

AFTER HAPPY HOUR

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AFTER
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ISSUE 20

ISSUE 20 EDITORS AND READERS

ELIZABETH ABELING
NATHAN KUKULSKI
SHAWN MADDEY
DANIEL PARME
JASON PECK
JESS SIMMS
BRENDAN SULLIVAN

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COVER ART BY JOSHUA RICH
LAYOUT AND DESIGN BY JESS SIMMS

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FOREWORD

So, the last few years (and yes, beyond) have been more than a little rough. Change has been constant, and very little of that change has been positive.

But we soldier on, right? We wake up every morning and go to work, or look for work. We brush our teeth maybe a bit more attentively, getting every last nook and cranny, because do you even know how long it takes to get an appointment with the dentist right now, even with a decent dental plan? We take careful steps around puddles because leaping over them we might sprain an ankle, and we can't afford to miss even one day of work because of such a silly decision.

Hoping for a better future for ourselves, our children, our neighbors, we cast votes to put our chosen politicians into office, and we celebrate our victories only to see them snatched from our grasp, our rights threatened, violated, stripped away.

And still, we soldier on.

Here at AHH, we soldier by providing space for other soldiers to make their voices heard, and although our space is small, we are proud to be able to add it to all the other spaces for all the other voices.

That being said, the constant soldiering can get fucking arduous, man. And although one could possibly argue that it can be invigorating, or even at times exciting, it is very rarely any fun.

We received a number of fun submissions for this issue, though, so that's what we're doing: bringing a little more of the fun. We are still writers, of course, creatives, and so our definition of "fun" is perhaps a little different than that of the normies out there. But we're doing what we can. Just like you are. Just like everyone is.

We hope you have as much fun reading this issue as we did putting it together.

Godspeed, dear reader. And much love.

Daniel Parme
Fiction Editor

Mysterious Corsican Cat-Fox Confirmed as a Unique Species

BY JOHN WOJTOWICZ

This afternoon the village idiot tips
his tin-foil hat to every patron
who walks into the pub
and the town drunk orders them a shot
he's not going to pay for.
They were right all along.

Their spirited moonlit reports
of striped front legs, solid back legs,
and black-tipped ring tails
slipping out of chicken coops
and into the undergrowth
had not been a series of hallucinations.

Suddenly, the antlers of the jackalope
looked slightly less taxidermized,
the chupacabra's hairless body and spines
seemed somewhat more sinister,
and the bubbles in Lake Loch Ness
were reportedly a little more suspicious.

Upon hearing the news, a middle-aged
sasquatch rushed a letter
by passenger pigeon to his favorite
yeti cousin, noting their existence
had moved a cat-fox hair
from the impossible towards the improbable.



KIRSTY GREENWOOD

Nevada Pastoral

BY ERIN STOODLEY

Driving through a town fogged
in dust, littered with rocks and possums, frozen

in respite, a town you didn't
know existed, you listen to radio static

melt across county lines. Thick rows of cacti
flit past and disappear.

Staked over soil, a tarp ripples, shimmers
so brightly in the sun you mistake it

for water, Californian that you are.
By now night is hours behind you,

and so is Henderson—its wealth
of slot machines in grocery stores,

the velour sweatpants and gated stucco homes.
One stands shuttered in the distance,

the two-story house your mother bought
on a whim and abandoned

in foreclosure.
Ahead, no home awaits you.

No electric green turf
sprawled across a stone yard, no lizard

tails flickering between rocks.
Forget the hazy night, its stars dissolved

in light pollution, the billboard women,
bikini-clad, blinking at your bedroom

window, the backyard bone-bleached pool,
complete with a metal diving board,

where your mother's date,
a small-club comedian, sat

last summer and dropped his shorts,
expecting something more.

The Garden

BY MORGAN MUSSELMAN

There is something dead in her garden again. A week of intermittent downpours has invited the dead thing's rot to settle into the dense, humid air. The woman can smell it each time she slides open her back door. She's avoided going outside to her just-burgeoning garden entirely because of it, resolving instead to keep diligent watch from the little window above her kitchen sink. This decision has cost her.

A nearly ripe heirloom tomato, plump and shining on the vine, telltale red just beginning to stripe its surface. The woman had been monitoring its growth for weeks. It was the first blossom of the lot to appear, leagues ahead of its companions. Even now the others are still green and growing, stunted in their youth. As if this particular tomato was so eager to grow that it had convinced the plant, roots to vine, to grant it all the life force it could muster.

She knows how such determination to grow can pull at a mother, can override any coaxing toward patience. Her daughter, her youngest, has always been eager to grow up as fast as possible, to keep up with her older brothers at all costs. She worries sometimes that her daughter is so desperate to be seen as their equal that she's pushing away her own childhood, trying to shed the skin before it's dead and dry. That one day, when she's grown enough to realize her mistakes, she'll look down in regret at the parts of herself she ripped off too soon. But even as her mother, there is not much the woman can do to protect her.

Oh, but the tomato. She had left it outside to ripen on the vine a little bit longer, until the smell of decay left the air. Just a couple of days so she wouldn't have to choke down the foul air as she plucked it, wouldn't be

plagued by memories of matted hair, coagulated blood, writhing maggots as she sliced it open on her kitchen counter. She had assumed she could maintain the vigilance with which she protected her garden from her perch at the sink, only steps away from the back door. A mistake.

This morning as she was washing up the dishes from breakfast, she glanced out the window and found a sparrow perched on her tomato plant, pecking away with all the gall in the world at her one nearly ripe tomato.

The dishes clattered in the sink as she rushed outside, shoving open the back door and racing toward the garden bed, hollering and waving her arms. The bird darted off in a mess of wings and tomato juice. In the solemn aftermath, she gently pried the remnants of the tomato off the vine.

"Ugh, Mom," came a voice from behind. Her eldest, standing at the threshold of the back door, fingers pinched over his nose. "What's that smell?"

That damned rotting thing.

"Go get ready for camp." In her hands, she cradled the tomato's excavated body, still warm from the morning sun, as she followed him inside.

As the morning weathered on, despair coiled into anger despite the woman's best efforts to shake it off. She bristled while packing her children's lunches, getting her daughter dressed, dropping her children off at their respective day camps. She was so preoccupied by growing resentment—against the bird, against herself, against the dead thing plaguing her garden—that she didn't even say thank you to the cashier at the Starbucks drive-thru.

She stands now before the back door, guzzling down the last of her iced latte. The cold is a balm; her anger has hardened into a flinty resolve that settles into the fine lines of the woman's face. The hulled tomato rests on the kitchen counter in a small puddle of pink juice. She will not let this happen again. She will do now what she should have done days ago.

The ice rattles in the plastic coffee cup as she tosses it into the garbage. After wiping the condensation from her hands, she opens the cabinet under the kitchen sink and pulls out a spare pair of yellow dish gloves and

a black trash bag. She then heads to the garage to snatch the claw-like trash grabber that she stored away after a distant neighborhood spring cleaning day. She puts her shoes on, then her sunglasses, a sun hat (a Mother's Day gift), and finally the gloves. Fully equipped, she begins her hunt.

This had happened once before, in early spring. A dead thing in the garden. She begins, in a way, where she ended things then, combing through the hydrangeas that border the back of her house. She sniffs with purpose, trying to catch where the smell is strongest as she pushes branches and blossoms aside to peer at the ground beneath. Déjà vu dizzies her.

Last time, she had been planting green beans when she caught a faint odor of something wrong, sharp and organic. Like a bloodhound, she followed its trail to the shaded hydrangeas. When she parted the branches, she had found the remains of a vole. No doubt it had been tossed there by one of the neighborhood strays after losing interest in the poor thing once its hunt had reached the fatal end. She'd had to hack away at the new green branches to reach it—pulling her shirt over her mouth and nose to fend off the smell—and double-bagged the carcass before throwing it out. The hydrangea bush still looks malformed months later.

The woman can still feel the weight of the bagged vole in her hand and smell its wetness. Can see the maggots crawling in it, their white wriggling bodies avoiding the small patches of sunlight where its skin had leathered. She tries to stop herself from shuddering as she pries branches apart. It's her squeamishness, her aversion to the muck in those memories, that has landed her in this situation in the first place.

But today the ground all along the side of her house is empty of dead things. Still, the smell of decay permeates the air. Reluctantly, the woman fills her nostrils and lungs with the smell over and over, trying to sniff out the source. She looks around her garden beds and beneath the crabapple tree, but the ground contains only green, growing things. She tosses around a set of empty pots resting outside the small shed near the garden's perimeter, then opens the shed doors and peers inside, sucks in a tentative whiff. Not here.

She turns to look past the wide acre of her overgrown lawn—now that

the rain is over, her husband will need to mow it—toward the dense wooded area at the far end of her property. To pervade the garden with its stench from so far away...she can't begin to imagine the size of this thing. Unease tightens her chest, nearly convincing her to go back inside the house, but she shakes it off. She's being ridiculous. If she relinquishes control over her property so easily, just because she can't bear the smell, she may as well scatter bird food on every garden bed and call it a day. She has cultivated this green space; it is hers.

The woman heads back to her garage and grabs the wheelbarrow, tossing the trash grabber inside with a clang. She adds a shovel for good measure, then runs inside the house to grab three more trash bags and ties them around the wheelbarrow handle. She sets off in the direction of the trees.

When she and her husband were looking for houses—those quiet years before the kids—it was this patch of woods that had sold them. Well, that had sold her husband, at least. He could imagine, he told her, their future children racing each other from the back door to the trees where they would spend all day play-acting soldiers, as he had with his brothers. Her husband's childhood stories would have her believe he grew up half-wild, barefoot and covered in mud. His eyes shine when he tells these stories, and so they put in the offer.

But their children have only gone past the border of their lawn a handful of times. Enough to lose a few toys among the weeds and branches and then, soon after, their interest. They are far more keen on racing each other on bikes around the cul-de-sac than they are weaving and dodging imaginary blows between trees. Secretly, the woman is happy about this; it's much easier to keep her eye on them.

She crosses her yard and shuffles down the slight slope to the border of trees. She has to pause from time to time to readjust the sunhat, which is too large for her head, and the gloves, which have begun to slip from the sweat collecting within. The weight of the wheelbarrow tugs her forward and she must dig her heels into the soft earth to maintain her balance.

At the mouth of the woods, the woman flares her nostrils. Her instincts were right; the dead thing is certainly inside. The cool air that has collected

between trees is muddled with wet and rot. She fails to hold back a gag.

Briefly, she considers going back to grab a dish towel to wrap around her nose and mouth. If she turns back now, will she be able to return and finish the job? She thinks again of the tomato, her garden, the still-green tomatoes, everything else. She hardens her resolve.

She follows the stench inside, deeper and deeper into the woods. Here, the earth is still damp. Raindrops still rest on leaves and felled trees, yet unbothered by the heat of the day. As she pushes her way through, the woman must stop regularly to clear branches from the path. She has to maneuver the wheelbarrow over rocks and stumps. The metal basin clangs like a bell, disturbing the quiet. She marks the trees with the shovel, knocking shallow divots into the bark every so often to ensure she can find her way back. Fallen leaves and blades of grass paste to her shoes and calves like pieces of papier-mâché. Despite the coolness of the woods, sweat dampens her fabric under her armpits and along the small of her back. She feels the bite of mosquitos feasting on her uncovered skin.

Finally, when the stench surrounds her so entirely that she cannot determine where next to go, the woman stops. Sticky, deep, rich and wrong, she's been sucking it down for so long that she can taste the sweetness at its root, like Easter lilies gone to rot. Memories flash: maggots, the heft of decomposing limbs, the sounds of flesh and bone and guts sliding down the sides of the plastic bag. Bile rises to her throat.

She sets the wheelbarrow down with a thud and wrings the stiffness out of her hands, then begins walking slowly in a circle, head tilted and turned down, letting her eyes scan the earth. Rocks, twigs, weeds, moss, feathers small and large, mushrooms, and still, the smell pervades. She widens the circle and quickens the pace of her feet, her eyes. Her heartbeat follows suit.

Her foot catches on a raised root. She falls forward, hands landing flat and hard against the ground. The jolt reverberates deep in her wrists. After the initial shock has passed, she takes stock of her joints, checking for twists and pulls, then pushes herself up.

Something pricks her palm. Sitting up on her knees, she raises her hand

to find the shaft of a feather has impaled itself through her left glove. It is long—the very tip of it reaches beyond her elbow as it dangles. Bewildered, she plucks it and takes a closer look.

Though it has been resting on the muddy ground, the feather gleams as she twirls it, as if each individual barb has been dipped in gold. It's at once enthralling and unnerving. The woman can't picture any bird with plumage like this. The fine, pearly down at the shaft blends gradually into a tawny gold vane. The pointed tip displays a pattern the size of her palm that she can only describe as a double-pupiled eye, like a mutated peacock feather: A pale circle at the center flecked with two oily black dots. The more she looks at it, the heavier dread settles in her stomach. She angles the feather away so that it does not look directly at her.

Leaves rustle as a light breeze writhes through the trees. The hairs on her arms and the back of her neck rise. An identical feather is caught in the bark of a tree root near her knee. An image of a neighborhood stray pops into her mind, the cat's back arched and its hackles raised as it backs away. She dismisses the thought; she won't let her discomfort get the best of her.

As she moves to pick up the second feather, a wave of decay hits her, so caustic it stings her nostrils. Pulling her shirt collar up over her nose to block the smell, the woman rises and rounds the tree, careful to avoid tripping on any more roots. On the side opposite from where she just fell, she finds a large mass of feathers identical to the one in her hand. There are so many that she can barely make out what she's looking at.

No, no. She can barely make it out because her mind has no frame of reference for the creature before her. She forces herself to move closer. Every foot forward immerses her further into the polluted air emanating from it.

Pain slices behind her eyes as she looks closer to try to distinguish where the feathers come from. They seem to form six wings, each enormous, which emerge from behind the creature and fold in on each other over the torso like a splayed hand of cards.

Even in its hunched state, slumped against the tree, she can tell the dead thing is much larger than her. At least nine feet head to foot. Surely there

must be feet, though the entire bottom half of the creature is obscured by the feathers. And, *oh*, the head, nestled at the top, slung back against the bark and—

The woman stiffens with the sensation of being seen. What she first thought to be mottled patches of skin covering its head and chest are... eyes. Hundreds of eyes. The pattern on the feathers suddenly makes sense. Those that haven't been pecked away by birds or maggots protrude from the skin, wide open and bulbous. The eyes glisten with golden irises; the pupils are doubled and dark. The woman's legs give out. Orphaned branches crack beneath her as the weight of her body drops to the ground.

She strips off the dish gloves, her sunhat, and tosses them beside her. She covers her face with her hands, clammy with fear and trapped sweat, and breathes deeply. She needs calmness, sense. To open her eyes and see anything but this in her backyard.

When she removes her hands from her face and looks back at the tree, the dead thing still rests there, slumped and still and ever-seeing. Pain cracks through her skull again and the woman averts her eyes.

Sunlight leaks between the tree branches, dappling the creature's form and the ground around it. Resting on the ground beside it she sees a blue foam football. The logo is so worn that it's nearly illegible, but she recognizes it all the same. How did it get here, so deep in this suburban wood? She pictures this feathered thing in her lawn, yards away from her back door, plucking her children's ball out of the overgrown grass. She remembers what she is here to do.

She forces herself to stand, snatching her cell phone from her back pocket without a second thought. But she doesn't know what numbers to punch in. She pictures her yard crawling with uniformed men, news anchors, churchgoers hellbent on finding a sign, anyone else with a taste for the absurd. She thinks of her children, her husband, this life she has created. She slides her phone back into her pocket. She will take care of this herself, as she had planned.

She'll need to use an ax and saw to take the creature apart. They don't own either. She can feel the weight of the tools in her hands, the sensation

of chopping strange limb from strange limb, of prying stiff wing from rotting backside. Does she even have the strength needed to hack away at it? And if she hurts herself, how will she explain?

The woman stands there, before the dead thing in the little wooded area beyond her backyard, and she wavers. She can feel her heartbeat in her throat like a choke. Her nostrils are raw from the stench. It is almost time to pick up her daughter. She will need to take a shower first. To use mouthwash to burn the taste out of her mouth. It has coated her tongue.

She scans the ground around her and begins collecting branches and twigs until her arms are full. Then, one by one, she places them over the creature's body, layering them with leaves and soil until the dead thing is completely covered. On the tree bark above its bowed head, now disappeared beneath branches and leaves, she uses the shovel to make one last notch.

She steps back to admire her work. She's done well; no one would suspect what lay here. And with the smell, no one would be inclined to dig around. Someday soon, she will steal some time for herself and return to bury the bones. But for now, she is leaving. As the land dries up in the coming days, so will the dead thing. The smell will disappear from her garden, and this will all be done.

She grabs her gloves and sunhat from the forest floor, walks back to the wheelbarrow, and hauls it all back home. By the time she makes it back to her garage, the woman has nearly convinced herself that all she saw today was a strange bird, nothing more. In the kitchen, she sees the tomato resting on the counter and it feels like a snap back to reality. She tosses it in the trash and makes a mental shopping list.

At the hardware store, she grabs gossamer bags to place around the tomatoes and chicken wire to place around everything else. She grabs a small camera set-up, akin to a baby monitor, to prop at the kitchen window, something to help her keep watch when she is away; it advertises that it beeps when there is movement. The woman also grabs a saw and a small ax; she may as well fill the gaps in their home toolkit while she's here.

The clerk's eyes are glued to the TV beside the register. It's tilted enough

that the woman can see a news broadcast playing. She doesn't know how other people can stand it—the constant barrage of catastrophes, one after the other. She doesn't trust these talking heads, can't stomach their fearmongering and refuses to watch them. You'd think the world was ending, the way they go on. She clears her throat to grab the girl's attention. The clerk is slow to detach herself from the screen and look at the woman; when she does, her eyes widen.

“Ma'am, I think you've hurt yourself.” The clerk hands her a fist full of tissues and motions toward her eye, then quickly scans the items. The woman raises the tissues to her face. They come away dotted with blood.

In her car, she pulls down the mirror. Tracks of blood—some fresh, some already dried and crusted—descend from her eyes, trailing down her cheeks. Most of it must be from earlier in the day; she'd been so harried she hadn't even looked at herself in the mirror after rinsing off in the shower. She grabs a pack of wet wipes from the center console and scrubs until the only redness left on her face is that from her flushed cheeks. She tucks the pinked wipes into her pocket.

For the rest of the day, as she picks up her daughter, secures the garden, prepares dinner, tucks the children in bed, tries to relax in front of the TV with her husband, the woman finds herself regularly dabbing at her eyes and checking her reflection. There is never any more blood. Perhaps it was merely tomato juice, earlier, that she managed to smear on her cheeks.

Any attempt to delude herself is proven futile that night. She dreams of the creature. Beneath the moonlight, she watches it decompose. The many eyes deflate into their sockets, the skin around them moves as if bubbling before it, too, deflates. The creature folds in on itself as if made of mere paper, until it is just a wet feather-covered mound. The woman sees its rot seeping and spreading, miasmatic, through the earth toward her home, the mephitic polluting the raised garden beds, the potted plants, seeping through the open windows. She sleeps in a fit, wakes up in a start.

When she falls back asleep, she dreams of wings and eyes, eyes, eyes. Of heavenly bodies tumbling, falling to the earth, then crawling toward her.

When she wakes a second time, her heart pounding and bile creeping up her throat, she slips out of bed. On tiptoes, so as to not wake the children, she heads downstairs. She slips on a coat to stave off the early morning chill and tucks her pajama pants into tall rain boots before sneaking into the garage.

Knowing she won't be able to lug the wheelbarrow out without waking her family, she stuffs the trash bags still tied around its handles into her pockets instead. In one hand, she takes the new ax. In the other, the saw.

The smell saturates the air more extensively now, and she is unable to follow it in the same way, but the notches she carved into tree trunks earlier prove reliable path markers. Even in the foggy predawn world, she is confident in her course. The purpose of her movements, the laser focus of her mind, have cast off any residual reluctance. There will be no second-guessing this time. She will leave nothing up to mother nature.

She reaches the creature's tree. She puts down the tools and takes out her cellphone, turning the flashlight on to be sure of what she's seeing. What she's missing. All that remains of the creature are feathers, scattered about the tree roots. Its body, gone. As the woman walks closer, the ground squelches beneath her feet. The place where the creature once lay is now spongy and soft, the soil a putrid green.

Standing in the creature's muck, she looks back toward her garden, her home. Where the sleeping bodies of her family peacefully rest.

Inclination

BY ZEKE SHOMLER

I hate oligarchy and I love
the little green bugs in the grass.

The verdant mealy smell of a tomato vine.
I want to live a small life, with opened hands—

to slip into beetled fissures
until I dissipate there under

rows of stone. Here is an epiphany:
here, between the minerals of silt.

Here is the entire world.

Last Plea of an Earthworm on the Sidewalk

BY MIMIC CLAYTON

WILL YOU PLEASE PEEL ME OFF THE CONCRETE
I DO NOT WANT TO BURN
I DO NOT WANT TO DIE
A DEATH OF MY OWN MAKING
IT MAY SEEM IRONIC
THAT MY RESPITE BECAME MY TOMB
BUT REALLY IT JUST BURNS
THERE'S NO HUMOR IN IT AT ALL
I DIDN'T MEAN TO BEACH MYSELF
WHEN THE FLOOD COMES
YOU DON'T WORRY ABOUT LIGHTNING STRIKES
I CANNOT HELP THAT I WAS BORN
AN UGLY THING



Exposed

BY SEAN MCFADDEN

The first apartment Nolan looked at in Chicago was a grimy studio in the bohemian-sounding “Artist in Residence” building, which offered rehearsal space, a darkroom, and computer and printer access. Also, a Korean liquor store was on the corner with dusty magnum bottles of sake on sale for next to nothing in a crack-fueled neighborhood the police called the “Winthrop Corridor,” but Nolan wasn’t aware of that. The “Artist in Residence” building sounded perfect. He was a cook, but he wanted to date an artist and he needed a residence.

Mack, the aging hippie showing the vacant eighth-floor studio, pointed out the heavily obstructed view of Lake Michigan, a fifty-foot sliver of blue water between the high rises on Sheridan equating to an inch on the window. Nolan was transfixed, and rather stoned.

“A water view? I’ll take it.”

“The young man knows what he wants,” Mack said. “Let’s go sign on the dotted line.”

Mack’s office had the look and smell of a used bookstore—a maze of newspaper piles, books stacked on the floor, canvases propped against the walls, and at least three cats. Amidst more legitimate artwork hung a familiar old poster titled “Expose Yourself to Art,” which featured a man in a trench coat flashing the sculpture of a nude woman on a city street. Nolan bought that very poster at a Spencer’s Gifts in his teens, and still cherished it.

“No way,” Nolan said, pointing. He’d meant to say more.

“Oh, that? Yeah. Bud’s a nut.”

Nolan nodded. “Hmm?”

“Bud Clark, mayor of Portland. We ran together in our wasted youth. When he opened a tavern, well, I love taverns. Next thing I knew, my bartender was citizen mayor.”

“And he took the photo that’s been on my wall for ten years?”

“You have one? No, that’s him flashing! Mike Ryerson’s your shutterbug. Whole thing was Mikey’s idea. Supposed to be a poster for V.D. awareness but ended up a little more popular.”

Nolan stared at Mack in awe. He felt like he just bumped into Elvis Costello at the laundromat while wearing the same obscure t-shirt.

“Where do I sign?” he asked.

“You already did, son. Before you started wandering around. In your right hand, you’ll see you’re holding your copy of the lease. You’ve been folding it into a tiny square for reasons that escape me. Storage, perhaps. I’ve got your check, which I assure you I will be depositing forthwith.”

“Oh.”

“No harm,” Mack said, indicating the door. “You are free to go.”

“...Well, that’s my cue to go.”

Mack picked up a cat. “They find *me*, Blimpers. Don’t give me that look.”

By the time Nolan finished hauling the last of his alley furniture into the new studio, he was past ready to christen the joint. He grabbed a twelve pack at the corner, apologized for not having 87 cents to a human exclamation point outside his building, and rolled a fat one. He poked his head out his window, smoking and taking in his thin slice of Lake Michigan, admiring a pigeon flock flashing turns against the skyline, and following a tiny jumping spider along the ledge. With less potent weed he might have even noticed that, down in the alley eight floors below, a tow truck was pulling away with his empty U-Haul.

That first week, celebrating a new job in a new kitchen, Nolan downed most of a magnum bottle of Gekkeikan and woke with a pasty tongue. His fingers crawled through the dark to his bedside Ball jar of Pepsi. He took a swig and there it was, in his mouth, legs scurrying. Scrabbling against his tongue and teeth. He spat out Pepsi and water bug, the cockroach king,

and screamed, jumping to his feet, hopping from one foot to the other, dropping the Pepsi, hands dancing in palsy. He turned on the light, and the black creature squeezed between carpet and floorboard. Nolan filled his mouth with toothpaste and brushed until his arm got tired. Six beers later, as dawn lit up a pink and grey inch of Lake Michigan, he finally slipped back to sleep.

He blamed the sake, which went down like spring water and softened the loneliness of living in a new city with only Mondays and Tuesdays free. But sake had a way of summoning the weird. Another night, another magnum, Nolan woke and staggered to the bathroom in the dark. He fumbled with the door on his right instead of his left and heard the latch click behind him. It was bright. He squinted at his feet. And his penis. The carpet was red and black—not gray, like the interior of his apartment. He spun and tried the door, but he already knew. He was locked out in the hallway, naked, and *really* had to urinate.

The urge had pulled him from a dead sleep and reached critical in no time. He snuck around the corner to the fire escape. A sign warned that if the door was opened, an alarm would sound. That wouldn't help any, Nolan decided, so he waited a moment then pissed on the door. The relief was overwhelming but brief. Still locked out. Still naked. No glasses. No anything. And now if he got caught, he'd be that guy who peed in the hall.

Of his two hundred neighbors, he knew exactly two. Pat worked for building maintenance and Bonbonfera was a jazz drummer. He tried Pat's door, lightly rapping at first, but ultimately pounding to no avail. The drummer had picked up his nickname while learning to make calf skin drums under a West African master's touch. Bonbonfera meant "He who is everywhere," but overreached slightly because he didn't answer his door, either.

Nolan walked back to his studio and tried the knob again. Still locked. Minutes crept by, and he pressed his back against the door and slid down, flinching when his ass touched the floor. He hugged his knees while waiting for the worst to happen—a stranger coming home. If he got arrested for indecent exposure, he might even end up a registered sex offender. What

was jail like? What was jail like naked? What was Mack going to say? When this was over, he resolved to always sleep in underwear. And meet more neighbors.

Someone with keys could be downstairs. The office was locked after five, but worth a shot. He tiptoed down the hallway to the elevator, hands over his junk. An old-school lift with a hinged door and security gate, it had never seemed so bright inside. Fluorescents really brought out his pale goosebumps. The floors ticked down through the gate. Realizing he had no plan should the elevator stop early, he backed against the wall.

He reached the lobby. Now two large glass doors were all that separated him from the lads slinging crack on Winthrop. He ran across the annoyingly well-lit lobby, both hands cupped, but the office door was locked. Rehearsal studio also locked. He still hadn't figured out where the darkroom was. It had to be thirty degrees colder downstairs. Voices out on Winthrop sent him sprinting back across the lobby, into the elevator and up to the sleepy eighth floor.

Because it was there, he tried his doorknob again. He missed being inside with a futon, a blanket, and a radiator. Out in the hall, and even more so downstairs, it was November in Chicago. He slid back down to the floor, wrapping his arms around his knees, and reconsidered his risk of exposure. Forget getting arrested. This had the makings of a meet-cute story for the grandkids:

"Well, your grandpa had gotten shitfaced, locked himself out, and peed in the hallway. I was getting back from, call it 'midnight yoga' and there he was, sitting outside his door, naked as a jaybird and squinting up at me, the old Casanova."

How he'd ever meet anyone working in a kitchen was beyond him. Maybe doing laundry. His heart leapt. He'd forgotten to check the laundry room around the corner from the lobby, and there were always piles of clothes in there. He ran down the hall to the elevator. This time the lift came to a jerking stop at the fifth floor and the outside door opened. Nolan's face got hot, and he backed into the corner, bug-eyed.

A black-gloved hand slid open the security gate and in strode a six-and-

a-half-foot man in a long brown overcoat, an even longer red scarf, topped off with a black beret. French Dr. Who made no eye contact. He walked in and pressed the already lit “L.”

“Seems early for a scarf,” Nolan tried. “Still, though. I’d wear one at this point.”

No response. Upon reaching the lobby, Dr. Who bolted out to Winthrop like someone unaccustomed to riding an elevator with a naked man.

Nolan tiptoed around the corner into the laundry room. No pile of free clothes. The tile floor was frigid, and he switched from foot to foot. The washing machines were empty. The dryers turned up a singular item—a tiny lavender sweatshirt reading “I Love You Beary Much” under a puffy teddy bear.

He wrapped the sweatshirt arms around his waist, and immediately thought better, bunching it over his groin instead. He felt more comfortable walking back to the elevator, until he heard the outer lobby security doors open. He ran the rest of the way and pushed and pushed the button, forgetting the elevator was already there. At least two of them, out of the corner of his eye. In black. Walking in. Nolan realized his mistake and flung open the porthole door, then caught his finger sliding open the gate. They were right behind him, squeezing in, taking up position in the rear corners. Black trench coats. Combat boots. Pale. Black and blue hair. Piercings. Nolan fumed. Goths? Seriously?

Two aloof statues in black eyeliner, with nothing but disdain.

“You should see the other guy,” Nolan tried.

Zilch. He fidgeted, hoping his teddy bear wasn’t visible. At the third floor, Goth security hopped out and erupted in giggles. Damn posers weren’t depressed in the least.

Up on the eighth, he tried his door. He lay down and bunched up his new sweatshirt as a pillow, but that didn’t solve the cold. He draped it over his knees, then on his chest, then tried tucking his feet inside while curled up facing the door, and he passed out.

He woke up shivering on the tacky carpet, no idea how long he’d been out. He rolled over and wormed his feet through the arms of the pullover

and tugged it up as far as his calves. Eventually, he passed out again and woke to a brighter, warmer hallway. The sun was up and shining through the security windows of the fire escape door. Nolan assumed he would catch the first person into the office in the morning, but that plan seemed optimistic now.

The hangover throbbed behind his eyeballs as he tore the sweatshirt cuffs open so they’d slide further up his legs. His arm and shoulder were covered in greasy black smudges. So was his ribcage. He looked diseased. The oddly patterned red and black carpet might have started out as a red carpet back in 1927.

Hiking the torn sleeves past his knees, the waistline just up over his crotch, he silly-walked back to the elevator to face the music. No one joined him on the ride, but down in the lobby he opened the door to a half-dozen workmen standing in a circle outside Mack’s office, drinking coffee, eating doughnuts and cracking wise. Nolan froze.

“Oh,” he said.

A few of the men looked over at him, and they froze, too. One started coughing up doughnut and pointed at Nolan. They all turned to look and appeared genuinely horrified. Finally, one man spoke.

“Ain’t *that* some ‘Night of the Living Dead’ shit.”

They roared.

“Brains,” Nolan groaned with a sickly grin. He shielded his face from the glare of the sun with one hand, while the other held up Beary Much’s waistband.

“Hey, where do you buy your pajamas, amigo? My wife’s birthday is coming up.”

“Are those designer?”

“Lock yourself out, buddy?” Pat from maintenance sounded extra chipper. Nolan closed his eyes and nodded.

“Hang on. I’ll grab a master.” Pat unlocked the office and went inside.

“Alright,” Nolan said. “Bring it on.”

“I was going to wear that *exact* same outfit today. God, I would have been embarrassed.”

“Looks like he ate a little kid and shit him out.”

“Ho!”

“Jesus, Gary.”

“And you wonder why you’re single.”

Pat came back with the keys. “I don’t want to break up the party.”

“Gary broke it.”

“Right, *I’m* the weird one.”

“Hey, let me get your number before you run off.”

Nolan smiled and flipped the bird. He followed Pat into the elevator and someone whistled.

Pat was first to speak. “So...shall I ask?”

“Fairly standard,” Nolan replied. He didn’t want to talk details, especially the reason he woke up.

“What I’m looking at, not so standard. But at least you gave the boys something to talk about today.”

“They’re still talking about it tomorrow. Bet.”

“I don’t know how you kids do it. I don’t have the stamina anymore.”

“Weren’t you out all night? I don’t start work until four anyway.”

Pat frowned. “Oh, you tried my door? Yeah, I was at a lady friend’s. But most of the night I was sleeping. Might want to try that sometime.”

“Sometime soon,” Nolan promised as Pat opened the elevator gate.

“Listen, I wouldn’t bother saying, but you’re a good guy, I don’t want to see anything bad happen. You might want to think about slowing down now and then.”

“Got nothing but shut eye on the brain, Pat, but thanks. You’re a good guy, too. You don’t have to tell Mack about this, do you?”

“I have to tell everyone about this. The rest of my life.”

A door opened down the hall and out stepped a neighbor he’d only seen once before. Spiky pink and chestnut hair buzzed up one side of a dangerously cute pixie face, she did a double take and swallowed a laugh.

“Sorry, Mona,” Pat said.

Nolan deadpanned to her, “You already have plans, I’m sure.”

Her eyes flashed, and she pursed her lips trying to hide a smile. He

thought he saw her shake her head. He certainly had her attention. He prayed Pat wouldn’t mention any smell as they walked down to Nolan’s door.

“I really appreciate this, Pat. Please thank your parents again for a lovely evening. Good night.”

He swore he heard her laugh.

“It’s morning,” Pat said.

“I’m in no position to fight you on this, so agree to disagree. Now, stop looking at my ass.”

Definitely laughing, as the door latched shut behind him. He beelined for the bathroom, chewed a handful of aspirin and peeled the sweatshirt arms off his legs. The greasy smears weren’t enough to send him into the shower quite yet. A few steps over to the kitchenette and he let the water run cold while two German roaches ran out of the sink, then he stuck his mouth under the faucet. He put on some underwear, reheated the leftover jar of sake in the microwave, wrapped a blanket around himself and sank into the faded pink chair. The aspirin wasn’t fast enough—he packed a bowl on the corner of the card table and took a few hits for his head. The yellow morning light sparkled out on his little patch of Lake Michigan between the high-rises, and he wondered what Mona’s deal was and whether he stood a chance. Hanging on the wall across from him, the future mayor of Portland with his raincoat splayed wide insisted absolutely anything was possible given the proper exposure.

Hibachi Rhinoplasty

BY ANGELICA WHITEHORNE

We are 14 years old. Girls with arms like branches and
insecurities like roots. Gathered together in our symbiotic
system to hear that a friend's - sister's - friend
got the tip of her nose chopped off at a hibachi bar

and from it a free rhinoplasty.

We imagine the new, petite, ski-sloped feature
on our own face. And with the hacked off cartilage,
every bad feeling we've ever felt about ourselves.

That year, we hold our birthday parties at
hibachi bars. The countertop fire blazes up
around its audience, mothers in drugstore lipsticks,
fathers in baseball jerseys, younger brothers with mouths
in *o* shapes, jump back—while the pack of us lean forward,
noses pertly pointed towards the flame, waiting for the chef to slip.

And later, when we blow out the single candle
on the ball of fried ice cream, we use our wishes

to ask for less of us.

A woman, whole

BY CORY HENNIGES

*It is only rarely that one can see in a little boy the promise of a man, but
one can almost always see in a little girl the threat of a woman.*

—Alexandre Dumas

How many servings?
If you force me to tell
how she is cut or quartered.
If the sweat is pat dry
and the skin gripped through a rub
or split and scored.

You want more.
The fat rendered down,
a salt cracked crust.

The meat is stubborn
and withstands the oven heat.
Withstands the flash fry.
The pan. The knife
and plate. The fork.
The hands. The fork.
The fork.



“To Sarah and her anxiety! Together forever!”



“This town ain’t big enough for the proposed outlet shopping mall at Millet Creek Pass.”

my brother, the killer

BY TANYA TUZEO

i knew he would understand
and afterwards he asked:
how does it feel to kill?
i think of the plastic tube
stopping its suck
at a twelve week old
cellular explosion—
womb emptied
of posy mouthed children,
like the ones he remembers wanting
brilliantly colored lollipops.
engulfing the camouflaged candy machine
that only moments before
wrecked their homes,
crying out at the uniformed,
strange men for their
veiled treats.
after too many tequilas
he'd tell me how he kept
gum in his pockets,
looked forward to the children
running out from their hiding spots,
arms flapping like wild flowers
after the blast.

his confectionary promises
tossed from the tank
because he was there
to make their lives better,
sprinkling hope
with every tightly wrapped sweet.



JOSHUA RICH

Memory of a Fish

BY DAVID COYLE

Hazy beams of sunlight pass through the gaps of the window's wooden shutters. Carolina stares blankly at her kitchen pantry shelves. Some yelling from outside snaps her out of her uninspired daze; she walks to the window to peer through the shutters. With arms outstretched, Daniele flies around the backyard making machine gun noises, shooting bullets at Nello who sits cross-legged on the ground, his chin in his hands.

'You're sunk!' Daniele cries, before folding in his wings when he sees his mother walking toward him.

'Having fun, boys?' Carolina asks.

Daniele nods, but Nello shakes his head.

'I'm the ship so I'm not allowed to move,' Nello says.

'Ships can move, can't they?' Carolina asks.

'Yeah, but he's in port,' Daniele explains.

'Ah, well, I've got a job for you two, one where you both can help,' Carolina says, giving Daniele a stern eye. 'I need you to go to the river and catch something for dinner.'

Daniele frowns and kicks the dirt. 'Does Nello have to come?'

'Hey!' Nello pipes up.

'It's too dangerous by yourselves,' Carolina says.

'No, it isn't!' Daniele protests.

'I want you back by five o'clock,' she says in that tone that makes them compliant. 'Understood?'

The boys glare at each other before mumbling. 'Yes, mum.'

'And don't go into the forest.'

Sepia hills glow in a hazel blur, broken only by tall pillars of green cypress. Two small fishing rods rest over Daniele's shoulder as he walks through a field of dry grass, a small box of hooks and weights in his hand. He keeps a knife and a cigarette lighter in his pocket. A half-smoked cigarette sits behind his ear.

A few paces behind him, Nello carries a bucket of bait and struggles to keep up.

'Daniele?'

'Yeah?'

'You know how you were saying in the war... who was the Nazi again?'

'I've told you this a million times before, kid.'

'Yeah, I know, but I can't remember right now.'

'You've got the memory of a fish.'

'Just tell me!'

'Alright, calm down, don't cry.'

'I'm not crying!'

Daniele stops walking and turns to face his brother. He takes the half-smoked cigarette out from behind his ear and lights it. He catches Nello's judgmental stare.

'If you want me to talk about the war,' Daniele begins, a serious look appearing in his face. 'I have to smoke, alright? It's just the way things are. So don't go crying to mum about it.'

Nello doesn't say anything as Daniele exhales a plume of smoke.

'So, the war,' he says. 'There was more than one Nazi, alright? The Germans were the Nazis, it was like their team name for the war. You with me?'

'Oh,' Nello says. 'So, what were the other teams called?'

Daniele breathes out more smoke with a tired sigh.

'Well, the Americans were the Yanks, the English were the Allies, the Russians were the Reds, the Japs were just the Japs, and the French were called the Frogs.'

'The Frogs?'

'Yeah.'

'That doesn't sound very scary.'

'It wasn't.'

'So, what were we called?'

'Lots of names,' Daniele says. 'Wops, Dagos, Eye-Ties, Guineas, Macaronis.'

'Macaronis?' Nello asks, feeling a little offended.

'Better than being a lousy Frog or a dirty Red.'

'What side were we on?'

'The Nazis and the Japs were on our team, but only in World War Two. It was different teams in World War One.'

A faraway bird breaks an otherwise quiet, teeming heat.

'Any more questions?'

Nello thinks for a moment. 'Is there going to be a World War Three?'

Daniele laughs, stubbing out his cigarette on the ground and placing it back behind his ear. He then gazes across the sweltering grass, as if seeing beyond the wavering horizon.

'Probably.'

Pushing the slimy bait through the tip of his hook, Daniele swings his rod back before casting his line high into the air. He watches it soar for a moment before it plops down into the river.

'Told you,' he says as he hands the rod to Nello.

'Dad did it better.'

'Shut up and catch a fish.'

Nello frowns darkly at the end of his line in the water in silence.

'I got something!' Daniele says, excitedly winding in his line. A clump of algae slowly lifts out of the river, making Nello laugh.

'What kind of fish is that?'

'*Fuck you.*'

Nello looks a little stunned, confused, and offended, picking up his brother's tone.

'Do you even know any swear words?' Daniele asks; Nello doesn't answer.

'Just what I thought,' Daniele says.

'Well, what ones do you know? Seeing as you're so old.'

'Alright, kid,' Daniele says, taking the algae off his hook. 'That's the first one you need to know, the f-word, *fuck*. It's just an angry word adults say. It's pretty useful. Then there's the s-word, *shit*. That just means poo. You say it when you make a mistake. Then there's d-word, *dick*, it means penis.'

'*Dick?*' Nello says, his voice trembling slightly.

'Yeah,' Daniele says, putting fresh bait on his line before recasting it into the river. 'Like you, *you're a dick.*'

'Shut up, *you're a dick!*'

'Exactly. Oh, and the b-word, *bitch*. It's a mean word to call girls. I called mum a *bitch* once. She got really mad.'

'Is there a word for every letter in the alphabet?'

'I don't know, maybe,' Daniele says. 'Focus on your line, kid.'

'Don't call me kid!'

'Or what?'

Daniele winds in yet another line, not even catching any algae.

'Maybe we should go upstream?' Daniele says, winding in yet another empty line.

Nello looks at Daniele with a dark frown. 'The forest?'

'Don't tell me you're scared!'

'No! Of course not.'

'Mum won't find out.'

'I know, but...'

'But?'

'It's just... well, we have to be back by five, remember?'

'We'll walk fast,' Daniele says, winding in the rest of his line.

The brothers walk in silence along the riverbank towards the looming green and black of the forest. Nello almost trips on the uneven stones underfoot as he carries the bucket of bait. Daniele keeps his eyes on the forest ahead. The trees above begin to cut out the sky and the sunlight,

making the river's smooth current colder and darker. Nello watches blackbirds fly overhead.

Around a fifth or sixth bend, now surrounded by the blackened wood, they arrive at a raised bank above the river; twisted roots snarl along the forest floor to meet the rock, covered in moss.

Daniele turns to Nello. 'Should we stop here?'

Nello nods quickly and places the bucket at his feet.

'You're not scared, are you? You're pretty quiet.'

'No,' Nello says, holding his rod tightly. 'Just hungry.'

'Well, hurry up and catch something then.'

'I'm trying! You can't be doing the bait and stuff right.'

'Whatever, I'm doing it just like dad did.'

'Well, why aren't we catching anything?' Nello asks.

Daniele winds in his line, revealing a bare silver hook stripped of bait.

'Let's go upstream more,' Daniele says, reeling in the rest of his line.

Nello stares intently at the end of his line where it meets the river. 'I don't want to.'

'Don't tell me you're a Frog.'

'We've never been this far before.'

'Ha! You're such a Frog!'

'Fine!' Nello says, angrily winding in his line.

Scrambling bush and forest run up both sides of the riverbank. Nearly all the light and warmth from the sun has gone behind the thick cover of wood and leaves. Climbing over a large tree root, Daniele and Nello soon find themselves overlooking a slight cliff under which the river swirls into a small pool several feet below.

'This looks like a good spot,' Daniele says.

Nello doesn't answer.

'What's wrong with you?' Daniele asks.

Nello's eyes are fixed upstream, over Daniele's shoulder. Daniele turns around to see what has captured Nello's gaze: a dark mouth into the earth,

the black entrance to a cave in the side of the hill above the riverbank. Daniele turns to Nello with excited eyes. Nello shakes his head.

The dim light of the forest vanishes entirely just a few feet from the cave's entrance. The air inside is cold, almost whispering. Daniele flicks his cigarette lighter into life, illuminating some of the damp cave walls in a wavering orange light.

'I wonder if anyone else has ever found this place?' he wonders aloud.

Nello doesn't want to think about it.

'You're not going to find any fish in here,' he says.

'For once, would you just stop being a little kid?' Daniele says, creeping forward into the cave. Nello looks over his shoulder at the forest and the river, which now seem bright and welcoming by comparison. Daniele keeps inching forward. Not wanting to be left alone, Nello follows Daniele into the enveloping darkness.

The light from the forest soon becomes nothing more than a faint and shrinking window behind them, surrounded by the swelling blackened air. Daniele turns to grin again at Nello, who winces at the sight of Daniele's maniacal looking face in the lighter's dancing yellow flame; they begin to see their breath in its glow.

After a hundred or so paces, they arrive at what appears to be the end of the cave.

'See?' Daniele says. 'Nothing bad happened and now we know what's here.'

'Great, let's go.'

'This is a lesson for you, kid.'

'A lesson in what?'

'How to be a man.'

'You're not a man.'

'Hold on...' Daniele then says with a sudden look of seriousness as he peers into the darkness behind Nello. 'What's that?'

'Funny,' Nello says. 'I'm not that stupid.'

'No, seriously.'

Daniele brushes Nello aside and crouches down, holding the lighter ahead of him to reveal a large wooden crate on the cave floor. There are big white letters painted on one of the wooden panels on the side of the crate:

U.S. A R M Y

‘What’s usarmy?’ Nello asks.

‘Here, hold this,’ Daniele says, thrusting the lighter into Nello’s hands.

Daniele approaches the crate and pushes off a loose wooden lid. He freezes. ‘Whoa.’

‘What is it?’ Nello asks, stepping forward with the lighter.

Daniele remains speechless.

Lying on his stomach, Daniele aims an M1 Garand rifle at his target: a small dead tree on the banks of the river, draped in a mouldy US Army jacket, an officer’s hat hanging from an upper branch. Wearing an oversized jacket himself, Daniele puffs on his cigarette as he rests the barrel of the rifle on a piece of wood. He peers through the cigarette smoke at the tree in the distance. Beside him are some ammunition cases, several bayonets, a Colt M1911 pistol, and a Browning .50 caliber machine gun. Two grenades bulge in his pockets. Nello watches on from nearby, his fingers firmly pressed into his ears.

Daniele holds his breath, closes his eyes, and pulls the M1’s trigger. A boom cracks violently through the woods. Birds escape above the canopy of leaves. The gun rocks back violently and the intense vibration rattles Daniele’s bones. Although giving himself a fright and making him spit out his cigarette, as well as completely missing his target, he turns to Nello with a wild grin. ‘That was awesome!’

At first shaken by the noise, Nello then begins to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’ Daniele asks angrily.

‘You dropped it!’

Having aimed the machine gun at the tree, Daniele begins piling rocks from the river on top of it to weigh it down. With several heavy rocks in place, he tries shaking the barrel to see if it moves; it doesn’t budge.

‘This’ll work,’ he says to Nello, who seems unconvinced as he places his fingers back in his ears.

Lying down behind the gun, Daniele readies himself to fire. He lines up his shot and braces himself. Squeezing the trigger, the rapid booms stomp throughout the forest. A few stray bullets even tear through the uniformed tree, but while the gun doesn’t move, it still shakes all the bones in Daniele’s hand and he has to stop firing.

‘You hit him!’ Nello shouts.

‘It’s still no good,’ Daniele says with a pained look on his face and holding his trigger hand in the other. ‘It shakes too much when it fires.’

Daniele and Nello sit a few feet back from the machine gun, Nello once more with his fingers in his ears and Daniele now holding some fishing line in his hand. The fishing line trails along the stony ground of the riverbank, tied to the machine gun’s trigger.

‘Ready?’ Daniele asks.

Nello nods, already wincing. Daniele pulls back on the fishing line and unloads a belt of bullets at the uniformed tree. The sound is deafening; the woods are left shaking. The tree’s hat blows off and Daniele lets go of the line.

‘Whoa!’ he shouts, his chest pumping with adrenaline. ‘Am I a genius or what!’

Nello keeps his fingers in his ears in the deafening aftermath.

Tying the two grenades to the trunk of the bullet-ridden tree with more fishing line, Daniele, holding his knife in his teeth, then gives himself a generous amount of line back to a safe vantage point behind a large boulder where Nello is already hiding.

‘I told you to wear your helmet,’ Daniele says, stabbing his knife into a nearby log.

‘It’s too heavy,’ Nello says, holding the old metal helmet in his hands.

‘It’s an order.’

Nello reluctantly places the helmet on his head, his eyes almost

disappearing under it, and places his fingers back in his ears.

'Fire in the hole!' Daniele then shouts, yanking on the fishing line. He quickly peeks over the boulder to make sure the pins have been pulled before ducking back down and bracing himself for the explosion. A few seconds pass. Then, thunder and lightning both suddenly appear in the heart of the forest, a wave of heat and collapsed air blasting outwards, obliterating the tree and tearing the jacket apart. It takes a few seconds for the debris to settle.

The boys both tremble: Daniele in excitement, Nello in terror.

'Yes!' Daniele shouts. 'Do you want a turn?'

Nello shakes his head fervently.

'Oh, c'mon, kid! Haven't you learnt anything today?'

'I've learnt that you're crazy. And stop calling me kid!'

'Don't be such a wimp!'

Nello looks around desperately for an excuse. 'Anyway, there's no more. You just blew them both up!'

'Well... what about the machine gun?'

'There's no more bullets.'

'I'll go see if there's another belt. Wait here. That's another order.'

Under the flicker of his cigarette lighter, Daniele returns to the crate at the back of the cave. Searching for more ammunition, he pushes aside another jacket, some trousers, and some dust-covered papers. He freezes once again, unable to believe his own eyes.

The shredded uniform dangles from another dead tree, its tattered arms blowing gently in a soft breeze. Breathing carefully, Daniele ties his last remaining stretch of spare fishing line around the large metal trigger of an M20 anti-tank bazooka. It sits under a large mound of rocks, loaded with a round, and aimed squarely at the new target. He finishes tying the line in a tight knot and follows it back to where Nello is sitting behind the boulder. His helmet is on firmly, the strap done up under his chin.

'Ready?' Daniele asks. Nello shakes his head and jams his fingers in his

ears.

Daniele takes a deep breath before pulling hard on the fishing line, but nothing happens. He tries tugging on it again, but still nothing happens.

'It must be jammed,' he says, pulling on it as hard as he can. He peeks over the edge of the boulder and yanks on the line, noticing that he isn't quite strong enough to pull the trigger back far enough.

'I need you to help me,' he says.

'How?'

'Help me pull.'

Nello's hands tremble as he reaches for the line.

'Alright, pull on three,' Daniele says. 'One... two... three!'

Jerking the line back as hard as they can, they dislodge the bazooka from underneath the rocks. It slides backwards, but not until the barrel is pointed upwards does the trigger finally engage. The rocket shoots vertically into the air while the launcher itself kicks back and flips along the riverbank, cartwheeling into the water.

Motionless, Daniele and Nello look up at the rocket as it punctures through the leaves of the forest's canopy. High above the trees, it begins to lose momentum. Slowly, the rocket decelerates until it briefly hangs in the air. Gravity then takes over and accelerates it back to the ground.

For a moment, Daniele and Nello simply watch as the rocket falls towards them. Then, they look to each other in terrified silence.

—

Aldo and Daniele sat by the river, rods baited and cast. Aldo had no hair, even his eyebrows were gone. They fished in silence, accompanied only by the sounds of the river and the insects of summer.

'Look after your little brother, alright?' Aldo said.

'I will.'

'I mean it,' Aldo said firmly. 'Help him fish. Be nice to him. Don't let him get into trouble. You've got to look after him. You'll be the man of the house, remember.'

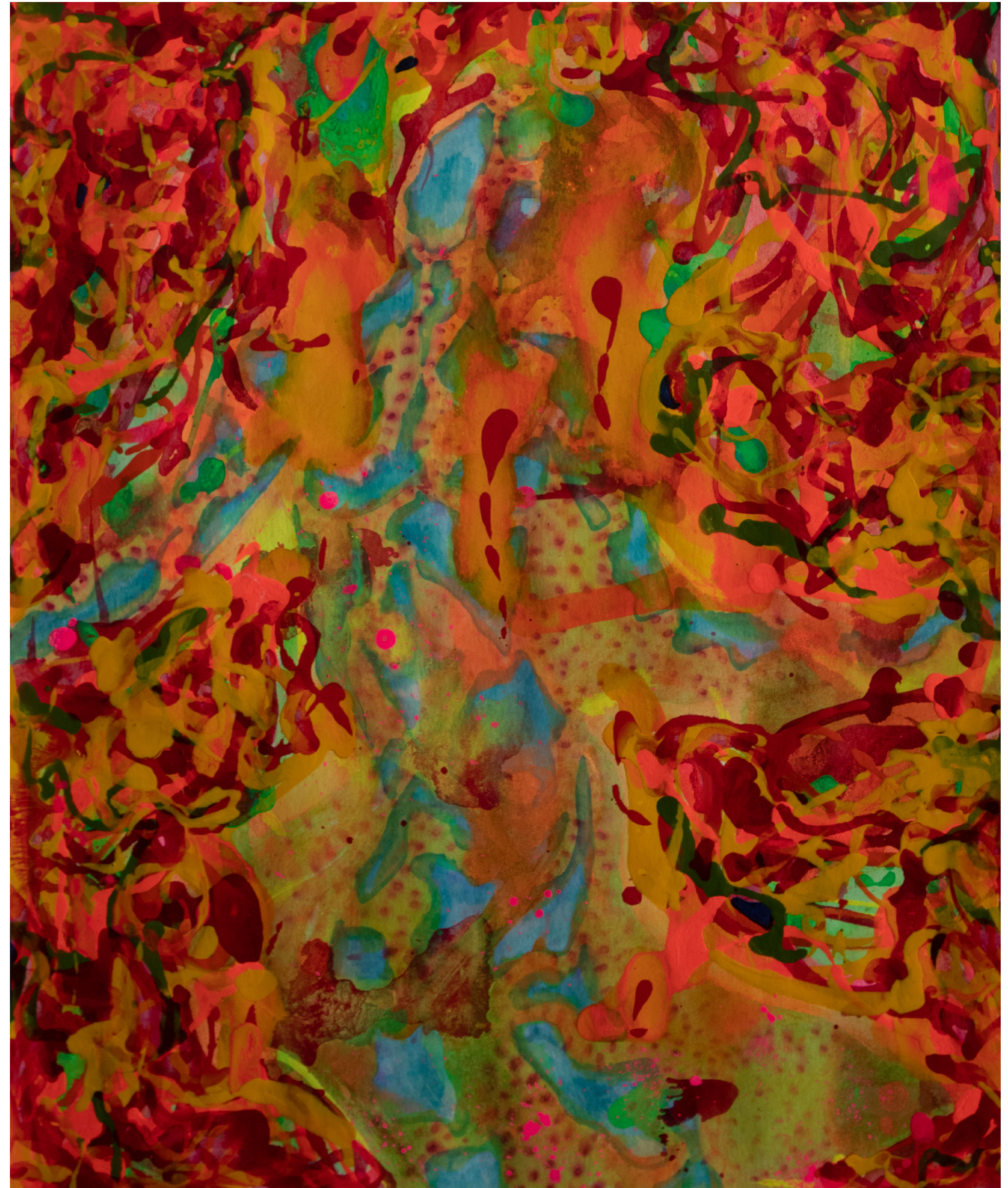
'I know,' Daniele said, wiping away a tear. 'I'll miss you, dad.'

Aldo put his arm around him and held him tight. 'I'll miss you too, buddy.'

Daniele stares at the falling rocket, frozen in fear. With guilt and regret, he looks to Nello who has gone as white as a ghost. Neither of them moves; the rocket hurtles towards them.

Then, in the blink of an eye, it rains down beside them, swallowed up by the river. For a moment, it looks as though it isn't going to explode, but then a huge plume of white water suddenly erupts into the air.

Daniele and Nello are drenched in the downpour. They look around, not believing their eyes. Fish rain down all around them.



Want not

BY MARY MCCREADY SCHULZ

Into the freezer, he wedged wrapped venison
between frosty vodka and silvery Klondike bars.
The harvested deer came to Grant Alley atop an old green Chevy,
hung defeated in the red garage alongside rusted rakes,
journeyed wide-eyed after dark to our bearded butcher,
and returned home to Formica, linoleum.
Nothing was wasted.

Guilty Feet

BY NATHANAEL O'REILLY

A woman drops a roasted
new potato on the floor
in the crowded buffet line
glances left then right then left
toes the potato under
the counter shuffles towards
the stir-fry station like a nursing
home patient
 sheepskin slippers
keeping contact with floor tiles

After the Diagnosis

BY ROBERT PFEIFFER

I imagine him
after she's gone
to bed, sitting
in his old chair,
game on, mute,
lamp glowing
beside him,
book folded
in his lap.
How quiet
can a house get?

MOTHER AND CHILD UNDER A ZEBRA SKY ON A GIRAFFE TAPESTRY



SERGE LECOMTE

Spirit of the Stars

BY WYLAND CARVER

Captain Franklin Drake fell against the control panel as his starship barreled through the nebula.

“Put her down, Doctor Dreadnought!”

The evil Doctor Dreadnought laughed through the viewscreen, holding a two-pronged techknife to Lumeria’s beautiful throat.

“You’ll never make it, Drake! Your navigational computer is gone and in three minutes, the Doom Cloud surrounding my planet will have eaten through your hull.”

Lumeria tossed her showers of golden curls and shouted, “Get out of there, Drake! Save yourself!”

Captain Drake braced himself while the ship rocked violently. “I’m not going anywhere, babe.”

The screen door of the two-bedroom bungalow slammed shut as Kevin’s dad entered, pulling the eight-year-old’s attention away from the TV. His old man opened a beer out of the fridge and slumped down at the kitchen table. The bottle toppled as he suddenly buried his face in his hands. Beer ran onto the floor as he wept.

Six Years Later

Kevin climbed through the hole in the chainlink fence and ran towards the hangar. The sky was a deep purple in the final hours of night while the rest of the world still slept. Upon reaching the giant metal structure, he climbed a scissor lift to reach an open window. As he dropped inside, his

denim jacket caught on a nail and ripped it wide open. Unconcerned with the torn garment, Kevin dusted himself off and switched on his flashlight.

There she was. A set of triple thrusters at the bottom with wings jutting out on all three sides as she tapered off to a point. She wasn’t what you’d call a sleek ship, but she was state-of-the-art. She sported a wide touch-sensitive viewscreen on the bridge and a large storage bay big enough to fit an off-world ATV.

Kevin laid his hand across the name emblazoned on the ship’s side: *The Spirit of the Stars*.

He jumped at the boom of metal scraping against metal. The deep red light of dawn speared into the dark hangar as the massive hangar doors rolled open. A man in a brown flight jacket stormed in, followed by two techs in lab coats.

“There is your spy, gentlemen,” he laughed, pointing at the teen. “You care to explain yourself, son?”

“I’m Kevin Arthur, sir.”

The man raised an eyebrow, “Mack’s kid. Surprised I haven’t seen you around here sooner. I’m—”

“Dan Brokerage. You’re Dad’s boss,” Kevin interrupted. “He hasn’t had a chance to bring me out here. He doesn’t have a lot of time for much, these days. And The Spirit ships out next week so I figured this was my last chance to see it for myself.”

He lowered his head and kicked the concrete. Brokerage lit a cigar, giving the boy a hard look while he drew smoke. The edges of his jacket whipped around as he suddenly wheeled towards the ship.

“Well don’t lag behind, kid. Ten minute tour then you scat.”

Kevin’s eyes lit up and he trotted after Brokerage.

He knew everything about the ship: how it was the first designed for continuous manned exploration. It was fully stocked and boasted an upgraded air recycling system, emergency ejection pod, and the newest in AI tech. A pilot could live for years in that thing if he needed to.

But actually walking inside was a completely different experience. The freshly padded walls smelled like a tire factory, his feet left scuff marks on

the floors, and the bridge was roomier than he expected it to be. About ten feet in front of the command console was a wide, smooth touchscreen wall.

Brokerage flipped a few switches and the screen lit up, flooding the wall with a range of readings from atmosphere to fuel capacity.

“Good morning, Jackie,” Brokerage growled around his cigar.

A line of text flew across the screen in reply.

Good morning, Dan.

“The AI doesn’t speak out loud, but it can understand context, tone, and emotion. Your dad had a lot to do with programming it.”

Kevin leaned forward—completely absorbed—and addressed the ship, “How’s the weather, Jackie? Good day to fly?”

Detailed atmospheric and astronomical readings spread out over the screen.

Ready when you are, Skipper.

Kevin stiffened. He was four years old again; his mom pulled the swing back farther and farther until he was almost horizontal with the ground below. He heard her call out, “Ready when you are, Skipper!” before launching him forward, his peals of laughter rising and falling with the rhythm of the swing.

The swing. The park. The rocket. The launch. The explosion. The newsman casually detailing what went wrong while twisted metal melted on the launchpad. The images shattered with Brokerage’s interruption.

“You ever think about going to flight school, Kevin? We’re funding more orbital research stations around the solar system every year; there’s a growing demand for pilots.”

“Supply runs? Not me. If I’m going up, it’s in one of these,” Kevin patted the control panel. “Deep space exploration.”

“Just like your mom, eh?”

“Like she wanted to.”

Brokerage put a hand on Kevin’s shoulder and led him out of the ship.

Before Kevin exited the hangar, Brokerage said, “When you get back, tell your old man I need him here over the weekend. The test run is on Tuesday and we’re still waiting on his reports.”

“He’s been skipping days again, hasn’t he?” Kevin sighed.

Brokerage frowned. “Look, kid, your dad’s one of the best we’ve got. This whole thing was his baby from the start. But you know how he got last time. See if you can get him to pull himself together. Otherwise, after this project I can’t promise...well, just tell him to come in over the weekend.”

Kevin nodded and shuffled out of the hangar doors.

Brokerage shouted after him, “Join flight school! I’ll write a letter of reference—get you a good scholarship!”

Kevin threw a final look back at the ship his dad had poured so much of himself into. The sun bathed the *Spirit* in amber light. If Kevin squinted, he could picture his mom ascending the ramp, ready to take off for another flight.

Right then and there, Kevin decided he was going to pilot that ship.

Fourteen Years Later

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

If only that rotten alarm would stop. For the past half hour, the red light on the control panel had blinked in rhythm to the incessant beeping. “Hey! Look at me! I’m still here!” it seemed to screech. Kevin couldn’t even escape it in the bathroom. The damn thing was wired to all speakers in the ship.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

He pinched his eyes as the sound burrowed through his skull. “What if we did a full system reset, Jackie? Would that shut it up?”

Jackie’s reply rolled across the viewscreen: *Nope. The warning system would detect the leak as soon as we powered back on and start the alarm again. I’m afraid we’re stuck with this, Skipper.*

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

“Stupid security protocols,” Kevin murmured.

He wasn’t worried about the oil leak; they were almost at the outpost and weren’t in any danger of falling apart before then. He just wasn’t looking forward to being stuck at the outpost for two weeks while he waited for Central to send a mechanic from Earth. Two weeks if he was lucky and

they had somebody on hand to send out right away and they had no stops to—

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Kevin gritted his teeth. Nowadays there were overrides for alarms. In a newer ship he'd be able to at least mute the sound after acknowledging it, but the *Spirit* was coming up on fifteen years, practically a relic.

Another sound added to the cacophony: the classic rock hit “Blue Rabbit” by the band Deep Frost. Kevin cocked his head in confusion.

“Jackie, what the hell are you doing?”

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Let's drown this sucker out.

Kevin smiled.

“Well at least play something that goes with the beat. Try ‘Juke Box Hero’.”

The opening rhythm was almost in time with the beeping, but not quite. Kevin and Jackie spent the next forty minutes testing out different songs, conducting an orchestra of noise. When that grew old, Kevin broke out a hacky sack and they whacked it back and forth to the beat, Jackie using her mechanical arms that folded out of the walls and ceiling. These were the moments Kevin lived for: the two of them working to make the time pass quicker. These were the moments when he forgot he was just a delivery boy and how much he'd rather be out exploring the stars with Jackie.

Within a week of leaving that hangar all those years ago, he had enrolled in flight school. It had taken him six grueling years to log the hours required for commercial flight. Six years of working multiple part-time jobs while his father retreated further into the bottle, unable to stay employed for more than a couple of months at a time. Even when they both happened to be home at the same time, they rarely saw each other. When Kevin finally graduated, all the privatized space programs were already shutting down their exploration divisions; he could only get work as a delivery pilot. When he found out that all the exploration ships were being recommissioned as delivery vessels, he raised heaven and earth to get assigned to the *Spirit*. Now 28 years old, Kevin had been babying the *Spirit of the Stars* for five years, keeping her together with bolts, spray-on sealant, and prayers.

Jackie threw a schematic of the moon they were approaching up on the viewscreen, along with docking coordinates on the surface.

Buckle up, Skip. We're coming in.

The outline of a hand appeared on the viewscreen, and Kevin high-fived it before buckling into the command seat. Jackie folded her robot arms back into the walls like they were never there.

They landed in the docking bay without a hitch. As soon as the automatic doors closed and the hangar pressurized, a small door at the far end opened and a portly researcher strode in, her ponytail swaying with her gait.

She whistled when she saw the ship. “An X-53! I couldn't tell you the last time I saw one of these.”

She pointed to the oil pooling under the *Spirit* as Kevin wheeled a couple of crates down the loading ramp. “Looks like you've got a leaking converter, there.”

“Ayup. I need to call Central for a mechanic ASAP,” Kevin replied.

“Give me five minutes to look at her first. I might be able to patch it up for you.”

Kevin frowned, “I'd really be more comfortable if somebody from Central looked at it.”

“You have any idea how long it would take them to get someone out here from Earth? Don't be silly. We'll have you on your way home in the morning.”

Before Kevin could answer, she was already on her back, checking the underside of the *Spirit*.

Kevin wrinkled his nose. Researchers usually wanted to be left alone to their work. Someone would pop in to sign the manifest and then disappear back into the bowels of the base, leaving him to unload his shipment in peace. The last thing he wanted was some gearhead poking her nose into the *Spirit's* wiring.

“The name's Pat. How long have you been flying this thing?” her muffled voice said from beneath the hull.

Kevin replied, “About five years now. Hey, I'd appreciate it if you'd—”

Pat slid out from under the ship and wiped her oily hands on her equally

oily trousers. “She’s a beauty! Shame the few of these left are either hauling junk or making deliveries now.”

“Yeah, a shame,” Kevin looked at the ground. He wasn’t used to holding a conversation with another flesh-and-blood human for more than a sentence or two, and it annoyed him even more that Pat seemed to share the same appreciation for the *Spirit* that he had. People were annoying. People expected things. People wanted him to listen when they talked and didn’t give a damn about his life at all. The less investment he had to make in another human being, the better.

“We’ve got tons of space-grade sealant and spare planks in the back. Never have a use for them. It’ll be a patch job, but it’ll get you home.” She patted Jackie’s hull.

Kevin hesitated. “If it’s all the same, I’d rather—”

She interrupted, “When you get back, be sure to tell the mechanics that you need new couplers fitted. That should prevent any future leakage. This thing wasn’t designed for short trips and heavy payloads, so the strain is what’s breaking her. She should be out there for the long haul! Among the stars! Charting solar systems!”

“Say, how do you know so much about X-53s?” Kevin asked.

“I used to build ‘em,” she beamed. “I got my start in a shipyard. Got sick of taking orders from suits who had no idea how these things work. Recommissioning these fine machines for haul duty? Should be illegal. Do you mind if I take a look inside?”

Five minutes later and Pat was on the bridge, bantering with Jackie like they were old friends. Kevin stood uncomfortably on the side. Pat casually leaned against the command chair—*his* command chair. That coffee stain on the armrest was from when Kevin lost a bet with Jackie that he could land on an asteroid base without auto-assistance. That was *his* coffee stain, and Pat’s ass was planted on it. She was a foreign contaminant invading his sanctuary.

“Hey, you got any grub on this tin can?”

Kevin snapped out of his reverie, “I’ve got...food. I’m good.”

“Dog food, huh? Well if I’m not mistaken, you brought a pack of seasoned

pork chops and a box of wine in one of those crates outside. If you wheel them to the cafeteria, we can crack ‘em open before my co-workers discover them. It’s been a lifetime since I’ve had somebody to talk old ships with.”

Jackie lit up the viewscreen: *Hey, who are you calling old?*

Pat smirked, “Sorry, I meant experienced.”

“I’m fine, thanks for the offer—” Kevin started.

He’d love to join you.

Pat smiled. “Turn left when you enter the base and just follow the signs.”

She gaily trotted down the ramp, humming some old show tune.

I like her. It’s about time you brought a girl home for my approval.

“Oh, shut up. And I’m not going.”

Oh yes, you are. You’re going to have dinner with another human being, you are going to engage her in conversation, and you are going to enjoy it.

“I’ve got too much to do if we’re going to get out of here tomorrow. I’ve got to run a full diagnostic on you, for one.”

Don’t be stupid, I can run that diagnostic myself. Besides, who says I don’t need a little time away from you too?

“I’m heartbroken,” he gripped his chest in mock despair.

Good.

The pork chops were surprisingly good, certainly better than the grub he usually ate on the ship.

“Did you work for Axaul when Macklemore was running it? You know, he’s the one who was pushing for the exploration program. Once Jordon took over, that’s when the company started phasing out the X-53s.”

Kevin mindlessly stirred the contents of his plate. With both of his parents involved with the space program, neither of them cooked much when he was a kid, but his mom had a million ways to prepare chicken breasts. She never made pork chops that he could remember. His dad didn’t cook at all, so Kevin lived on boxed meals after his mother died.

“*Now* the suits are only interested in space travel if they can monetize it. Luxury cruises, asteroid mining, pharmaceutical value—I hear they might even look into interplanetary real estate soon. Could you imagine living on

a rock in space? Nobody cares about exploration for the sake of discovery anymore. It's all about the bottom dollar."

He'd tried to cook chicken once. Didn't know jack shit about seasoning, so he just covered it with whatever he could find in the pantry and threw it in the frying pan. It was burnt and salty and dried his mouth faster than a pack of Saltines. His dad didn't notice.

"I like working on this station because at least here they're studying terraforming. You see, I'm an alien from another planet who needs to eat human brains to survive. I've killed everybody on this base, and I'm going to steal your ship so I can tell my fellow aliens where Earth is, in preparation for the invasion."

"Uh-huh," Kevin wondered what those herbs were on the pork chops. Were they herbs, or were they just little bits of chopped spinach?

Pat watched Kevin play with his food. After a few minutes of silence, she pushed back her chair and cleared the plastic plates.

"We've got plenty of spare bunks and a shower on the base if you want a change of scenery for the night."

Kevin got up from the table and looked down the hall that led to the hangar, "Naw, but thanks for asking. Is the bathroom that way?"

Pat nodded.

True to her word, Pat got the Spirit patched up first thing in the morning. Her attempts to engage him in conversation were less enthusiastic than the night before. Good, Kevin told himself. She wasn't really interested in him anyway, she just liked his ship. The sooner she could finish up, the sooner he could be back in the solitude of space with Jackie.

"Where do you call home?" she asked.

Images of Kevin's father flashed before his mind, sitting in an apartment he could barely pay for back home. Probably spending the money Kevin sent him to keep his minifridge stocked. He shook his head angrily and made a mental note to try to get assigned off this route when he got home.

"Look, are you almost done here?"

Pat brusquely tossed her tools into her bag. "I've got to run a final test

on the computer, but you'll be rid of me after that."

She walked up the plank into the ship without giving him a backward glance. Kevin cursed under his breath; why did she have to take him so seriously?

Pat pulled a window up on the viewscreen, checking it twice before she was satisfied.

"That patch will hold you to Earth, but you'll need to get it checked out by a mechanic when you get back. I did notice a problem with your navigational computer." Pat pointed to a line on one of the readouts. "It seems somebody's been tinkering with it, and it's locked?"

"Oh yeah," Kevin said, "This system is so old that we've been running it off Pruneapple 3 for all these years. Some jackass tech thought he was doing us a favor by upgrading the software to Pruneapple 9 about a year ago, so now I have to manually reboot the entire system and enter the new coordinates on startup. We should give the computer a full overhaul one of these days."

"But won't that wipe Jackie from the system?"

Kevin flinched. The truth was he had been putting off getting the computer replaced because he was afraid of exactly this. Theoretically, the technician could upload Jackie's files into the new computer, but there was no guarantee it would go smoothly. If something went wrong, he'd lose her forever.

"Anyway, it isn't a major deal. We've been getting along just fine for now."

Pat frowned, "Well be careful. I wouldn't want to be out there with a glitchy navigational system myself, but you know what you're doing."

Pat left the ship and retreated into the base. Kevin threw a halfhearted goodbye after her and took the command seat.

"Ready, Jackie?"

Ready when you are, Skipper.

Kevin idly tapped the console. For two hours he'd read the same page of a book three times, watched the first few minutes of five different movies, and cracked open a puzzle that was stashed in the cabinet.

“Okay, I’ll bite. What’s wrong?”

Nothing is wrong. All systems are operating smoothly.

“Why are you giving me the cold shoulder?”

I do not understand the question. Please rephrase.

“Oh come on, Jackie! Why are you talking like a damn computer!”

Because I AM a computer, Kevin! And the sooner you get that through your skull, the sooner you can start a REAL relationship with a REAL human!

“You want me to get a girlfriend? With this job? We’d hardly see each other more than once a year!”

I want you to connect with SOMEONE. When was the last time you talked to your dad?

“He doesn’t want to talk to me! He just wants to wallow at home wishing you– wishing Mom was still alive!”

Why won’t you upgrade my hardware, Kevin?

“Well if I lose you, then who will I have left?” tears welled up in his eyes, “we should have been out there discovering new planets! Logging anomalies nobody has ever studied up close! That’s why Mom wanted to be a pilot. She wanted to see things no other human had seen before, bring back discoveries that would open our minds. Map the stars. That’s what we should be doing, but we’re stuck hauling junk food and bolts and fuel to rocks in the middle of nowhere! It’s a repetitive cycle that eventually ends in me dying a sorry old man long after you’ve been turned into scrap. So excuse me if I don’t want to let go of you just yet!”

Kevin’s nose practically touched the massive viewscreen now, his feet rooted to the floor. Slowly, the tension burned off and he relaxed, his muscles folding in exhaustion. A couple of robotic arms helped him into his chair. The viewscreen lit up with Jackie’s response.

That is why you need to call your dad.

Kevin didn’t raise his head. “I can’t.”

A red warning lit up the screen, and a window opened showing a map of their trajectory.

We’ve got something coming up. I can’t get a solid reading on it, but it appears to be some sort of gaseous cloud. We’re going to pass right through it.

Kevin looked up, “Any danger?”

Unclear. It’s pretty dense; my sensors can’t penetrate the photons. It doesn’t seem to match anything in the database.

Kevin’s hands flew to the console and more readings appeared on the screen.

“Can we move around it?”

Sorry Skipper, not with the navigational controls locked, and we can’t risk a hard reset at these speeds.

“Shit.” He buckled himself into his seat. “We’ll try to collect a sample and take readings while we fly through. If it doesn’t kill us, maybe we’ll learn something.”

The bridge started trembling before he’d finished his sentence. He could feel his teeth rattling as the vibrations grew more violent. The cabin lights flickered and the viewscreen glitched on and off. Kevin wondered how strong the bolts on his chair were.

“You still with me, Jackie?” His voice wobbled with the turbulence.

ssTiLL heeeeeeeEEEEre SK KIP PERrr

ERROR 205

PT: void

serial: S556-0DA3-P380

The ship slammed to one side. Kevin’s neck practically snapped from the whiplash. Alarms blared from every surface. Red lights bathed the bridge in waves. Blocks of code flooded the viewscreen, now a sheet of blue. Steam spat out of a nearby vent and scorched Kevin’s shoulder.

Kevin shut his eyes and prayed through gritted teeth that the ship would hold together. He expected to see his mother or dad, guiding him through the cloud, but they weren’t there. All he saw was his flight school instructor the time he’d mixed up the levers, how his organs jumped as he dipped the ship into a nosedive. He saw the instructor grab the controls.

“KEVIN!”

A voice broke into the present. A woman’s voice, one that pierced in from some forgotten dream. His mother. Kevin opened his eyes.

THE ship is falling apart, Kevin. Get to an evacuation pod NOW.

Kevin unbuckled his belt and looked over the console, hoping an answer would appear.

“How much farther do we have to go? Maybe I can patch it up—”

WE’VE BEEN THROWN OFF COURSE AND THE NAVIGATION COMPUTER CAN’T CORRECT ITSELF. EVEN IF YOU PATCH IT UP, WE’RE HEADED OUT INTO DEEP SPACE.

“Then that’s where I’m going! Kevin and Jackie facing the universe together, it’s what we’ve always wanted!”

Another impact threw him to the floor. An ominous hissing sound joined the fray: some coolant or oxygen leak.

GET OUT OF HERE, KEVIN. SAVE YOURSELF.

“I’m not going anywhere!”

Tears streamed down his face as he knelt before the viewscreen. He saw his reflection in the smooth black surface. He saw that little boy who just heard that his mother was dead, whose father had retreated into himself out of grief. He saw a boy filled with anger and fear, who wanted to pour himself into something—anything—so he wouldn’t have to feel this pain.

The reflection disappeared as the white outline of a hand took its place. The edges of the hand glowed with pixelated light, pulsing with warmth.

Neither am I, Skipper.

He wearily raised his hand to touch the glass. Electricity jumped from the viewscreen and ran through his body. He fell unconscious. Robotic arms tenderly lifted him into the evacuation pod, shut the door, and started the ejection sequence.

When Kevin came to, the pod had propelled itself far away from the gaseous cloud. He leaned forward to look out the small porthole window. How long had he been out? Was the Spirit still in one piece? There, on the other side of the cloud. Was that speck a ship or just a stray asteroid?

A quiet beep alerted him to the small console wired into the wall in front of him. A transmission that had been sent to him hours ago.

I’m still in one piece, Skipper. Say hi to your dad for me.

He leaned back and wiped his face. He could feel the salty stains on his cheeks. So she made it. She was out there somewhere, hurtling into

unexplored space. Maybe she’d crash into some unknown planetoid or maybe she’d fly on forever, charting new starfields.

He checked his coordinates. Luck had deposited him not too far from an outpost. He switched on his distress beacon. One day he’d get a ship and go after her to discover where she’d gone, but right now he had to make a long overdue trip back home.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Wyland Carver hails from wooded expanse of western Washington state. He writes genre fiction between cups of coffee, and is currently working on his first novel. You can find his tales of horror, sci-fi, and historical fiction on www.wylandcarver.com.

MR. C.F writes poems so he doesn't kill someone. Hailing from the boring part of Georgia, he is now a part-time student in the boring part of Missouri. He was a 2023 participant in KC Storytellers. He hopes to write not to change the world, but to make it a little more hospitable.

David Coyle is a writer from Wellington, New Zealand. He's published two books with Unsolicited Press and his third book will be released in December 2023 by Legacy Book Press. He's also written short stories, poetry, and short films. Visit his website www.davidcoyle.co.nz for more information.

Frega + DiPerri met by providence in Providence and have been creating together ever since. Their cartoons have been published in *Weekly Humorist*, *The Spectator*, *Frazzled*, *School Administration*, and *Kappan* among others. Their cartoons are licensed worldwide with CartoonStock. Their world views vacillate between idealism and total despair, depending on the day.

Alex Dodt is a high school philosophy teacher in Phoenix and his previous work has appeared in *Qu Magazine* and *Devastation Baby*.

Kimberly Flynn (born in Cambridge, MA, 1985) began photographing at the age of sixteen when she used her first paycheck from the local movie theater to purchase a 35 mm film camera. Kimberly is the founder of Starlight Art Consultancy where she is a leader whose goal is to inspire artists to see their full potential and put it to use helping them with the business side of their art life. She will be starting her new photography project entitled Hints of Happiness which will explore mental health through portraiture. This project will take her to 5 different national and international artist residencies in 2023 with the expectation to exhibit this body of work in the future.

Kirsty Greenwood is an illustrator who works mainly within the realm of short fiction stories both for print and online publications. With experience in many aspects of artwork and the advantage of an illustrative mind-set, her passion is for imagery that accompanies literature based in the surreal, the Gothic and folk tales; she has also exhibited her works internationally and more recently 'Metamorphosis', the fabric she designed for and in collaboration with The Monkey Puzzle Tree- art fabrics and wallcoverings, was winner of 'Best in British Product Design' at the Hotel Designs Brit List Awards 2021. Motivated by pareidolia, ephemeral visual misunderstanding, ocular strangeness, nightmares, dreams and fleeting glimpses of unreality;

inspired by faerie tales, folklore, myths and legends, transformation, aboriginal cultures and Quixotism, Kirsty works in traditional mediums such as pencil and ink on home-made marbled papers. With her work focused on the idea of embracing change; she uses methods such as marbling to create a base for her images and then uses the traditional techniques of drawing, ink and paint washes to further make the scene, picking out details to promote the telling of the tale through images filled with narrative, allure and creatures from around the allegorical world.

Cory Henniges lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where his body drives a forklift while his mind travels. His previous work can be found in many procedure revisions and machine operating instructions throughout factories in Eastern Wisconsin.

As a Guatemalan native, **Carlos Lorenzana** moved to Chicago with his mother and sister at age six and has cultivated an artful life long since. During his youth, he discovered Chicago's urban street art culture and used concrete and steel as his two main canvases. Strictly working with aerosol paint and markers, he defined his visual art as belonging to a bold yet fluid, non-objective world. After getting schooled and receiving an Associate's in Graphic Design at Robert Morris College, he felt it was time to experience larger mediums of style in digital art. Therefore, pursued an education in Computer Animation at Illinois Institute of Art in Chicago and took to applying significant value to 3D texture, contrast, and depth, in my paintings. Influenced by ancient civilizations, mythology, and spiritualism, his work aids to create an understanding of how all of these intersect and form a collective consciousness. An artist's aspiration dear to him is to create art that audiences will reflect upon, use as a means to search for their own narrative and plug into a global consciousness that leaves the subject out of focus.

Mary McCready Schulz was raised in Beaver Falls, PA and nurtured in Carnegie libraries. Currently, she wrestles with words in St. Paul, MN. She was a winner in the 2023 St. Paul Sidewalk Poetry Contest.

Born in South Jersey, **Sean McFadden** received his B.A from the University of Michigan. The wheels fell off (and were reattached) during a 20-year stint in Chicago. He now lives on Pine Island, Florida, editing his backwards-moving novel of alcoholic and recovery short stories, *Peeling the Onion*. Recent work is in *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Write Launch* and *The Lakeshore Review*, and forthcoming in *Dunes Review*.

Morgan Musselman is a reader and writer living in Washington, DC. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature from the University of Iowa. Her theater and poetry reviews have been published on Broadway World DC and The DC Line, respectively.

Irish-Australian poet **Nathanael O'Reilly** teaches creative writing at the University of Texas at Arlington. His ten collections include *Selected Poems of Ned Kelly* (Beir Bua Press, 2023), *Dear Nostalgia* (above/ground press, 2023), *Boulevard* (Beir Bua Press, 2021), *(Un)belonging* (Recent Work Press, 2020), *BLUE* (above/ground press, 2020) and *Preparations for Departure* (UWAP, 2017). His work appears in over one hundred journals and anthologies published in fourteen

countries, including *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Anthropocene*, *Cordite*, *The Elevation Review*, *Identity Theory*, *New World Writing Quarterly*, *Trasna*, *Westerly* and *Wisconsin Review*. He is poetry editor for *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature*.

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium. He came to the States where he spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden H. S. he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975-78. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997). He worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, bartender.

Robert Pfeiffer received his MFA and PhD in Creative Writing from Georgia State University. He has published two original collections of poetry, *Bend, Break*, and *The Inexhaustible Before* with Plain View Press out of Austin, Texas. Individual poems have appeared in journals internationally such as *Mudfish*, *The Connecticut River Review*, *Indefinite Space*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *The Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *The Flint Hills Review*, *Freefall Magazine*, and *The Concho River Review* and previously in *The Fourth River*.

Joshua Rich: This project is a series of images that depict an unfaced modern couple as they complete mundane household tasks. He uses these tasks as a commentary on agreed upon social norms of identity through traditional American values. He finds self confinement to these values to be crippling in a state of self contemplation through the beguilement of one's own values.

Zeke Shomler is a poet and prose writer in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Erin Stoodley is an artist residing in Urbana, Illinois, where she is pursuing her MFA in poetry at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and can be found in such journals as *The Adroit Journal* and *Vox Viola*.

Tanya Tuzeo is a librarian and mother to two children and two collections of unpublished poetry, "We Live in Paradise" and "Miserable People". Presented here is from the latter, a merciless observation of intergenerational trauma; a family wounded by mental illness in a post-war, post-truth society and yet continues to limp along, sustained by the vestiges of love and forged bonds. Her work appears in various literary publications, is a finalist in the Atlanta Review International Poetry Contest 2022 and longlisted in Frontier Poetry's Nature & Place prize.

Angelica Whitehorne is a writer living in Durham, NC with published work in *Westwind Poetry*, *Mantis*, *Air/Light Magazine* and *Fourteen Hills*, among others. She is the author of the chapbook *The World Is Ending, Say Something That Will Last* (Bottle Cap Press, 2022). Besides being a devastated poet, Angelica is a Marketing Content Writer for a green energy loan company and a volunteer reader with Autumn House Press. You can find more of her work on Instagram at

a.w.ords or her website, angelicawhitehorne.com.

John Wojtowicz grew up working on his family's azalea and rhododendron nursery and still lives in the backwoods of what Ginsberg dubbed "nowhere Zen New Jersey." Currently, he teaches social work at Stockton University. He serves as the Local Lyrics contributor for the Mad Poet Society blog and has been featured on Rowan University's Writer's Roundtable on 89.7 WGLS-FM. Recent publications include: *Split Rock Review*, *Soundings East*, *West Trade Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, and the *South Florida Poetry Journal*. He is the author of the coffee-table-style chapbook *Roadside Attractions: a poetic guide to American Oddities*. Find out more at: www.johnwojtowicz.com

