water until my muscles reached perfect conductance and started to bulge. They were full of electricity to the point of overflowing. With each convulsion, splats of color broke against the black sky outside the window before shards of chemical elements slinked their way into the ocean where they sizzled and died. The steam from each of the blasts was the same deep green as the oils draining from his hair. I could piece the color from ever blast into where it fit in The Hologram but it was a broken image never fully realized. His colors exposed a midnight truth. It was without him that I was afraid. I tried to reach the fireworks, clawing at the curtains that lay against the chilled glass of the window. Futile. Reduced to nothing, I fought a deep sleep, my body bent against the wall. My breath depreciated into the range of the deceased but somehow I was still alive.

“It's over. She's out,” said Madame. She pressed the gold nubs of her fingers against my jugular as it slowed down its twitch. “I'm proud of us, her mother didn't go down as smoothly.” Eloise looked at the still body on the floor with greed in her eyes.

“Really, to be honest, I was somewhat disappointed by the lack of fight.”

.....

The attic floor is sticky with old food and sour milk. Strange glasses and jars full of glowing rocks line the walls. I can see them even when I shut my eyes to sleep. I assume they are props in the business. The only other thing here is me. The growling in my stomach is the only sound I can talk to. It interrupts my every thought.

I wish I could smell Jeremiah's sweet cinnamon. I would savor that smell with every taste bud and it would be enough to curb my hunger. It's been hours since they have passed me bits of the runoff, leftover funnel cake that litters the boardwalk outside. There is so much waste out there, why allow it to ravage me in here? My stomach grumbles. My body shakes from the hunger echoing like a low pitch note off of a ukulele's string. But, I can't speak. It feels like there is a pole resting against my throat. It refuses to move, to make sound. I grip my throat and feel track marks. They fed me some kind of curse through a needle, I'm sure of it and now I can barely move.

I can see through a small crack in the board covering the window. Bright lights from the nearby Ferris wheel look like stained glass dripping through the slots of the boardwalk. Things are starting to recede into darkness. They turn the lights off earlier and earlier everyday. Why fight the natural state of things? Meanwhile, somewhere far away, glaciers melt. Winter comes and when it does Jeremiah will not be able to feel me die anymore. He just walked in with the Illusionists. They shut down the shop to go pick him up and visit with him. My son. I assume they are offering him a place in my rusted sheets.

He sits just below me. I imagine him carrying all of his possessions in the duffel bag with the duck on the front. After it's settled in the back room with the bed, I press my face to the attic floor to hear them.

"She is not of this world anymore." Madame is bent over a crystal ball, I am sure. She only speaks of the afterlife gazing into that orb as if the distorted view of the table's grains underneath it brings her closer to the everlasting.

Eloise sits sinister in silence.

I'm weak but I bang my hand against the floor. My throat is buzzing softly as it did in the days before Jeremiah was born. Jeremiah starts to groan, the only real sound he had ever learned to make. He did it so rarely it was as if he felt the same way about noise as Eloise. They know he's agitated. They know he's suspicious.

If Madame gulps before her lie, it is imperceptible. Errorless, she tips her head toward Eloise, "Hysteria, obviously. Over the grief!"

Her previous words echo in my head. "No one said he was dumb. He is special but. . ." Jeremiah starts bawling. It's a new sound for him. I stretch my arms out on the ground, face flush with the sticky floor and try to hug him through the slats of wood. I

hope he can feel the heat from my heartbeat. I can picture him looking up at me and locking eyes. I hear a thud, a whimper, his denim jeans sliding across the floor through the bedroom doorway. Then a door slams shut, opens and slams again all in the span of several minutes. Whispering precedes a loud slap from a ring-less finger somewhere near the center of the room. It must have been Eloise because when the transient is over I hear her voice for the last time. She's yelling so loud the house shakes. "Or, he heard the roof bounce. You didn't give her enough. No excuses." There was a long pause before Madame replied.

"Do we leave her or go take care of her first?"

Through the discord I can sense bitter charcoal and the essence of smoke on its whitened edges. It smells as if next year has come early this time. My pointer finger traces the same message over and over again against the wood. It's the only way I can think to get to him, to keep hoping the warmth from my fingers will leave stains in infrared.

The blue comes first like it always does. It's a match lighting the air on fire in slow motion. His flickering hologram appears before the hollow laugh and green spit that dribbles down the side of his cheek like sweaty face paint. When he fully materializes in front of me the air from the attic sucks toward his center nurturing friction's progeny. His energy is something chemistry has not yet discovered. Even I can only harness it in pieces. My finger keeps moving against the wood, spelling.

Please Jeremiah. Save me. Bring me to the fireworks before they fall.





SILA OZKARA



# Teen Spook

BY MELISSA BRODER

My womanfur grows and eats up a whole town  
Bells sound in the churches saying tits of night  
Girlcats use their eyeteeth to impale the thighs of boycats  
Spit and light rain down from Aphrodite as she comes  
Fleshy fleshy everywhere and Athena is pissed  
She scales the walls and chars every door  
She places Cronus in a cage in the town square  
She licks and licks the bars as he shakes them  
There are flowers in the rocks  
There is fire in the hills  
I don't know where the muse is calling  
I don't know what she looks like  
I know what she feels like  
She feels like urgent  
She feels like bleeding out

# If the Marianas Trench Were a Gathering of Sound

BY BRADLEY J. FEST

Everything would be skylights and hunkered down worries:  
one penetrating the topsoil to wind adventures  
in sticky radiance, an envelope of fire and salt;  
the other a cascade of gummed intentions,

caramelized and static. All would be as it should be  
in carbonite freeze. Even dreams would be white rooms,  
starched sheets and pillows, milky and perfect.  
This would be nice for a time, the time of cloudless banks

roiling above, and then there would be so much liquid.  
The surface, a blank Silenus stare, but underneath would be  
tributaries where movement was almost imperceptible—  
a sea of palpitating limbs: kids going apeshit.

Stacked one atop the other, they would sway in time,  
beating their strange hands against the roof  
four feet away. The lime of the walls dripping.  
A few suffocating at the bottom of the pile.

“Caution!” the walls would read: protective headgear  
is required. It is a function of survival, of proliferation.  
It is a function of the planet’s rotation.  
And then crying. Tears, disturbing the wave-break

would find themselves in open waters, fiddling nervously  
with the switches and diodes controlling the whole thing.  
And the worry will disappear, even if the kids cannot see.  
The movement will stop and those suffering at the bottom

will be able to rise, shake the sweat out of their hair  
and look each other in the eye, silently admiring  
their beautiful coral pith helmets, their perfectly made-up  
coifs. And then there would be a stillness

requiring neither glue nor coercion. Rather, the only requirement  
would be darkness, and there would be plenty of that.



MAX SEGAL

# Water Wisteria

BY SEAN PEARS

1.

If at the conclusion the ground is still alive,  
we will have had known all along how to save ourselves  
and the minarets of distant pines will turn stony  
faces suddenly familiar as the moral of a wandering story

we will have had known all along. How to save ourselves  
becomes almost sleight of hand, the joke about the clock  
faces suddenly familiar, as the moral of a wandering story  
brings us hope in the shape of water that rapidly

becomes almost sleight of hand. The joke about the clock  
being right only twice every day is double-edged, but  
brings us hope in the shape of water—that rapidly  
shifting substance—into the vessel of our thoughts.

2.

Being right only twice every day is double-edged, but  
nevertheless a tempting challenge. Weather pauses,  
shifting substance. Into the vessel of our thoughts  
the cloud looms with tears in its eyes, crumbling

nevertheless. A tempting challenge, weather. Pauses,  
hesitations, “guesstimates,” somewhere along the line, the decision, like  
the cloud, looms. With tears in his eyes, crumbling  
confetti, he says, speaking properly, the water wisteria is born of

hesitations, “guesstimates.” Somewhere, along the line, the decision, like  
a viscous, plasticky substance, got stuck, so we threw on  
confetti, he says. Speaking properly, the water wisteria is born of  
a mistaken identity, and therefore doesn't exist, but still remains

viscous, plasticky. Substance got stuck, so we threw on  
our backs all that we'd attempted and crossed the mountains, hefting  
a mistake. Identity, therefore, doesn't exist, but still remains  
somehow prescient, a kind of four-leaf clover of regret.

3.

Our backs—all that we'd attempted—we crossed. The mountain, hefting  
four river-shaped swatches of granite, seemed in its silence  
somehow prescient, a kind of four-leaf clover. Of regret  
we spoke often, until our tinkling jocularity displayed our atrium's

four river-shaped swatches. Granite seemed in its silence  
too serious. So, as to live above the mountain,  
we spoke often until our tinkling jocularity displayed. Our atriums  
were built where one can see that the sun sets in the water

too seriously, as if to live above the mountain  
were its greatest gift, the platform on which all its dreams  
were built. Where one can see the sunset in the water  
would thus be a tragicomedy too overwhelming for the night

were its greatest gift the platform on which all dreams  
fall from leaf to leaf of moonlight and not,  
thus, a tragicomedy too. Overwhelming, for the night,  
our ambition, we let the vast patterns of sleep

fall from leaf to leaf of moonlight and not  
whelm us with errata. Simply put,  
our ambition we let vast patterns of sleep  
destroy and awake tomorrow gently without shaking.

4.

Whelm us with errata simply put  
in there to blur old paths we thought we had  
destroyed, and awake! Tomorrow, gently, without shaking.  
shuffle your feet across the loose dirt

in there, to blur old paths we thought we had.  
If at the conclusion, the ground is still alive,  
shuffle your feet across the loose dirt  
and the minarets of distant pines will turn stony.

## Cooking with Fat

BY LOIS WILLIAMS

My mother and her sisters cook lamb shank,  
rib roast, souse potatoes in pork grease,  
rub butter into pastry, then add lard—

Their men come in from being carpenters,  
soldiers, by-the-hour haulers, eyes glaring  
vigilance and deep fatigue. The table  
is their solitude—

Four mouthfuls into the plate they look up,  
their faces now the faces of boys  
of whom nothing fearful has yet been asked.



NEIL KOHL



NEIL KOHL

## The British Tablespoon

BY LOIS WILLIAMS

Heaper of sugar, fractioner of leaven.  
An abacus in the counting-house  
of flour. Shiniest spoon in the drawer,  
level-full it holds  $\frac{1}{2}$  ounce; rounded, an ounce.  
I saw my mother happy when she held it:  
smooth Stainless Sheffield Steel,  
seamless like the garments of biblical kings.

Armor spoon, amulet spoon—she gave it to me  
so that I could measure and bake  
our familiar foods in Pennsylvania, knowing  
I couldn't think in cups (only drink from them),  
that spoonful is a gradual language. Now,  
when I see it there among the smaller spoons,  
it seems I could leave my kitchen and walk to hers,  
the ocean between us merely a dram.



MAX SEGAL



## Lines and Curves

BY LEA BRIDI

At 5:15 pm on April 3rd, 2008, Emily sat in the lobby of State College's transportation center, waiting for a bus. The transportation center was a proposed solution to the city's parking and traffic problems. The idea was that people who lived in the suburbs could drive to the transportation center (which was basically a parking garage), park their cars, and take the bus or a shuttle into town. State College's parking and traffic problems were two things that were wrong with the world, but they were not, by any means, the only things. In fact, by 5:15 pm, on April 3rd, 2008, almost everyone agreed that so many things were wrong that the world was mostly ruined, but no one could agree on what those things were.

For example, Emily's parents believed that the most important world-ruining thing was changing weather patterns. According to them, increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide were causing extreme droughts and extremes floods, which were, in turn, causing slums and riots and wars. Emily's parents were both professors of ecology at the University. They had fallen into something almost like love while collecting marsh water samples and had been married for thirty years, but Emily had never seen them kiss. For a long, long time, she had never seen either of them cry, until one late summer afternoon, right before she moved into her college dorm. The talk show that Emily and her mother were watching was interrupted by a cookie dough commercial. As cherubic children wielded rolling pins and gazed at their television mother, Emily's real life mother had allowed several tears to escape her scientist's eyes. It had been deeply embarrassing for both of them.

Emily's boyfriend Daniel had identified a different collection of world-ruining things. He believed that the worst of those things were regulations, real and imagined. Government regulations specifically: lower limits on how much you can pay employees, upper limits on how much pollution your factory can produce. Regulations disrupted the natural order of things. They crimped and broke what could otherwise be the perfect and elegant flow of social hierarchy. He was sure of it.

Emily was not sure which world-ruining problems were most important. Everything felt like a problem to her. She read about floods and droughts in the news. She also read that you couldn't definitively attribute any isolated weather occurrence to that thing that her parents believed was ruining the world. Sometimes the weight

of juggling these two disparate theories of total annihilation was too much for Emily, and she felt like she needed to just sit perfectly still to better consider both of them, and potentially other apocalyptic prophecies as well. There were certainly plenty more: nuclear war, asteroids, massive sun flares, reversal of magnetic poles. It was what she was doing right then, actually, in the lobby of the transportation center, despite her impending college finals and the three small, glossy-covered text books stacked in the chair beside her.

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At 5:15 pm on April 3rd, 2008, Brandon Ryan stood in the lobby of State College's transportation center, waiting for people waiting for a bus. Brandon was the youngest son of Pastor James Ryan. By April 3, 2008, Pastor James Ryan was practically famous, at least among certain circles. But, Brandon guessed, nobody belonging to those circles was currently waiting in the Transportation Center. As the founder of True Word Baptist Church, located just outside of Mechanicsburg, Pastor James Ryan was the spiritual leader of an already huge and constantly growing congregation.

Unlike Emily, Brandon wasn't particularly worried about the future, at least not about the future of the planet. He did, however, have some pretty serious concerns about the fate of the planet's inhabitants. Brandon's concern focused, specifically, on the inhabitants' glibness.

The way Brandon saw it, concern for the university students' glibness was basically his professional mandate. Brandon was taking a course at New Life Bible College titled "Missions: Preparing for the Foreign Field with the Domestic Field." Each student in the class had been assigned his very own "domestic field," and Brandon had received the University campus. He hadn't been intimidated by the assignment at the time. He'd felt that he was prepared – so prepared, in fact, that he'd been excited.

Now, he realized, he'd been a fool. He'd been expecting a certain amount of nonchalance from the students, sure. But nothing could have prepared him for the extreme nonchalance that he encountered, the absolute ease with which people forgot and ignored what was waiting for them at every poorly secured balcony railing, and on every icy highway, what's waiting to come with words scratched onto a paper attached to a clipboard and a doctor's creased forehead – darkness, then judgment, then one of two possible eternities.

.....

There were several other people waiting in the State College Transportation Center with Brandon and Emily. One of these people, a young man, sat slumped in a beige plastic chair in the corner, next to a tall plant in a beige pot. He was twenty-two, but his teenage looks had been preserved. He appeared as though he'd keep his smooth face and thin limbs for at least five more years, as though his hairline would remain perfectly intact for even longer. His hair was longish and shiny. It framed his face in an attractive, vaguely feminine way. He was wearing expensive tennis shoes.

Brandon Ryan immediately sensed that Expensive Tennis Shoes was basically as glib as they come, and his concern for this complete stranger was sincere. He could, truly, honestly, and clearly imagine Expensive Tennis Shoes in a dark hot place with no beginning, no end, and no pretty haircuts.

Brandon felt that the clearness of this vision and the direness of his concern might be a direct sign from God. And so, as he'd been trained to do, he approached the young man with a prefabricated script:

“Excuse me, hi. My name is Brandon.”

“Oh, uh, hey. How's it going?” Expensive Tennis Shoes tried not to be entirely impolite.

“Well, I just wanted to talk with you today because Jesus put a concern for you on my heart just now.”

Brandon Ryan's pale hair was cropped close. His face was carefully shaven. He was wearing pleat front khakis. His red polo shirt was tucked in. He was wearing tennis shoes, but they were not expensive. Brandon Ryan was homeschooled. And still, this conversation wasn't even awkward for him, he'd done it so many times. He continued:

“And I just really feel compelled to ask you, if you died today, are you sure that you would go to heaven?”

“Hey, man, I'm not really religious, alright?” Expensive Tennis Shoes lost patience predictably quickly. His finger swiped the screen of his iPhone.

Expensive Tennis Shoes was luckier than Brandon, Emily, and Emily's boyfriend combined. On some level, he sensed that there were melting glaciers and regulations,

riots, slums, and maybe eternity. Maybe even impending ruin. If there was, though, it was more an occasion for beer than an occasion for concern. Expensive Tennis shoes had no need for the kind of comfort that Brandon was peddling.

Still, Brandon insisted that he take a pamphlet (“Whatever, dude.” said Expensive Tennis Shoes, tossing it into his open backpack), and with that, most of the tightness in Brandon’s chest was relieved. He hoped that he was no longer responsible for the eternal fate of this other person. He hoped he’d done everything he could to ensure that Expensive Tennis Shoes had the information he needed to make the correct decision about eternity. He tried to convince himself that now the matter was out of his hands. But he couldn’t deny that some doubt remained, that he couldn’t be sure if he’d really tried his hardest and really said the right things.

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At 5:30 pm on April 3rd, 2008, Emily watched Brandon Ryan’s retreat from Expensive Tennis Shoes. She noticed his vaguely concerned expression and his only slightly anachronistic wardrobe. He looked, she thought, like he’d spent the evening in a country club, in 1995. Emily, like Expensive Tennis Shoes, sat in a beige plastic chair. Her chair was attached by the armrests to the chairs on either side of it – Siamese chair triplets. She looked from Brandon Ryan down toward the stack of books in the chair beside her. The size of these books was a testament to Emily’s having progressed past the introductory stage of her college career, when the books had been huge and hard-backed.

She often found herself reminiscing about those early college days, when her four undergraduate years stretched indefinitely before her, seemingly unending. Back then, it had felt like she had all the time in the world to mess around and make mistakes, take classes she didn’t really need, change her major, then change it again, add a minor in something crazy, then drop it. Back then, she had a vague idea that she would need to pursue internships and research opportunities, but she had had plenty of time to worry about that, infinite time to figure it out. Now she was finishing her junior year, and she still wasn’t even sure what kind of graduate program she was interested in. Her parents were both really encouraging her to pursue her PhD in environmental biology, but she was sick to death of composing literature reviews and writing lab reports already. Even the language conventions of scholarly articles were starting to sicken her. How could she do this for another four to eight years?

And then there was her boyfriend Daniel. They had met in October of their freshman year, more than two-and-a-half years ago. All the laissez-faire invisible hand theory stuff, that had come later, after he'd taken the Economics 101 course taught by Dr. Coyne, whose endowment came from a large, conservative hedge fund. Dr. Coyne was one of those young, well-dressed professors who gave provocative talks and had a significant social media presence. Daniel's obsession with Coyne's teachings was exhausting, sure, but Emily tried to be understanding. The way she looked at it, he was a semi-innocent victim of Coyne's cult of personality.

In the two-and-a-half years of conversations Emily and Daniel had had, there had been plenty of discussions about Trickle-down theory, the pros and cons of establishing a free market for human infants, and the horrors of the Carter years. What there hadn't been was even a vague allusion to babies, to marriage, or to mortgages. As Emily thought of this, she almost added 'or to the future' to this list.

But then she remembered her boyfriend's weird affinity for women's clothing, his habit of surprising her with packages containing skirts, and sheer blouses, and new sandals. She remembered the time they went to an upscale department store. She had held soft sweaters and well-cut pants that she could never afford. He had said that one day she would wear those things, that he would buy them for her. As much as she wanted his almost proprietary desire to choose what she wore, to dress her up like a doll, to foment some kind of righteous feminist rage in her, it didn't. Because in truth, a restricted-access part of her mind housed a need for the promise of a future with soft, expensive, new sweaters paid for with someone else's money. And another part of her mind, even more remote and secret than the restricted-access part, housed the need for the promise of a future with something else soft and new and so, so expensive. Something small to hold, and fill up, and eventually give away.

.....

At 5:40pm on April 3rd, 2008, Brandon Ryan stood in the corner of the Transportation Center, waiting patiently for his next directive from God, when he noticed Emily sitting on her beige chair on the other side of the large and open room. Emily was a healthy-looking girl. Her body carried the right amount of weight in the right places. Her hair was thick and shiny and kept at a length that was flattering and wholly non-objectionable. Most of the time, Emily tried to dress fashionably and maybe just slightly provocatively, but today, she'd felt exhausted by the prospect of putting clothes

on and had settled for a gray tee shirt.

Brandon noticed the way that Emily clutched her plastic water bottle. He could see the tension in her white knuckles, in the way she held her shoulders, in the way she dug frantically in her purse for her phone only to glance at it briefly and toss it back it. So she wasn't as nonchalant as many of the girls at the University, he noticed, but something unnamable about her still identified her as one of them. Maybe it was the slightly unexpected way she was sitting, with one foot curled underneath her. Or maybe it was something about the way her eyelashes looked in profile, or the slenderness of her wrists.

Brandon was twenty-one, and he had never kissed a girl. Or held a girl's hand. Or gone on a date. Or talked with a girl alone. He had been told that all of that was a waste of time, because God already had a wife on reserve for him, and he didn't need to shop around to find her. So Brandon had waited around and prayed for his future wife and for God's perfect timing. Around his eighteenth birthday, his prayers had become more fervent, and his waiting had become less patient. He believed what his father told him about God's perfect timing, and he found that witnessing and missionary work gave him comfort and something to focus on while he waited for his wife to be revealed to him. But twenty-one years was a long time to wait, and, despite his best efforts, thoughts of this prophesied, promised, future woman were always with him, making it difficult for him to concentrate on scripture, witnessing, or anything else.

Brandon knew plenty of girls his age. Many of them had long heavy hair that appeared to be soft and fragrant. They had goofy smiles and inelegant shoes, and they layered their tee shirts, turning their torsos into lumpy, impenetrable boxes. These girls weren't unpretty, but they were pretty in a way that was solid and wholesome, like starchy dinner rolls. None of these girls were his future wife. They had everything that he was supposed to need in a woman, but, for some reason, he was pretty sure he could not love any of them.

The girls in State College were different from the daughters of the True Word Baptist Church congregation. They were sleek and effervescent. They possessed a kind of beauty that was only knowable in small, isolated, doses: quantum beauty. Brandon was mesmerized by glimpses of white insteps on tanned sandaled feet and shining artificially straightened hair momentarily released from a bun. He was in awe of the

thin, perfectly manicured fingers of constantly moving hands. Brandon love-hated these things, these girls, with the fascination of a person whose sense of self depends on his ability to reject things he's secretly attracted to.

Brandon took his prolonged contemplation of Emily and the certainty with which he had identified her as a semi-fallen woman as a possible sign from God that she was next in line to hear the message of salvation. He didn't exactly feel embarrassed as he approached her; he'd done this far too many times for that. But, even though he'd have been loath to admit it, his interactions with these kinds of girls always fomented a kind of giddiness in him that he couldn't fully contribute to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

.....

By 5:42 pm on April 3rd, 2008, Emily had found the willpower to open and begin reading one of her textbooks, so she didn't notice Brandon approaching until he was already standing over her, beginning his well-rehearsed spiel.

"Excuse me. Hi. My name is Brandon."

"Hi there." Emily smiled. She already knew exactly where this was going, but she'd always found it nearly impossible to be rude to strangers.

"Well, I just wanted to talk with you today because Jesus put a concern for you on my heart just now."

"Yeah, no thank you. I'm not interested right now." Emily had been raised in a non-religious household in a part of the country where that was still not the norm. She, like Brandon, was very used to these kinds of conversations.

"Okay, but can I just ask you one question, though, miss? Can I just have one minute?"

"No, I'm really pretty secure in my beliefs already, thanks. Actually, I'm pretty busy right now, I've got –" Emily raised her global ecology textbook with her left hand and waved it, letting the gesture finish her sentence. She kept smiling, but not nearly as genuinely as she had been before.

Brandon had expected this. "Okay. Okay. I'll just leave you with one of these," he said, and thrust a pamphlet toward her.

Emily placed her other hand on Brandon's extended forearm, meeting his eyes

as she gently pushed the tract away. “No. But seriously, just, no. Thank you though. Thanks for your concern.”

Brandon continued to look into Emily’s eyes, his head slightly tilted, as he took a step back. He searched for the appropriate words and, unable to find any, he turned and walked away.

Emily reopened her textbook and stared down at it for a moment. She wanted to believe that she was unfazed by the discomfort of the interaction she’d just had, but an involuntary shudder of embarrassment traveled the breadth of her shoulders. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head.

When she opened them, she noticed a pamphlet lying on the ground several feet in front of her chair, and realized that Brandon must have dropped it on his way out. When she was sure he wasn’t watching, she leaned down and picked it up.

.....

The pamphlets Brandon handed out when he worked on his domestic mission project were not the pamphlets that were distributed by his Bible college. He preferred to take the ones that his dad’s church printed. They were done in full color on glossy paper. The text on the front was superimposed on a background of red flames. It read: “The Degeneration of Western Society Heralds the End of the World.” Inside, the pamphlet explained Pastor James Ryan’s ministry and religious philosophy in detail.

Brandon’s decision to use these tracts came from a place of pride and admiration for his father and his father’s vision. Pastor Ryan had, in recent years, grown to be a very influential man in the evangelical community. He was practically worshiped, not only by his congregation, but also by other congregations with a similar vision, as a sort of demigod. Pastor Ryan (as the pamphlet explained) had grown into adulthood during the 1960s, right as America imploded. He had watched as people rejected all natural boundaries and rebelled against all order. And he had seen people suffer for it, too. Pastor Ryan had seen that people had forgotten how to live their lives, and so he had taken it upon himself as his God-given mission to remind them. He developed a code. It was formula for how to live a respectful, wholesome, and full life. And if you followed the rules, you were sure to produce respectful children, have a happy marriage, and be fulfilled.

In order to spread his formula and redirect a downwardly spiraling civilization,



the pastor wrote books and gave presentations. He sold manuals and curricula and made paid appearances. But even as Pastor Ryan progressed from man/pastor to demigod to brand, and even as more and more families applied his formula to their own lives, the spiraling continued and accelerated, with civilization smashing through and destroying every natural and God-given rule and law and limit on its way down.

By April 3, 2008, Pastor Ryan was sure that it had very nearly crashed to rock bottom, which meant, of course, that Jesus would soon return. What else could happen? There was just no way that people could carry on like that for much longer, suffering for their own rebellion. He knew that Jesus' return would bring a lot more suffering, but not for him or his family or his followers. In fact, he was looking forward to it. The pamphlet didn't mention this, but Pastor Ryan conceptualized that moment as the ultimate "I told ya so."

Brandon respected his father, but he knew that they weren't quite the same. When Brandon was seven or eight, he tried to convince his faithless maternal grandmother, on a rare visit to her house, to begin going to church. When she declined, he asked his father how he dealt with the guilt of the souls he'd never save, the people he would fail by not trying hard enough.

Pastor James Ryan had regarded this as a silly question. He'd responded succinctly and swiftly: "Brandon, everyone makes a choice. You can either love God and accept Jesus, or you can reject God. Rejecting God is the same thing as hating God. There is no middle ground. You do what you can to convince people to love God, but, in the end, it's a decision that everyone has to make on their own."

Pastor Ryan had never been a victim of uncertainty.

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Emily also had early memories of her parents talking fervently about imminent global destruction, but then sleeping soundly at night. Instead of gleefully anticipating the arrival of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, however, her parents had eaten chocolate pie and watched Chuck Lorre sitcoms while they waited for the waters to rise.

Once, when Emily was twelve, she watched a documentary on the Discovery channel titled "Five Natural Disasters that Could End Civilization as We Know It." The program's booming narrator explained that a volcano under Yellowstone National

Park could erupt any day, as evidenced by a measured increase in the rate at which the floor of the Yellowstone Caldera was rising. That night, she had lain awake in her bed and stared, transfixed, as a shadow on her ceiling morphed from the familiarly terrifying point of a witch's hat to the enormously, unknowably terrifying tip of an erupting super volcano. After begging her brain to fall asleep for over an hour, Emily gave up and woke her parents.

At her mother's insistence, Emily had explained what she'd seen about the volcano.

"So could it happen? Can that even be true?" It was less an actual question than it was a desperate plea for reassurance.

"They think it could happen. The scientists are monitoring it."

"Well, how can they stop it if they figure out it's happening?"

"They can't stop it, Emily. There are all kinds of things in the world like this, and we have no control over any them. It's just something you have to learn to live with. Now please try to relax." It wasn't that Emily's mother was cold; she just didn't support coddling.

Emily understood this and basically agreed. She had never been able to fool herself into believing that a (conditionally) beneficent being controlled it all, not even during the years she spent attending church with a friend's family, no matter how hard she tried. But, still, how great would it be to have someone, anyone, to plead with when things got disastrous?

The night that Emily had trouble sleeping because of her worries about the volcano, her parents had agreed to allow her to put a sleeping bag down on the floor of their bedroom. Emily had lain in the sleeping bag and stared at the ceiling. She didn't even try to go to sleep. In fact, she figured that she might never sleep again, because now she understood that she wasn't guaranteed to wake up in the same world she fell asleep in. Actually, she wasn't guaranteed to wake up at all.

Eventually, the rise of the Caldera floor slowed due to a decrease in volcanic pressure, and then, slowly, it actually started sinking. Ever since that incident, Emily found comfort in cycles. Ebbs and flows. The rolling hills of a sine curve. It was straight sloping lines—clear increases and decreases—that worried her.

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At 6:00 pm, on April 3rd, 2008, Emily's boyfriend Daniel got off a bus and entered the transportation center lobby, looking for Emily. He was mad. He had just returned from an academic conference in Philadelphia. He didn't really like public transportation because he couldn't stand the crowds, the delays, the adhering to someone else's schedule. But Superbus was a new bus company, the first real competition that Greyhound had ever had, and if there's one thing Daniel could get behind, it was a bold new startup. Plus, the ticket had been so cheap. And he had wanted to review the paper he would be presenting at the conference and study for finals instead of driving.

But of course, he had been disappointed. It was 6:00, and he had been scheduled to arrive in State College at 5:15. If he'd said it once, he'd said it one thousand times: The only reliable form of transportation was personal transportation. He planned to get a personal jet as soon as he could afford it, which, according to his projections would be in—worst-case scenario—ten years.

When Emily noticed Daniel approaching, she stood up to meet him.

"Well hey, how was it?" she asked, taking a couple of his smaller bags. He noticed that her expression wasn't particularly welcoming, but he didn't care. He, too, was in a bad mood.

"Okay. But the stupid bus. It was forty-fucking-five minutes late."

"Bummer, but hey, A plus, environmentally-speaking, for the mass transportation."

"Environmentally friendly isn't shit if it doesn't maximize consumer satisfaction, though. I mean, I know you've heard this before, and I don't really feel like getting into an argument about it now." Daniel headed toward the main entrance, and Emily followed him.

Brandon Ryan was standing near the door, apparently waiting for yet another directive. When Emily and her boyfriend passed him, Emily handed him the pamphlet that she'd found on the floor. "I think you dropped this," she said, shrugging at him.

"What was that about?" Daniel asked, once they'd fully exited.

"He's some kind of ultra-Christian kid. He dropped that when he tried to save me earlier." Emily laughed as she spoke.

"Don't you think he has plenty of those pamphlets? I don't think he'd miss one."

“Yeah, I guess not. I was just trying to be nice.”

“Okay, whatever,” Daniel shrugged. “But I mean, wow, it’s 2008. You think we’d be far past all that salvation stuff by now.”

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By 6:15 pm on April 3rd, 2008, Brandon Ryan felt pretty sure that God was done sending lost souls his way for the evening. He left the transportation center lobby and walked toward the complex’s huge attached parking garage. As he walked, he thought about the girl who had pushed his arm away and then returned the errant pamphlet. It was like he could almost still feel the pressure where her hand had been. He had talked to plenty of girls on his domestic mission, and he had fallen at least a little in love with many of them. Most of them had been pretty polite—smiling, taking a pamphlet, thanking him—but none of them had ever touched him before. It was weird, too, that she had brought that pamphlet back to him. Why not just leave it on the floor? Maybe her heart was more open to the message of Jesus than he had originally thought.

When he reached his car, he opened the driver’s door and tossed the leftover pamphlets onto the passenger seat. One near the top of the pile landed face down. The backs of the pamphlets were mostly blank, excepting the copyright information printed in small font at the bottom. But not this one. There was something else on the back of this one.

Brandon picked up the pamphlet to examine it more closely. It was a number and a name, written in black ballpoint pen: “Emily Sanders: 459-792-3334.” With shaky hands, Brandon turned the pamphlet over, then turned it back again. It was still there. He began to salivate slightly, in that sick way that made him worry he might throw up.

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Ask God to talk to you, Listen to God, and do exactly what God says. When troubled anxious children asked Pastor James Ryan a question that couldn’t be directly answered by the scriptures, this was his three-pronged retort. “See? Your problem is not that complicated. In fact, it’s so incredibly simple.”

This instructive chant could very well have been Brandon’s first string of sentences. By the time he was born, True Word Ministries was well established, along with all its aphorisms. But still, it had been confusing for young Brandon, because no one had

ever been straight with him about what God was supposed to sound like. Naomi, his oldest sister, once told him that some people could actually hear God’s voice, but that most people just got a “special feeling” when they prayed.

Brandon had considered Naomi’s advice and waited for God’s “special feeling.” Sometimes he asked God direct questions, like should he or shouldn’t he go on a youth mission trip to West Philadelphia. Other times, he needed more general guidance, like what should he do to prepare for the End Times? Or what was the most effective thing to say to a sinner to save his soul? In all cases, Brandon had reached some conclusions, but he could never be sure whether he was basing those conclusions on feelings from God or his own preferences.

But this, this was definitely different. This was the most obvious, the most direct, that God had ever been with Brandon in his whole life. From the moment he saw that girl – Emily, he knew now that her name was Emily – he had sensed that there was something different about her. She was special. And then there was her strange reaction, and then she gave him the pamphlet with her phone number. And then, finally, there was this feeling he was having, like he needed to spring into action, or like he’d had too many diet cokes. He was sweating and his pulse was fast, plus there was the queasiness. Was this the special feeling that Naomi was talking about?

Right before Brandon left Mechanicsburg for Bible College, Pastor Ryan told him that he felt that God would soon reveal who was to be his helpmeet. He had been expecting to find his intended soon, but he hadn’t guessed it would be a girl like Emily, a girl who seemed so resistant to hearing the message of salvation. But the more Brandon thought about it, the more it made sense. This girl needed him most. He was going to save her eternal soul. What better bonding activity than that could there be?

Sure, he was nervous to call her. But he knew she would be expecting it. It was her, after all, who had given him her number. He knew that God was already working in her to soften her heart and prepare her for him. She might feign resistance at first, but that was all part of the test. He would just have to be persistent.

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At 6:35 pm on April 3rd, 2008, Emily sat in her apartment, her global ecology book open in front of her on her desk. Searching for the answer to a question on her final exam study guide, she flipped through the book to the chapter on carbon sequestration.

“All plant life sequesters CO<sub>2</sub> as long it is growing,” Emily read, “but when it is harvested or cleared, it releases CO<sub>2</sub> back into the atmosphere. The degradation of the South American rainforests contributes to global warming not only by decreasing the amount of carbon these ecosystems can now sequester, but also through the direct release of carbon back into the atmosphere by the cleared and now decaying vegetation.”

The Degradation of the South American Rainforests ... Heralds the End of the World. Emily pressed her fingertips into her eyes, but she could still see the pamphlet's red flames, her own hand turning it over, writing her number on the back. Another tremor of embarrassed regret made its way across her shoulders. Why had she done that?

It wasn't that she had wanted to talk to Brandon – well, not about Jesus, anyway. What she'd really felt that she wanted, there in the bus station, was to be Brandon. And maybe, she'd thought, in the statistically improbable event that he noticed her number on the pamphlet and called her, maybe he could explain to her the secrets of being him.

But here at her desk, not even an hour later, she was very far away from the impulse that had caused her to leave her number, already a stranger to the girl in the bus station that had done that. Still, she turned on her laptop and typed “Yellowstone Caldera update 2008” into the search engine.

That Brandon kid would never call her, she was sure of that.



NEIL KOHL





SILA OZKARA

## Protection

BY JEFF LAMBERT

I haven't been barefoot in weeks  
water no ice, please  
I just can't take the sound

I watch through windows  
talk through teeth  
dress in layers

there's something out there  
it's going to eat me alive  
the world you left



## Potamia

BY MIKE GOOD

There is a good place to drink  
above the Monongahela where  
a girl never sat by the river

muttering catholic hymns  
about yesterday when we sat  
atop Bates, as the lights clotted

below us and rush hour began.  
Now I am the traffic, braking  
above the Allegheny sweating

songs and psalms into rivers  
and rivers and rivers shifting,  
ebullient, slapdash over the dam.

## My Cat Problem

BY MIKE GOOD

The cat is on the fire escape and looks very unhealthy. The cat is inside my apartment and I am screaming. The cat is asleep outside and I am feeding it bananas. The cat is in my bathroom. The cat is in my head. I am thinking this cat is blind. One eye lacks a pupil. The cat glares at me. It makes its way into my bed. It keeps me warm and I feel loved. It calls me strong and appreciates me and so now I am fucking this cat. This cat is not unattractive, all said and done, speckled with brown and white fur, its eyes a dull piercing green. The cat does not eat. The cat sleeps outside of my apartment and now I am afraid to leave.

## A. Rethinks Seduction

BY ANDY CHEN

Her earrings are feathers of gold, the veins forever fixed. She snaps a match to life. He looks up to find moths everywhere, with names he will never know: Hairstreak, Antler, Pale Grass Blue. Their tiny applause drying out the air, sending in spirals a gasoline smell. *You knew it would come to this.* And he did.



NEIL KOHL

## A. Thinks, Loneliness Is Neither Good nor Bad

BY ANDY CHEN

She would later say he was too brittle to feasibly retrofit. He would later pick glass from the sails of his tiny ship.

# Laughing Gas

BY STEVEN KLEPETAR

I laughed all the way to the river,  
my cheeks aflame, laughed  
  
until my belly hurt and my breath  
broke in coughs and gulps, laughed  
  
at the strangest things: a red squirrel  
who looked to be from out of town,  
  
a VW bus painted gold, a woman  
with a crown of silvery glass.  
  
Even when the day turned serious,  
I laughed at pigeons streaming

through a threatening sky.  
At noon I laughed at sandwiches  
  
and milk, peanut butter left me  
writhing on the ground. I laughed  
  
at ghosts, at cows, at butter slowly  
melting in a blue dish, at clocks  
  
and at the sparkly devil's mask  
my brother pasted to his furious face  
  
last time he whispered my secret  
name to cold, brutal, humorless stars.



DIANE DEAN

## Door Knob

BY JESSICA MCNALLY

The kitchen looks like a place that I've never been before. Even though everything is the same, the same as last night.

A few of Mom's blue dishes rest in the sink, sticky with dried soapsuds that were never rinsed off.

There are four bowls on the table. Empty, except for bits of missed sugar and oats from her homemade peach cobbler.

*Everything is the same except for the door.*

The door that leads to the back deck where Dad goes to smoke. The door is different. It's missing a knob because he forgot to close it just the right way. Because he slammed the door instead of twisting the knob, gently. Instead of jiggling it three times so it wouldn't fall off.

*Everything is the same except for the doorknob lying on the floor.*

*Everything is the same except for the streak of dried mud left from Dad's boots.*

The boots he forgot to take off before coming back from his smoke. The boots he usually takes off real slow, real careful before sneaking back into the kitchen.

Except for the streak of dried mud and the knob on the floor, the kitchen looks exactly the same. But I've never been here before. Mom's not cleaning last night's dishes; Dad's not cooking Sunday brunch. The walls are quiet, the air is thick.

And there's a small hole in the door that I can see through to the deck.

Where Mom leans against the railing.

Smoking one of Dad's cigarettes.





SILA OZKARA



NEIL KOHL

## Inter-State

BY MIKE LAMBERT

*Previously published in Nude Bruce Review*

I'll tell you why, sure, but it's a long story. See, there's a reason cities exist, why people cluster up together. We've always done it, and we're probably always gonna keep doing it. There's a reason planets form together from rocks, why they stay close, gravity reaching out and pulling them in closer. Those are sort of cities, too, right? Everythin' makes a city of itself, like the cells in your body, y'know. Like the yeast in this beer. It's a law of the universe, the same stuff always clusters up together. Like attracts like, and that's a fact.

It's also the worst damn thing I've learned so far in this life.

Name's Steve, by the way. Here, we'll need another beer 'fore I get into this. Yeah, no problem. Nice to meet another day drinker, always. But you asked me why I'm drinkin' early so I'm gonna tell you, even though it's probably a longer story than you wanna hear.

Oh yeah? Well good, I ain't got nowhere to be, either.

So I used to drive a rig, see. Shock there, I know. I think those things even make you look like you drive'em, you do it long enough. I sure did. I did it for 7 years, driving that big honkin' thing, dragging that fat ass of whatever-it-was behind me from here to there and then back again loaded up with something else. And it was fulfilling, 'cause as soon as you're out there and thinking about it, actually driving the things that far? You realize just how much damn space there is between everything. It really does just smack you in the face at some point, I'll tell ya, just how far everything we use – from toilet paper to ceramic tile – has to go just to get where we need it.

And I was a part of that, y'know? It sometimes feels like civilization and everything's been around so damn long you'd think we had it all covered by now, that most of the empty space'd be filled up with somethin'. But it ain't even close, not even in the United States of America and all that. I swear, it made me wanna cry for whoever had to drive rigs in Russia or somewhere. So much so that I don't even like thinkin' about it even. But y'know, somebody's gotta do it, else we'd still be scattered around and, like I said, we don't like doin' that and for good reason.

Something that probably would surprise you about me -- and this is the last thing



about me 'fore I get to tellin' you, swear – but I kinda got a mad interest in physics and quantum theory and all that. Shit yeah, went to school for 6 years, s'why I got to driving eighteners, to pay for all that school money. Well, I mean, all you can do with that is teach it to other folks and most folks ain't interested and I don't blame'em. Conjugate momenta derivatives, phase space volume formulas, quantum foam and probability field theorems, all that shit's stuck in my head and I don't blame anyone for not wantin' it in theirs.

So yeah, I started driving and then I just kept on. But one of the things you learn, in physics and in truckin', is that the world don't really act the way we take for granted that it does. Either from way, way back or way, way close-up, the world is totally different than what we walk around in, how we normally perceive it, y'know?

You see way more than you'd think out in the middle of nowhere. Accidents, mostly. Those ain't the worst, 'cause we'll get to that, but they're pretty fuckin' bad. Lots of times you're drivin' up on it and you're the first one to see it, how someone's blown tire sent their minivan rollin' and skippin' at 75 mph and flinging the whole family in it out onto the blacktop at a force and velocity that I could calculate for ya but won't. It's all statistics, though. It's gotta happen with that many things goin' that fast.

Lot of the first 911 calls for interstate wrecks are truckers, actually. Mostly 'cause they're the first vehicle to come up on it, but I'd bet it's got something to do with those damn trucks bein' so hard to stop – could calculate that for ya, too – and a lot of the time those trucks end up rollin' right over the leftover bits of people the blacktop doesn't shred. There's just no helpin' it sometimes. And after feeling those kind of bumps under your cab and trailer you can't help but feel more involved. Sometimes you see it happen, too, you're right there behind'em when some Mustang going too fast pops over the little guardrails on a mountain road, just sails through it, and you know that it's over, that's it for them. But you're still there, and that's a powerful teachin' right there, too. Fuckin' every single thing and every single day is dangerous, and the place where the difference between livin' and dyin' horribly is just a moment, a space between one thing and two different places. Like I said, there's the panned out view, and then there's close up.

Sometimes worse than the dead ones you see, though, is the live ones...Well, you wonder how some people get in the places they are, or why. I can tell you, from expe-



rience, that for every stretch of mountains and trees or long trail of desert, you'll come across some shop or motel or house that someone is trying to make a livin' in. People who just live out there, by themselves and away from everything. Some folks find that admirable or relatable, but not me.

Because I mean, maybe once they were just passing through, down all those back roads and hills and nothin' out there on the way to somewhere else. But then something just grabs on and they're stuck, like they landed on some giant invisible flypaper. And so they just sit there and twitch, hopin' someone else'll get stuck, too.

One time, I stopped in on one of 'em, this gas station in the middle of a valley that really just didn't have nobody livin' there, just this tiny little flat thing with dirty stucco walls and only two gas pumps. Looked old as hell but it had a little neon "open" sign and I wanted a snack. I park the truck, which was easy bein' that the place had a big gravel lot in front of it, and I pulled on the little jangly-bell door and walked in.

Nobody in there but me and the guy behind the counter. He's standin' there by the cigarettes, just a lanky balding guy. Anyway, he didn't say nothin' when I walked in, just sorta looked at me. So y'know, I nod at him and walk over to the candy rack. Now, lots of convenience stores get pretty grody once you're far enough out so that didn't bother me. But there was this smell, one that went beyond the usual stink of those places, and I still remember it just rising up around me as I walked back, this weird sweet and sour smell.

I picked out a Snickers and start walkin' back to the counter. Then I notice the dude behind the counter has gone from all stone-faced to just grinnin', all toothy-like. And he's not blinkin' either, just out-and-out staring at me from the cigarette racks. I sorta skip a step and stop for a second when I seen him, and I must have gripped the candy bar tighter 'cause immediately after I realize it's got fuckin' maggots crawlin' out the bottom of it, wriggling in between my fingers.

So I fling the thing down like it was a red-hot angry rattlesnake, obviously. But then I notice the rest of the candy racks are all disintegrated and old, with like the old wrappers I ain't seen since I was a kid, right? Patches a'mold all over 'em and everything. So I look up at the guy to say somethin' like "hey man, what the fuck", y'know, but when I see him, he's taken like three steps forward, still behind the counter but pressed up against it. Almost leanin' over.

And he's smilin' bigger and bigger now, just unnaturally big like he had hooks attached and pullin' on his face, stretchin' and stretchin' so hard he's like shaking a little and his eyes are just bugging out of his head. Just staring like a corpse who just heard the funniest joke in the world but can't laugh. So I'm all fuck this shit and I start walkin' out and as I do he starts raising his arm, like he's doing a slow jumping jack or something, but just with his right arm.

Now the place wasn't big but it felt like walkin' through molasses outta there, that sorta bad dream slow motion bullshit. Like flypaper. And I ain't takin' my eyes off the motherfucker as I'm walkin', and he gets his arm all the way up so it's just pointin' straight up, and then he just cocks that stretched out grinning head to the right, sorta tilted into his up-stretched arm and still grinning bigger and bigger. I get through the door and I hear him start to move...

I ran to the truck and would'a unhitched the trailer if that didn't mean I'd have to stay out there another second. And as I'm gearin' it up and gettin' it to move – which takes a while with the trailer attached, you see – I see him just standin' at the door grinning out at me. And the worst part was his eyes, they went all white and shiny, like a reflection of headlights in an animal's eyes, all bright and twinklin'. Reflections of my headlights, of course.

Either way, I didn't stop drivin' for another twelve hours.

One more beer? That's the spirit. No, I got it, I'm the one gettin' thirsty from all this talkin'. Almost done, though, and then you can talk all you like.

Anyway, about a year later, I was on a real long one. New Orleans to right outside'a Vegas. This's like a year after the fuckin' joker in the C-store. Haulin' ten tons of taco sauce, 'cause that's what it was that day, and for some reason it had to get all the way the hell out there. But that was the job, y'know.

So, about 6 o'clock, I'm just starin' out the windshield and I see these sorta ripples on the side of the road. And I know, yeah, it's the desert and shit so I figure it's just heat waves but I've been seein' heat waves all day and these are just...different. Like heat waves, yeah, but sideways – vertical, y'know? But I ignore it, as at this point I'm headin' through some mesas the road curves around, and on a flat desert drive like that you start gettin' really excited about getting to just turn the damn wheel.

I'm on the first long curve when I notice on the left side, one of those weird

sideways ziggy-zaggies is gettin' darker and wavier, sort of a shadow but still wobbly and shimmery like a blacktop mirage. But it's right there on the left side, and keepin' pace with me. And I know enough to know that ain't normal. And the more I look at it, I start seein' a pattern to it, like the shape of it started coming into focus.

That's when it started lookin' less like a something and more like a someone. A damned person-shaped shadow running across the road at 70 miles-per-fuckin'-hour. And I'd think it was just a shadow, too, but there was nothin' on the other side of the road. And normal shadows slant, well, sorta backwards on the ground, but this one was leanin' forwards. But the thing looked sort of flat and round at the same time, like it was somewhere in between.

Five or ten minutes go by like this, and a'course, the road starts curving the other way and I gotta turn the wheel again, and it's gone. I check the other side and it ain't there either, so I shrug it off as some weird desert optical illusion. Couple minutes later, though, once the road straightened out again, I see it again, but this time on the other side and way further off the road. And now I know it ain't a shadow 'cause the land is flat and this shadow/mirage thing I've been hopin' it is is castin' an outline on the horizon. And it's still movin' fast toward this little mesa about a mile or two out, which I can see the interstate I'm on eventually curves around. The thing disappears behind it.

I've been squintin' into the sunset watchin' it, drivin' west and all, so I just kinda tried to focus on turning the wheel and shifting gears for a minute. But I'm still lookin' for it, kinda off to the south 'cause I figure it's gone past the mesa in a straight line. I finish out the curve and I finally see this little butte split by the road as it straightens out, and there he is again. And I can see him real clearly now, the squiggly edges smoothin' out into this nondescript outline of a person, almost a stick figure. Yeah, silhouette is the exact word, thank you. Anyway, this time he ain't running no more, just standing on the little mesa I'm about to drive right past.

So I'm coming up pretty fast and there ain't no other road to drive to so my stomach is sorta droppin' to my balls at this point and my chest is starting to feel all sick and cold like it did in that damn convenience store. And right as I'm within about a hundred yards, I see these two little shimmers flashing out at me, from right where his eyes should be.

Then I realize I haven't turned my lights on yet.

So I'm breathin' like I'm givin' birth at this point and grippin' the wheel like I'm on a bridge goin' over the grand canyon with no guardrails and an inch on each side in the snow, right? The road starts going down into a real soft decline but at the time it felt like droppin' off from the top slope of a rollercoaster. I'm still lookin' around for the thing, and it's that bright desert dusk so I can see pretty clear still. And for a while I don't see nothin' but the pavement stretching out in front of me with the dirt on both sides startin' to turn purple as the sunlight dimmed down.

It was right then my body remembered it hadn't blinked for way too long, and I remember blinkin' because it was just that quick little picture-slide-change moment of black flicker that changed the view from empty purple dirt to seein' FOUR of those shadow things scootin' across the sand. Three of 'em were further off to the side but veerin' in towards the road and the fourth one, obviously runnin' but in this weird like flip-book jitter-step, without leavin' a single speck of dirt kicked up. Then I notice the fifth one, runnin' right beside the truck again and somehow I know this is the first one just catching up again.

Well, I'm keepin' an eye on him and he runs further up in front, even though I'm doin' 85, easy. He runs up ahead about a hundred yards and then just stops, on a fuckin' dime, and I speed past him. And just a half-second after that, maybe even less, the other four out in front all stop, too, one after the other, and they turn around, and I only know they do because I start seein' those little white shimmers castin' back at me.

I'll tell ya, 85 em-pee-aych don't feel real fast when there's a bunch of fuckin' shadow-things stoppin' what they're doin' to watch you roll past'em. But after I did, I didn't see'em for another ten minutes or so, and by this time it was about 7:15 and dusk still moving right along into dark.

I go another five miles without seein' anything, so I start sorta regaining my wits a little bit. That's enough to realize I'm almost outta diesel. See, you tend to burn gas quick in them trucks if you start drivin' scared and fast, and I only had about ten miles left in it, tops, and these last few miles have been one of those gradual desert inclines that burns it up even worse. But I'm almost to the top of the grade and I figure I can coast it down for a good while, and I knew I was close to where it starts goin' downhill outta Arizona and into Nevada, so I figured I could stretch it at least a little bit.

So I gun it when I see the crest of this uphill grade comin' up and I slap the thing in neutral and get ready to coast down, just as the last dark purple glimmers of the sun are fadin' out and I feel the last couple sputters of a fuel injector running dry.

I come over that hill and there they all are. Like they were waitin' for me. Lined up around both sides of the road, scattered up on the great-big rocky mesas and cliffs next to the road, and even lined up along the horizon, way off in the distance. Hundreds of these little jittery shadows, standin' still and watching me coast this truck down the blacktop. Each and every one of those things' eyes lit up and twinkling back at me like flashlights, or little binary stars.

The face of that crazy guy in the rotted-out C-store flashed through my head, and it was then that I knew they were all grinning back at me just the same, wider and wider and wider, even as their outlines began to fade along with the last little bit of dusk.

Then, and understand I was sorta panicked, I turned my lights off. I guess in just some blind aim to hide and, prob'ly more likely, not to see. It wasn't the best idea, 'cause out in the desert like that? It's real dark, see, and all those little lights out there just blended into the sky and...

Anyway. It was a long, long time going down that hill.

Eventually I rolled to a stop, as I was just sorta frozen at that point and didn't even think to hit the brakes. But stopping snapped me out of it, so I just jerk up with a start. It's pitch black outside my cab as far as I can see, like a black sheet was just laid over my windshield. But part of me realized I was out of gas and stranded so I just kinda ran on instinct. I try the CB radio and managed to Channel 9 myself. That bein' the reserved band for roadside trucker assistance and basically an instant dunce-cap as trucker culture goes, but I was past carin', even when the jackass on the other end laughed his ass off when I told him where I was and laughed even harder after he said it'd be 8-10 hours to get someone out there. I just say whatever and turn the thing off and just sat there for a minute. Eventually the dark out there starts gettin' to me. I know the battery's still good so I turn on the headlights...

Ugh. Jesus... One more beer, alright? That's fine, I'll just have this one for me.

I turn on the lights, and the first and only thing I see out there is that same god-forsaken convenience store and gas station, down to the last detail. Sittin' there on

the side of the road just to the right of where the truck stopped, with that same round gravel drive in front of it.

I turned those headlights right the hell back off. And not three seconds after I do, the whole store's lights flash on, first the ones over the pumps, then the ones inside, and last of all, that little worn-out neon Open sign. And as that came on, I knew I'd've given everything in the world to have it just be dark again.

I don't know how I managed to sleep that night, or how much I actually slept or how much of it I just spent in a ball under my quilt trying to block out that shitty flickering fluorescent light, trying not to see shimmering white eyes starin' and grinin' at me, or hear the ding-ding jingle of the door opening. Because I knew, somehow, that that store – that version of it – was the one I didn't manage to leave.

Next thing I knew, it was dawn and this smug motherfucker from roadside assistance was knockin' and hollerin' at me from the driver's side. And I remember wondering for a second why, outta all the smart-ass comments, he didn't say nothing about why I didn't just get gas at the place I broke down next to.

But it wasn't there. Maybe it never was. Maybe both.

Now, I've thought about this a lot. See, the universe is sort of a bad little kid who only behaves – or really, only decides whether he's gonna behave or not – when yer watchin'im like a hawk. Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, man, look it up. Schrödinger's Cat, too. All of us and everything else are just in flux between one state and another. That's why we bunch up – to keep watch, to keep things solid. 'Cause the world, it gets up to all sorts of shit when you ain't, and it loves to misbehave. Especially when nobody, or almost nobody, is lookin'.

Anyway, finally drivin' into the warehouse was the last damn time I stepped out of a truck, and honestly, that's how I ended up here, 'cause this is where the taco sauce was goin'. It's a nice place, though. Nice big community, real close to Vegas, y'know, and you meet polite folk like you who you can tell yer fucked up stories to. Like attracts like, and that's why you stay away from lonely places like the road. Of any of the things that happened out there that night, this's what I know for sure: If I'd gone in there, back in that store, or even just outta the truck? I think I'd have found out what was so funny, too. And I'd probably still be there, twitchin' in flypaper.

So here's a fact for ya: at its closest orbit, it's 2.7 billion miles from Earth to Plu-

to, and that's just to the far end of the solar system. Now that's a shitload further and with a whole lot more empty space in between than drivin' New Orleans to fuckin' Vegas. I'd have to scribble out in scientific notation the amount of miles to the closest star. And even them, the stars are all bunched up too, clustering together in galaxies.

'Cause just the same, the opposite bunches together, too. Dark clings to dark. Loneliness to loneliness. Misery to misery. Death to death.

Everything wants company.

So, you asked why I drink during the day. Well, ever since I got outta drivin' and started livin' here, I go to sleep at 6 o'clock sharp, every day. Yep, s'almost bed-time for me now! Gotta get the booze in sometime, though, right? Because no, out here, even in a city like this and right next to one so bright-as-hell as Vegas? It's still the desert and in the desert you can always see the stars at night, shimmering and twinkling clearer than anything.

And me, when I was rollin' down that hill in the pitch black towards those things, when I turned the headlights off like an idiot? Well, what did it was seein' em all, all those whatever-they-were's, with no other light and just the dark desert floor and the starry desert sky behind'em?

They all looked just the same: those things' eyes and all the millions of stars up there, with absolutely no way or how of tellin' the difference between the ones below the horizon or way up above it. Or if there even was a difference.

I mean, don't get me wrong. I know it's only stars, other suns way far off shinin' their photons at us; I know how far the light has traveled and everything.

I know that, I done studied it. But no matter how much I tell myself that, I'm still not sure which ones are stars I'm lookin' at and which of those shiny blinkin' dots in the sky are really a whole lot closer and looking at me. So if I don't look, if I don't ever try'n turn those headlights back off again, then maybe it just ain't either one.

Sorry. Like attracts like. So what are you so scared of?



STEPHEN TUOMALA



## The Bureau of Imminent Souls (*Excerpt*)

BY MARTIN VAN VELSEN

Jack eyed the long line in front of him. He had never seen a line this long. Something really special must be waiting at the end of it, if he ever got there. So far he had barely been moving and he must have been here, wherever here was, for what must have been a week now. How he got here was a mystery to him. Last he remembered was serving someone the soup of the day. When he arrived here he could still feel the hot plate on his hand and by now that was the fondest memory he had. Nothing seemed to matter here, and he found it very curious that he couldn't smell or taste anything. Even touching was difficult. He had tried tapping someone in front of him on the shoulder but his finger had sunk a little bit into the flesh. He couldn't quite push all the way through but there wasn't quite a lot of resistance, either.

"Do you mind?" the woman in front of him said. "That's quite annoying, really."

"Sorry, sorry, it's just a strange sensation."

"Trust me, being poked this way is just as much an odd sensation for me, now please stop it," Jack heard as he was still standing in line with his finger buried half into the shoulder of the woman in front of him. He tried on his best smile.

"I was aiming for your hand but got stuck in your shoulder." With that Jack grabbed the woman's hand and enthusiastically started shaking it.

"You're dead, why try to have your way with me?" Her reply set off a number of simultaneous questions in Jack's mind. First of all he hadn't realized the woman – or rather, girl – in front of him, was actually quite pleasant to look at. If she was dead she certainly didn't look it. She looked about his age, with long dark hair and bright green eyes in an elegant face.

"Even in death men are pigs," she said, turning back around.

"Excuse me, I'm not really a pig, then again I'm not really a man anymore if you know what I mean." As he said this it finally dawned on him that yes, he was indeed dead. He mainly concluded this from the fact he would never have said anything of the sort to a girl as pretty as this in real life.

"You're still staring at me," the girl said.

"Sorry," Jack replied and turned away.

"And the hand." He let go of her hand. For a while he stood there, wondering what

he should think of all this. He was dead apparently. He didn't feel dead though. Then again he couldn't swear to it that he felt alive. Breathing was still going on but seemed more a reflex than a necessity. His head was still attached and so were his limbs. There didn't seem any sign of injury. Staring at the eternal queue he stood there for a while trying to make sense of things.

"Do I look alright?" He asked the girl. She didn't respond.

"Sorry, but do I look all right?" He asked tapping her on the shoulder again.

"Why would you not look all right and even if you didn't why would you care?" She replied without turning around.

"Hand," she added.

He withdrew his hand.

About an hour later he started whistling a tune he had heard on the radio not too long before he had apparently died. It had stuck in his mind then and he hadn't been able to get rid of it since. It was a rather happy tune with high notes and a fast melody.

"Stop it." The girl said.

"Why? Even if we're dead, that's no reason to be depressed about it. I feel quite fine actually," Jack replied.

"Okay, look," the girl said, now turning around to face Jack. "We're dead, but that's not the end of it. Why do you think we're in this line? We're not in yet, you know. Whatever is at the end of this line either leads to heaven or hell. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

Jack had not. Then again he hadn't really thought about it. His former girlfriend constantly complained about this, that he never thought about the future, that he was always stuck in the present.

"So what happens at the end of the line?" Jack asked.

"Who knows, and I don't want to know. As long as this line lasts I'm not in either heaven or hell and I'm still somewhat myself." The girl said to the ground.

"Why would you be anyone else?"

"You really never thought of any of this, have you? The person you were doesn't exist anymore. Anything is possible now. Who says they won't strip your identity and turn you into a nameless soul?"

Jack had always been told he didn't have much personality so this remark didn't

make that much of an impression.

“Could be worse,” he said.

“How?”

“Could be burning,” Jack replied, “or drowning.” Jack’s grandfather had drowned in World War II and as a consequence Jack had never known him. It had always made a strong impression on him and he imagined drowning the worst death one could possibly go through. “What about the pearly gates?” Jack asked. “Isn’t St. Peter supposed to be waiting for us and judging if we’re fit to go in?”

“He’s only in charge of making sure near-death experiences don’t come though. Did you get hit on the head when you died?” she said.

“Could be,” in reality he hadn’t thought much about how he had died. It didn’t seem to matter much. So far he had been too bewildered to think of anything at all. Mostly he just stood in line and moved up a bit whenever the person in front did.

He stood in a very large hall. All along the hall, from one side to the furthest end, a winding pattern of black tape had been stretched on low pillars creating corridors and lines along which people slowly moved towards whatever waited at the far end. Jack turned and looked back to where he must have come from. A sudden cold wind flowed around him and he shivered as he peered into the distance. The hallway stretched out endlessly and he could not see the place where – at some point in the past – he must have started his journey.

“I’m Jack,” he said, almost reaching out but remembering her aversion to him touching her.

“Emma,” came the response.

“Been here long?”

“More or less just as long as you have been, of course,” she said icily.

“Sorry, just making conversation. It’s getting a bit boring here.”

“Better get used to it; the line is still quite long.”

“What do you think is at the end?”

“Don’t know.”

“Hope it’s heaven.”

Silence.

“I don’t know for sure but people further down the line have been sending through reports of what they think is coming,” Emma said. “They say that the line ends at lots of doors. You have to pick a number. When they call you, you have to go through the door that has your number.”

“That’s pretty vague,” Jack said.

“Apparently that’s all that can be seen. Nobody comes out of those doors and nobody else can be seen that works here or guards the place.”

“Perhaps there are peep holes, some way for them to see what we’re doing. Maybe they’re looking at us right now.”

“Don’t be silly,” Emma snorted. “This is the afterlife, not some Vaudeville act.”

“This all reminds me of something,” Jack said. “Have you ever read Dante’s Inferno?”

“You mean with the seven circles of hell?” Emma asked, turning around.

“Yes, that one. But I’m more thinking of purgatory. Wasn’t that supposed to last forever and be eternally boring?”

“That certainly sounds like this place,” Emma sighed. “But it doesn’t go on forever because there are those doors at the end.”

Jack frowned and thought to himself for a while. Emma glanced back and tried to see over the line.

“This place resembles an airport, doesn’t it?” Jack asked. “With waiting lines before you go through customs. Maybe this is something like that. Maybe we’re waiting to travel somewhere.”

“What’s an airport?” she asked.

“What do you mean ‘what’s an airport’?”

“Just like I said, what does that word mean?”

“How can you not know what the word airport means?” Jack said.

“I’ve never heard it, how should I know?” replied Emma.

“It’s a place where airplanes come and go. You know.”

“What’s an airplane?”

“Okay, now I know you’re taking the micky.”

“I will not have you talk to me that way!” Emma said almost shouting now.

“How can you not know what an airplane is?” Jack asked again. “Are you from like 1880 or something?”

“From 1886, thank you very much.” At this Jack did not know how to reply. She did look a bit odd in that dress but he had assumed she had come from some kind of renaissance fair or a costume party. Then again her garments did look a little bit too worn for a costume store. The best he could think of was to reply in kind:

“You don’t say?”

“I do.”

“So you think the year is 1886 right now?”

“Well, not right now, who knows what year it is in here? But yes, the last year I remember was 1886. July 15<sup>th</sup> to be exact.”

“So you don’t think it is 2010 right now?”

“Don’t be absurd!”

“I’m not, it is 2010,” Jack replied wondering why he felt he had to convince himself that it actually was.

Emma now gave him a closer look. “You do look a bit ridiculous in that outfit. We don’t make men’s garments like that. What’s that long piece of fabric hanging down your chest?”

“That’s a tie,” Jack replied, glancing at his chest to make sure he hadn’t tied it the wrong way again.

“That’s not a tie. A tie is like a small black or white fabric butterfly you have around your neck below your collar,” Emma said pointing at Jack’s neck.

“No, that’s called a bowtie. They were mostly fashionable two centuries back,” Jack stopped there. Emma didn’t respond but turned around instead checking to see if the line had moved forward a bit during their conversation. It hadn’t.

“So what’s an airplane?” she asked, turning back to Jack.

“It’s a machine that carries people through the air. It flies.” Emma turned back towards the front, huffing skeptically.

“Seriously,” said Jack, “they work. We’ve had them for almost 100 years.”

Emma didn’t turn around, speaking instead to the back of the man in front of her: “You’re telling me that there are machines that take bunches of people up into the air and fly them around over the rooftops?”

“Not quite over the rooftops, more like a few thousand feet up in the air. They tell me it’s faster that way.

“Such nonsense.”

“Okay, look, there’s nothing I can say or show you that will convince you, so let’s just take a step back and re-think this thing.”

.....

It sounded crazy to Emma but then again this entire situation was crazy. All being equal Jack’s observation and conclusion made some sense.

“But where would we travel to?” She asked.

“Either heaven or hell, I suppose,” replied Jack. They went quiet.

“All this effort just to send us to either place? You would think they would be more efficient. At the rate they’re going people can’t die anytime soon or there wouldn’t be any room left,” Emma said with a small serious frown. Jack grinned.

“What are you grinning at?” Emma asked.

“Nothing. That was just the first lighthearted thing I’ve heard in this place so far.”

“Do you think there’s a chance we might go to hell?”

“That sounds like a nice diversion right about now,” Jack said. Emma smiled.

“No seriously, what do you think will happen?”

“There’s no way of knowing. Besides, why think about that now? From what I can tell it will be quite some time before we’re in any spot to worry about that.”

Jack poked his head above the line but could only see masses of people stretching out in front and behind. Most of them were staring into space or had their gaze at the floor. It was curious that there wasn’t a lot more conversation going on. The hall was even rather quiet, Jack realized. There goes the comparison to airport security lines, he thought.

Most people had figured out they were dead now and must have made peace with

that fate. It was incomprehensible to Jack that each and every soul would just stand in line with nothing to do but wait. Shouldn't they all be bored enough to revolt?

Revolt against what? Surely there was no way of escaping...and even if you did, where would you go? Surely, even if you made it back out of the entrance, you would still be dead. No other exits or doors could be seen in the large hall, not even restroom signs. Everything was made of faded marble. Large slabs on the floor, pillars of it reaching into the sky, tiles plating old walls and carved portals. Quite dreary, all of it. Why was he the only one who was bored?

"Are you bored?" He asked Emma.

"Bored?" she said turning her head slightly. "Not really, but I think that's because it had not occurred to me to be bored. Should we be?"

"I am," Jack said.

"Better not think about it too much, we have a long way to go still."

Jack stood on his tiptoes again. "What if we could ask those people all the way up front to tell us what they see?"

"Even if you could, why would you want to do that?"

"We could prepare ourselves for what awaits us when we get there."

"But we already know, there's lots of doors and when you're up front they call you and you go in."

"What happens after that?"

"Who knows? If the current experience is any indication, I would say it's even more boring. God, now I'm bored as well."

A small door opened in the far wall and a rotund cherub walked out. He wasn't carrying a bow and arrows but instead looked more like a mailman with a bag and a rather silly blue and yellow uniform.

"Excuse me, pardon me, coming through," the cherub said as he pushed his way politely through the crowd.

"Is he coming our way?" Emma asked.

"Looks like it. I wonder what he wants." Jack said.

The little man made his way straight to Emma. "Good day to you, greetings and

salutations. On behalf of the Oversight Office, I hereby present you this..." he said and started going through his bag. After a few minutes the dwarfish man gave up and started staring at the ceiling.

"I just had it. Had it in my hand," he muttered. For a while he just stood there. "Coat," he mumbled with an expression of relief on his face. He reached inside his pocket and took out a small marble-patterned envelope. He cleared his throat and stood upright.

"On Behalf of the Oversight Office, I hereby give you this," he said, handing the envelope to Emma. The cherub bowed, brightly turned around, and started pushing his way back to the wall all the while yelling: "So sorry! Coming through!"

"Absolutely ridiculous," Emma said, still watching the cherub.

"I rather thought his jacket was becoming," Jack said, trying to see where the little man entered the wall.

The two of them stood there for a while not sure what to do next. Nobody around them had said anything or even reacted to the strange events. Nobody in the line was annoyed or surprised or showed any kind of emotions. Most just stood there shifting their weight from one foot to another, or staring at the ceiling or floor. One looked down at his watch, only to realize there was no longer a watch on his wrist.

"Open it up," Jack said.

"Are you sure I should?" asked Emma.

"That little guy may look a bit ridiculous but he also looked very official. Better open that up." A little nervous Emma turned the envelope to inspect the back and front. It looked a little bit like a party invitation made from thick parchment. Other than a finely engraved front label that said "Office of Oversight," nothing else indicated what the content was about.

"Nice paper," Emma said. "Very fancy."

"Just open it," Jack said.

Emma ran her finger through the top part very carefully as if she expected to have to use the envelope again. Inside she found a single card, slightly larger than a business card. It had a black imprinted band running around the edge and at the bottom, in small print, read: Copyright © 0 - ∞, The Oversight Office, All Rights Forever Reserved.

One side was otherwise completely blank and on the other read:



Notice: In accordance with section 3.2, pertaining to unprocessed souls taking the High Administrator's name in vain, 50 lives will be added to your contract in the credit column.

"Nonsense, I thought so," said Emma. "I don't know what this high administrator's name is, but I certainly didn't use it, much less in vain!"

"Assuming that all this makes sense in some horribly misconstrued way, then the only person whose name you shouldn't take in vain is God," Jack said.

"Even if that's true, I never said anything of the sort," Emma replied looking confused.

"You did say something like: 'God, now I'm bored as well.'"

"But I didn't use a swear word. I mean it's not like I said: 'Jesus, this place sucks,'" Emma said, getting annoyed.

Jack turned around just in time to see the little door open again. At a brisk walk, the cherub again pushed his way through the waiting crowd. This time he had a small envelope in his hand and wasn't carrying a bag. He stopped in front of Emma, put on his best smile, and said: "On Behalf of the Oversight Office, I hereby present you with this," and he handed Emma another card looking identical to the first. At a quick trot, the cherub ducked and slid his way back into the small door in the wall. "That's absurd," Emma said and opened the envelope. On the card in a handwritten message it said:

Notice: In accordance with section 3.2.1, pertaining to unprocessed souls taking the High Administrator's name in vain twice in a row, 100 lives will be added to your contract in the credit column.

"Perhaps you should be a bit more careful," Jack said trying to sound amenable.

"Good Lord, that's just nice, that's just peaches! I haven't even made it into heaven yet."

"If you keep this up you might not," Jack said eyeing the wall.

The little door opened and the cherub ran out with an envelope in between his teeth, trying to get his blue coat on. He tried apologizing for rushing through the crowd, but the card in his mouth prevented him from saying anything that could be remotely understood as polite. Abruptly, the cherub halted in front of Emma.

"Here, read it," he said, turned around, and walked away still trying to get his coat on. Emma stood there holding the little envelope. She fiddled a bit with it, turned it over

and over, and finally shoved it in Jack's hands.

"Here, you read it."

Jack gave Emma a bit of a frown but opened the envelope.

"The good news is that it's predictable, the bad news is that it's bad news," Jack said stroking his chin. Emma grabbed the paper out of Jack's hand. On the note in a hastily written message it said:

Notice: In accordance with section 3.2.2, pertaining to unprocessed souls taking the High Administrator's name in vain thrice, 200 lives will be added to your contract in the credit column. Since this is your third violation you will forfeit the right to negotiate contract renewal within the first 100 years. You will be reminded about your rights during the intake interview.

"You really should be careful from now on," Jack whispered. "Who knows what might happen if you do that again? They may send you straight to hell."

Emma didn't say anything. She just stood there staring at the pieces of paper in her hands. "Where do I put these?" She asked.

"What?" Jack asked.

"The notes and envelopes," Emma said, holding up the paper. "I haven't seen any trashcans so far."

Jack looked around but Emma was right. There wasn't anything around. No benches, no chairs or tables, no nothing. "Did you hear that?" Emma asked.

"What?"

"It's like a chirping but very soft," Emma said looking around. It appeared to come from down below. Jack and Emma stepped to the side and noticed three cockroaches looking up, swaying their antennas as if signaling. Emma jumped and dropped the envelopes and message cards. The cockroaches scurried around pinning the paper on their antennas. "Dirty, dirty!" Emma yelled and squashed one of the roaches.

"Oh no," Jack sighed.

"What?" Emma asked, still flushed.

"I don't think you should have done that." On both sides of the hallway, tall narrow doors opened.

“It was an accident. I just reacted!” Emma shouted.

“Quick, what’s your full name?” Jack asked. Through the doors tall dark shapes appeared. Slowly, tall gaunt men in tattered tuxedos entered the hallway and moved over to where Emma stood.

“My full name? What are you talking about?”

“They are going to take you away and I don’t think I can stop them. But I can try to find you when I get to beyond those doors. Now quick, give me your full name and any other details that would help me find you.”

Emma stood paralyzed. The stiff and silent servants of the Afterlife Office were not in the least in a hurry, but they did make their way steadily and surely towards Emma and Jack.

“Emma Cordova, born July 29<sup>th</sup> 1865 in Yorkshire. My mother died when I was 5 and my dad re-married this horrible, horrible hag who arranged the decorations for mother’s funeral. I’ve never been married but I would love to get a captain or a colonel.” Emma stopped.

“Well, go on, tell me more,” Jack urged on. Emma didn’t say anything. “What’s wrong?”

“I just realized that there’s not more to tell,” Emma said.

“Surely there’s more. What’s your favorite color?” Jack asked, keeping an eye on the approaching officers.

“Yellow,” Emma said relieved.

“Any pets?” Jack asked.

“Like animals?”

“Yes, guinea pigs, rabbits...you know, pets.”

“What are guinea pigs?” Emma asked.

“Okay, never mind, we don’t have time for this,” Jack said and realized he had to adjust his questions by about 100 years. “Did you have a horse?” He asked.

“Oh yes of course, loads,” Emma replied, sounding relieved.

“So? Tell me their names!” Jack said.

“Well, there’s Flossy, but she’s not mine she’s Dad’s, really. And then there’s Spalding, who’s really good at the high jump but also a bit unwieldy so I’m not allowed to ride him...”

“Okay okay, I get it,” Jack said. He realized this wasn’t going to help him much. “Do you have any brothers and sisters? Cousins? Nephews or nieces?”

Emma shook her head. “Just me. If there’s more family then they’re in Spain, but that was ages ago and I don’t know anything about them.”

Time had run out. Two officers stood on either side of Emma each grabbing hold of an arm while a third placed himself in front as if to form an official procession. No cherubs, no messages.

“Make them let me go, Jack!” Emma screamed.

“I don’t think I can do that Emma. I think it’s best if you go with them. I’m going to find you when I get to the other side. Don’t worry, I don’t think they will send you to hell! At least not immediately...”

Holding on tight, the officers or guards – Jack didn’t quite know what they were – guided Emma out of the line, the officer in front clearing a path. Emma struggled. Although the rail thin guards looked like you could break them in half by shouting in their general direction, they were surprisingly strong and it didn’t seem as if Emma’s protests even broke their stride. It took a while for the party to reach one of the walls. Emma kept struggling.

“Don’t resist!” Jack shouted after her. Emma tried to turn but gripped as she was could only face away from the crowd and towards the wall where a large thin door was slowly opening. Jack jumped up and down to see over the crowd, but could only managed to watch the large door close after them.

He looked around. Nobody seemed to have noticed anything. Everyone in the long line was still either staring at the ceiling or continuing to investigate the floor.

Now he was not only bored, he was miserable.



JEAN FERNANDES

# AFTERWORD

And thus concludes our inaugural issue. How better to conclude reading a literary journal than by reading a stranger's thoughts on said literary journal?

All of this started because we wanted a different place for our writing to live – not a folder on our desktop or in a large pile of incoming (or rejected) submissions for a literary journal. While our own journal's inception may have created its own little pile, the Hour After Happy Hour Writing Workshop largely created that different place we sought. However solitary writing can ultimately be, nothing says it has to be, or that it actually benefits from being incubated. I know I personally look at anything I've put through the workshop as a collaborative piece.

I've rarely worked this long and hard on something without becoming frustrated and hopeless at points, but somehow these fruitless dispositions have been atypically absent throughout this little experiment. It's probably the people who surrendered their free time with me. It might be their work I've had the pleasure of reading. It's also quite possibly the beer we hold meetings over.

There are many reasons you are reading this. The Sprout Fund was kind enough to award us with a Seed Award<sup>1</sup> – support (both professional and financial) that allowed us to make the product you have just finished. We certainly owe nearly everything else to The Big Idea Bookstore, and later Lot 17 for providing us a venue to discuss/argue about each other's work. But most importantly, none of this would even approach existence without the amazingly brilliant, invariably sedulous people that make up both the editing team and the workshop itself, all of whom happen to be adroit writers. This is not, of course, to downplay the expertly controlled panache and great lyrical exactitude of all of the other writers we've selected from across the globe. Without them, this would be a much thinner, far less-interesting volume.

Of course, in a way we're also doing this for you, to give you things to think about, experiences to inhabit, and, hopefully, inspirations to be struck with. Simply put, without you, there wouldn't really be a reason to do any of this, even if we could. So thanks.

Until the fall,

Dean Matthews, Co-founder of the Hour After Happy Hour Writing Workshop.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sprout Seed Awards are modest financial awards (\$500–\$10,000) that provide critical financial support for projects and programs in the early stages of development—when just a small amount of investment has the potential to yield big results in the community.*



NEIL KOHL

# THE AUTHORS

## LITERATURE:

LEA BRIDI graduated from West Virginia University in 2011 with a degree in English literature. Now she lives in Pittsburgh, where she raises her two cats and works in an office. Sometimes she writes.

MELISSA BRODER is the author of three collections of poems, including the recently released *SCARE-CRONE* and *MEAT HEART*. Poems appear in *The Iowa Review*, *Fence*, *Guernica*, *The Awl*, *The Missouri Review*, et al. *The Chicago Tribune* says her poetry “risks the divine” and *Flavorwire* calls her work “unbelievable and overwhelming for its imaginative power alone.” [melissabroder.com](http://melissabroder.com) @melissabroder

ANDY CHEN is a native of the pretty part of New Jersey. He is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry from Washington University in St. Louis.

BRADLEY J. FEST received an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in English from the University of Pittsburgh, where he is currently a Visiting Postdoctoral Lecturer. His poems have appeared in *Spork*, *Open Thread*, *BathHouse*, *Flywheel*, and elsewhere. He has published essays in *boundary 2*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Studies in the Novel*, *The Silence of Fallout* (2013), and *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”* (2014). He blogs at *The Hyperarchival Parallax*.

MIKE GOOD is really more of a dog person, despite chronicling his traumatic cat problems in his poems. More of his poetry will be forthcoming in *Bloom Aluminum* magazine. Though he will constitutionally miss everything and everyone in Pittsburgh, he is looking forward attending Hollins University in Ronaoke, VA for an MFA in poetry in Fall 2014.

BETH HALEY hails from NJ where she is the best/worst white female rapper you’ll ever come across. She moved to Pittsburgh to study Audiology which means on most days she has looked into more than one ear. Her middle name is Grace but she’s pretty clumsy in everything except words. With words, she’s solid. Call her an old soul but she definitely loves a good pun.

AMY HAYES is an editorial assistant at a children’s nonfiction publishing company in Buffalo, New York. She is a graduate from the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in English Writing and Film Studies. She dreams of coming home to Pittsburgh and finding the way to Sesame Street. Her apartment has a turret and she loves broccoli.

KARA HELMICK-NELSON is a poetry student. She lives with one man and three cats.

STEVE KLEPETAR’s work has received several nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Recent poetry collections include *Speaking to the Field Mice* (Sweatshoppe Publications), *My Son Writes a Report on the Warsaw Ghetto* (Flutter Press), and *Return of the Bride of Frankenstein* (forthcoming from Kind of a Hurricane Press).

MIKE LAMBERT is a Pittsburgh-stationed refugee from the deep south who still wonders every day if he’s truly made it out scot-free. He earned a B.A. in Writing from the University of Central Arkansas in 2008, but has been writing stories for a long time before and for a long time after all that. Long, flat stretches of road still creep him out, as do the long, flat stretches of novel he’s working on.

JEFF LAMBERT is currently living in Pittsburgh and finishing up his MA degree in Philosophy at Duquesne University. Of particular interest to him is the relationship between poetry and philosophy. Unfortunately, this has led him to believe that he can and should write poetry. One day he might learn his limits, but he continues to blindly believe that such a day will never come.

DEAN MATTHEWS holds degrees in both Biology and Poetry. Upon graduating (the first time), he began a two-year stint performing medical research for UPMC, during which he co-founded The Hour After Happy Hour. After parting ways with science, he entered into a slurry of extremely disparate and sometimes quite odd part-time endeavors that have since allowed him to focus on his writing. As a result of his professional bifurcation, his work has been published in such journals as *Collision Lit-*



erary Magazine and *The Journal of Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology*, which he has never found a solid way of explaining.

JESSICA MCNALLY currently works for a local nonprofit and sometimes writes in her spare time. She lives in the 'burgh's Little Italy with three housemates and too many houseplants.

SEAN PEARS was born in Boston, MA and lives in Washington, D.C. He is currently pursuing a degree at George Mason University, where he is teaching a literature class on dislocation and diaspora. When his parents left South Africa to immigrate to the United States, they could hardly imagine the apartheid regime falling. It did.

MARTIN VAN VELSEN is a scientist, a sculptor, a researcher, a code monkey, and a writer--although not necessarily in that order. His mad science adventures have included: neurosurgery simulations, language technologies, artificial intelligence, robots and virtual humans. Martin lives in Pittsburgh in an old renovated Victorian toy factory and has trouble digging himself out of his ancient book collection every morning. The contact juggling is purely circumstantial.

LOIS WILLIAMS grew up along the Wash coast and traveled widely, teaching English in university and community writing programs in the US. Her poems and essays have appeared in many venues, including *Verse Daily*, *5 A.M.*, *Fourth River*, *Antiphon*, *New England Review*, and *Granta*.

## VISUAL ART:

DIANE DEAN is a registered nurse, licensed professional counselor and professionally-trained coach. She owns and operates Epiphany! Counseling & Wellness Center in Pittsburgh, PA. She has been counseling and coaching clients for all of her adult career, in addition to teaching at several local universities including the University of Pittsburgh and LaRoche University.

JEAN FERNANDES is an international artist from India, currently living and working in Arlington, Texas. She was first introduced to the glass arts while earning her Bachelor of Arts in Design at San Jose State University in California. Her work has won multiple awards; most notably the DuBois Grant, the Nunez Grant, Pittsburgh Glass Center and Bullseye Glass Conference scholarships. Jean is currently pursuing her MFA in glass at the University of Texas in Arlington.

NEIL KOHL is a photographer based in Philadelphia. He has been taking pictures since the 70s when his grandmother gave him an old Kodak Duaflex camera. Recent work documents his father's life in an assisted living facility, and the dramatic changes in his neighborhood as it has undergone gentrification followed by a construction boom. More information at [www.kohlweb.com](http://www.kohlweb.com).

SILA ÖZKARA is a Ph.D. student in Philosophy at Duquesne University. She is from Turkey. She has been cultivating her interest in photography since her early teenage years and since then has had the opportunity to work professionally as a photographer. She works with a variety of cameras including DSLRs and older and newer film cameras. She experiments with destroying film, using expired film, etc. Her photos have been published in various journals in Toronto, and have been used by the Public Affairs Office of Duquesne University as well as by some community organizations in and around Pittsburgh.

MAX SEGAL travels a lot. Sometimes Max Segal travels to terrible places. Sometimes these terrible places include every "major city in Ohio." Don't misunderstand, some places in Ohio are cool but some are Toledo. Regardless, he brings his camera wherever he goes to capture everyday abnormalities. Max's photography finds new ways to reveal daily occurrences, and when you view his photos he hopes you realize what special quality attracted his eye to them. Max thanks the Hour After Happy Hour for featuring these photos.

STEPHEN TUOMALA is a visual artist living/working in Pittsburgh. He has shown extensively in Pittsburgh and in group shows in New York, Philadelphia and Wilmington, DE. Tuomala's art is currently focused on distressed figures and landscapes inspired by media images of executions, historic tragedies, medical imaging, crime scenes, and war. The emphasis of his work is on the bodies' gestures and the stories they tell to establish a greater connection between death imagery and life.

