

AFTER HAPPY HOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART



ISSUE 30 | SUMMER 2026

AFTER HAPPY HOUR ISSUE 30

SUMMER 2026 MASTHEAD:

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After Happy Hour Review is produced and published in Pittsburgh, PA.
ISSN 2831-879X

FOREWORD

Ah, the joy of turning 30. If the 20’s are about finding yourself, your 30’s are about just being yourself. So, welcome to issue 30 of *After Happy Hour*, a point by which we should definitely know who we are and what we are about. There isn’t an issue we’ve put out that we’re not proud of—all the fantastic authors and artists we’ve been privileged to feature, each of them teaching us something about ourselves along the way. It’s enlightening, if not a bit difficult, the push and pull of editorial selection among several minds that often have clashing visions and editorial agendas, as we cobble together a larger, shared sense of selfhood—and maybe for the difficulty of the process, it is even more rewarding when you have an issue that gives you a sense of that becoming realized. As tempted as I am to call out individual authors, I like every piece in here too much and I want you all to read it straight through like I have and let yourself be tossed around between all of these different views harmonizing with each other in their weird symphony. There’s no particular through-line for me this time. Our authors explore drama and absurdity, boy bands and Jesus, horror and soft everydayness, experimentalism and simplicity, multiple snake poems. But in their voices each of them come out swinging, urgently grabbing and yanking you into their strange other universes, their unique understandings, their worlds so immediately different from yours and so instantly understandable. They play in the same key. They hit their notes with the same attitude. Whether or not they knew that they were part of the same song I suppose doesn’t matter. Isn’t that part of the beauty of participating in art, whether creating, curating, consuming? You be as you as you can be, and at the end of the day it’s only in that uniqueness where we can all find our shared identities. So here’s to the start of our AHH 30s! Let’s enjoy it while we can before those mid-life crises set in.

Much love,
Shawn Maddey, Poetry Editor

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Jesus Would Have Loved Bent Wood Chairs

BY JAY ORLANDO

That's the cup of a carpenter – Indiana Jones

I.

I am sitting in a coffee shop thinking
about leverage and the tables Jesus flipped.
I wonder if he ever built any, being
a carpenter, and if the apostles understood
the importance of sturdy legs,
how they hold up the meal that holds
the family together.

No wonder when God could choose to be
anything He chose to be wine and bread:
my grandmother on Christmas always asking
me to top off her glass, always politely gesturing
for another slice; bread and butter to warm
our bellies, wine to warm our cheeks, family
to warm our hearts. This is communion.

To pervert the sanctity of the table with greed,
to count money in the house of faith – no wonder
the God in Him came out, righteous with fury.
I hope for the sake of the man in Him someone
had taught Him to lift with His holy knees.

Anyone can hammer together a few sturdy
beams to make a cross. It takes skill and care, an
artful eye, to fashion a table fit for a feast.

II.

The No. 14 chair: a pinnacle of design refinement,
just six pieces of steam-bent beechwood assembled
with ten screws and two nuts. Released by Thonet
in 1859. Elegance on four legs. Timeless. Classic.
Fit for the asses of Picasso, Einstein, and Henri
Toulouse Lautrec. The first mass-produced piece
of furniture.

Surely a carpenter, founder of the largest
mass-produced religion, would see it anointed.
A throne fit for a cafe king. After all, a man needs
a place to sit and think. To rest and create. To
lean back and pontificate while drinking from
his clay cup. And Christ was all man, they say,
as well as all divine.

I think da Vinci got it wrong in
The Last Supper. All those men around a table
and not one chair in view. Not one foot
propped up. Not one vessel being sipped or
supped or knocked back with a grimace. No
clay cups, only delicate glassware, and a soft
handed Jesus surrounded by bickering friends.

III.

He was called *tektōn* which means *carpenter* or *woodworker* or possibly even *stonemason*. A *craftsman* with callused, sandpaper hands and a kindly Spirit. He knew a day's labor as my grandfather did, yet He died so young, nailed to the very wood from which He gained a living.

He knew how to make, how to repair, how to renew, refurbish, and eventually, yes, how to rebirth. He knew how to be callused without being callous, how to be righteous without the petty vindictiveness of flesh.

He walked on water like Rodney Mullen on a Powell Peralta skateboard: with all the confidence of Tony Hawk and all the joy of Lance Mountain. His friends were full of revelry and passion.

This is the point: there are things we do because we are human, and things we do because we are divine. To be human is to design a chair, to flip a table, to drink from a rough clay cup. To be human is to drink and eat and make merry with friends. To be divine is the moment, when doing so, that you realize these times are fleeting and one day, maybe soon, you are going to meet your maker.

Roadkill, Baby!

BY JACK FANNING

JOANNA DOESN'T KNOW if there is anyone across all the highways that connect this world to itself who could enjoy working at a gas station. It's possible, she thinks, because really you don't get to be sixty-whatever years old without encountering sadistic bents that are just that baffling. But even if someone could enjoy it, she knows that she does not.

The piece-of-shit hot dog machine that sits on the counter next to the register, for instance, hasn't been serviced or replaced since the mid-90s. That means that by the end of her shift, she's spent eight hours baking in hot dog fumes and whatever lead-laced radiation is coming off those ancient heating elements in waves. And that's just Strike One for Gary's Stop & Shop. She calls it the Eiffel Tower of I-40, but not after the one in Paris. She calls it that because of what truckers pay double for behind the working bathroom's busted lock. Though why they pay double and not half is an economic trick she'll never understand.

But it's that kind of distracted thinking that's kept her chained to this counter well into her bronze, silver, and now golden years. Every morning, the news flowing out of the little box TV she keeps on the counter does segments on "Secrets of Success." It's always a man with a PR-trained smile and waxed eyes rattling off a five-, eight-, or twelve-

step plan to maximize wealth.

Joanna's tried a few twelve-step plans in her day—she's never seen much success with those—but thinks these businessmen may be on to something. The way they talk about focus. About rising early and starting the day with brain-boosting smoothies. Long walks. Hot yoga. Cold plunges.

Now, Joanna's grocery store doesn't stock the superfoods that power up the moneymaking parts of the brain. Ditto with yoga and cold plunges. And Gary didn't like the idea of her taking a lap around the building twice an hour either. He looked at her like she was crazy for even suggesting it.

But she can't hold too much against those gray suits that come in so grainy on her TV. Honestly, she owes them a lot. Without their advice, she never would've started waking up early. And if she hadn't been out wandering the woods near her house at the ass-crack of dawn, each step powered by the blow she buys off of Tommy Callaghan, she never would've found her Baby.

JOANNA WAS PREGNANT once, really pregnant, a long time ago. She and Red, whose real name was Harvey, had screwed on the felt of his pool table after mixing tequila and some designer pills he'd brought back from New York.

While he was busy inside her, she stared into a hole in his wall. A Megadeth poster had sloped off, revealing the broken edges of the plaster. The longer she stared into that void, the less she could feel the friction on her back, or the sour-sick of the liquor, or even Red's rhythmless thrusts. In that moment, the present was memory and the future became dream. And somewhere in that darkness beyond the wall, beyond sight, she knew there could be a different life for her.

When she was five days late, she really thought that life had found her all on its own.

And when Red proposed, and when Joanna's mother moved in, and when people congratulated them, it all felt like confirmation. Like God or the Universe giving her all the signs, all the green lights.

But what good are green lights when your fiancé stumbles off his motorcycle at three in the morning, drunk and high and horned up from the strip club you beg him not to go to? And what is the Universe trying to say when you push him off and he responds with a beating that spits blood across both your pillows?

Whatever life she could have lived fell out of her in component parts, staining the white porcelain a shade of pink she can't forget.

She didn't cry in that bathroom. She didn't cry as she packed Red's bags. And she didn't cry when he put his fist through the wall, saliva streaking her face as he promised to do worse if she kept saying, "Go."

It wasn't until she sat on the floor looking at the hole his fist had left that tears finally fell. Because the chemical high that had burned in her four months gone hadn't been relaxing, or euphoric, or even made the sex much better. All it had done, she knew, was sear the outline of that hole in Red's wall right into her brain, carving her cornea in its image.

But all of that doesn't matter anymore—had stopped mattering decades ago, actually—and it was even more alright than it had been because now she had a new Baby. And this one would never die. She wouldn't let it.

IT HAD LOOKED, at first, like those webworm cocoons, the kind that show up in branches at the end of summer. Only, instead of white silk this one was made of long strands of pink flesh. Like bubblegum tinsel, dripping wet. It hung heavy, dragging the branches down and swaying in the breeze. A dozen tendrils gently brushed the soil.

The second she saw it, she knew that it needed her.

Joanna approached the mass reverently; her lips parted in awe.

When her hand touched the flesh, she felt life pulsing within. When she took her hand away, some of those fine strands clung to her skin. When she carefully removed them, the strands sliced through her like razors, pulling nail-thin slivers of flesh with them.

It hadn't bothered her at all, really. Wasn't it only natural for a child to reach for its mother? Even a child with claws?

That night, she left the Stop & Shop with one hand wrapped in gauze and the other weighed down by a plastic bag of day-old hot dogs, donuts, and two 64oz cups of congealing slushy syrup.

On tiptoes, she offered the donuts to her Baby. Two fleshy proboscises descended, unfurling down and out, resembling the feathered antennae of a moth. They wrapped around the pastry, dividing it and dividing again, the same razor edges that had kissed Joanna's flesh tearing through the glaze. Then the donut pieces hit the ground, the tendrils waving in disgust.

She raised the hot dogs next, one at a time. They were hastily split into coins, rolled up toward the central mass, and brought into Baby's body. Tears streamed down her face as she watched her Baby take its first bites.

Feeding Baby the syrup took more coaxing. It could not roll these calories into itself, could not slice them into digestible portions. She knew it needed them, though, needed as much as it could get in order to grow up big and strong.

In the end, it only took blood.

She approached one tendril that hung further than the others, barely visible in the dying light. Her finger was coated in blood and slick pus under her gauze. As soon as she raised it, the tendril twitched to life. Like a dog scenting the air, it rose and sought. Beautiful.

What possessed her to unbutton her blouse and unhook the front clasp of her bra, she didn't know. All she knew was that it felt right to pull a breast into the night air. To dab blood on her nipple. To have the tendril loop around her flesh, drawing thin bleeding lines around

her areola.

Baby was being so gentle, she knew. It would've taken nothing for those razor wires to lop off her flesh, to expose the veins and ducts and suckle from a gush rather than a trickle.

That's how she knew it loved her.

As she watched the minute pulses that signaled feeding, its microscopic cilia moving to part flesh and keep the wound from closing, she took the cup of Red Cherry syrup from the bag. Drop by drop, then strawful by strawful, she let it trickle down her breast and mingle with the blood. The dyes and colorings traveled through the tendril, flushing Baby a deep red. A few tendrils sliced through the bag to get at the Blue Raspberry syrup. Baby was soon tie-dyed in shades of blue and red and purple.

And then Baby began to sing.

Joanna couldn't see any mouth or opening in Baby. The tendrils that had hung limp began to shake and hum. It extended more and more of them, curling the ends into strange shapes. As they moved through the air, they began to resonate, echoing and harmonizing. In a steady crescendo, Baby filled the silent woods with a chorus. A cavalcade of frequencies that spun and danced. They slammed into Joanna in waves. No drug that had ever dialed the controls of her brain compared.

After many minutes, each too short for her liking, Baby unlatched. The tendrils curled back into the heavy cocoon she had first encountered. The longest one, the first she had coaxed with her blood, was rolled into a pendulum and swung, humming contentedly.

Joanna fed her Baby scraps and sugar every day for weeks. At night, she sat in front of her bathroom mirror and cleaned the shallow cuts. She kindled with new motherhood as she dropped the stained gauze in the toilet and flushed. Every time she returned to that spot in the woods, Baby had grown larger, until the branches holding it strained under the weight. The mass hung only inches from the ground and

Joanna could hardly contain her joy.

But when Baby started letting the hot dogs fall to the ground after only a few bites, and when its tendrils began to dig deeper and deeper grooves into her breast, she knew things had to change. That Baby needed more from her.

Which is why it was such good luck when, coming back from tossing the trash, she saw a fox whimpering on the edge of the road. Its pelvis and hind legs lay broken on the asphalt, and it was using what little life it had left to twitch toward the line of trees. As if that could save it now.

Inspired, Joanna grabbed the flat-bladed shovel out of the janitor's closet. In one swift motion, she rasped the blade under the poor creature. It hissed and mewled. Its eyes staggered in pain. She hardened herself to it, for Baby.

The fox spent the drive to the woods bleeding all over her back seat, its scream pitching higher with every mile and pothole and hasty turn. She wondered if, somehow, it knew it wasn't going somewhere nice. If it knew she wasn't that kind of kind.

The tie-dyed tendrils put the fox out of its misery in seconds. That Baby took it in slices only a little thicker than the machine at the deli counter gave Joanna the uncomfortable perspective of an MRI machine. The cross-sections of skull, brain, and spinal cord made her feel distant.

Baby's contented hum made it all better, though. And when layers of flesh parted to reveal a protuberance pushing its way out, one that flicked open to stare at her with an amber vulpine iris, her heart almost stopped with joy.

Later, Gary chewed her out for leaving. Talked her ear off about respect. She wanted to ask if any other mother would be getting the same treatment. Just because her Baby looked a little different didn't mean he could yell at her like this. She kept her mouth shut, though. Gary signed the paychecks and, apparently, employed her at the best

place in the world to feed Baby.

Maybe there were upsides to working at a gas station after all.

Moving Baby was the hardest thing she'd ever done. It had cautiously reached down to taste the rusted wheelbarrow, flinching at the realization that it wasn't food. When she started sawing through the clusters of branches holding Baby up, the moaning started again, one vibrating appendage swinging around and around in protest. Once it thunked down into the wheelbarrow, that moaning had turned to wailing.

But she couldn't risk getting fired from the Stop & Shop, and getting the fox to Baby while it was still alive had been hard enough. That was with the fox's head and major organs still intact, too. For anything less lucky, she'd need to move quicker.

For years, Gary had been dumping wood pallets behind the station, right into the gap between the wall and dumpster. Over the years, tepid southern rains had opened those pressure treated fibers to all manner of insect and plant life. It was a web of mold and moss she saw every time she took the trash.

And it was the perfect place to stash her Baby.

To be the best mother she could be, Joanna started smoking again. She made a big show of putting the money in the register whenever she grabbed her Virginia Slims. Once or twice an hour, it gave her the perfect opportunity to check for roadside victims. Like she was grocery shopping or thumbing through takeout menus.

Which is how, weeks into this routine, she spots the squirrel, tail still motoring in big circles as the last of its neurons fired. Poor guy.

Which is why she rounds the corner of Gary's Stop & Shop just in time to hear a voice say, "What the fuck!"

Which is when she sees that against all the odds, Gary has decided to get up off his ass and finally clean up the mess of pallets.

What a prick.

In the past month or so, Baby has really grown into itself. Is it any

wonder, with all the live meat she's managed to feed it? Raccoons, dogs, even a bisected fawn one evening. Baby used to nestle in the rotten wood like a pearl inside an oyster. Now, all that wood belongs to it, is a part of Baby. Like a pulsating pink-and-blue spider's nest, right on the edge of bursting. Some of the gossamer tendrils are now fleshy snakes covered in cilia like the tip of her pinky. Others have worked themselves into the pallets, the concrete slab, even the brick of the wall.

At least three sets of eyes are open at any time, but there could be more hidden from sight. They dot the mass at the center of it all, along with various teeth, ears, and tufts of hair.

And every part that can is looking, or tilted, or bared at Gary.

"What the fuck?" The hammer in his hand, meant for ripping apart boards, now hangs limp. For the best, she thinks. He won't be needing it.

He looks over, eyes dancing between her face and the squirrel cradled in her shovel. From the squirrel to Baby. From Baby to her face.

As hard and as fast as she can, she swings the shovel.

The squirrel, free to soar, tumbles through the air. Its impact on the concrete pad is just what it needs to let go and drift off into something better. It's probably grateful.

Joanna isn't so lucky.

Because her swing isn't really all that fast or all that vicious, and certainly not as much as she intended. Because she's never had to fight someone with a shovel, has only seen things like this in movies. Because it's easy for Gary to step out of the way and slam his fist into her jaw, completely forgetting the hammer. It's a sloppy right hook, but it gets the job done.

But what Gary doesn't understand, and would never suspect, is just what a mother will do to protect her Baby. So he's putting his hands up. He's reflexively apologizing because even though she was coming

at him, he really did just lay out an old woman. But then she's up again. She's throwing herself at his waist, which buckles as he's falling to his ass, letting his jaw slam down into Joanna's boney shoulder. He hears a filling crack.

"You don't understand!" She's trying to beg, to make him see reason, only it's coming out like hate and venom. "You need to understand!"

GARY THINKS HE pretty much gets it when, the daze of impact fading, he looks down to find that the thing tickling his hand isn't an overgrown weed. It's that thing, that fucking tentacled horror, reaching out to him. And suddenly it's pulling off his skin. It's slicing down into muscle, digging to bone. And it barely stings. Just feels cold.

So as he kicks her off of him, scrambles away from this thing, showers the ground in his own blood, he's thinking about movies. He likes aliens, zombies, that sort of thing. And when his dad had shown him *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* way back when, he'd dreamed of pod people and pink flowers for weeks. So it's not really Gary that picks up that shovel, is it? It's that kid, the one who woke up warm-cold and wet, who had to get a mattress protector because he kept dreaming of Moms and Dads with different eyes.

And what do you expect from a scared kid when an old woman starts scrambling toward him on hands and knees, babbling about her baby? With all that spit and foam gathering at the edges of her lips? When he's got a shovel all shiny and sharp and ready to go?

JOANNA'S EYES FLICK open and, as they do, her brain registers that she has the worst headache of her life. Worse than any of the hangovers or concussions. Honestly, it feels like her head's been cracked open.

It's so bad that it's affecting her vision, she's realizing. Because what

should be the center of that stereo image is all blurry and peripheral. And even though her eyes aren't rotating quite right, she has a wider field of view, like she's looking out through the sides of her head rather than the front.

"B-b-b-ba, b-b-bab." She isn't sure what she's trying to say. Her thoughts are coming in stops and starts, but it seems those are the only syllables she's got to work with.

Strange.

When she tries to reach a hand up and feel it out, to get a sense of what she's starting to understand could be some serious damage, her hand just twitches by her side.

If it had moved, she'd have felt the blood flowing steadily, carrying a shred of grey here and there. She could have put her fingers into the gash splitting her forehead and felt the splinters of fractured skull. All those raw edges would've felt every dry ridge of her fingerprints, even through the blood.

All in all, it's for the best that she's still.

That way she can focus on the tendrils inching toward her across the concrete slab. Even as big as Baby has gotten, this is the farthest it has ever reached. Thick and thin, small and large, Baby slithers over the cracked ground to find her. To find its Mother.

It has to dig into her in order to drag her, but she barely feels it. There isn't much left to feel, really. All she notices is that as she moves, the vision in her left eye shifts, starts jittering. Like it's dragging behind just a bit.

Joanna's ready to go like all the others, ready for Baby to slice her into those thin MRI images too. But it doesn't happen that way.

Instead, all those coils of flesh, thousands upon thousands of them, are unravelling. They're revealing layers of Baby she's never seen, standing at attention to form the shapes of sound. Moving through the air to force a song into motion.

And it's louder now, far louder than it was in the woods, because

there are so many more tendrils moving. These innermost layers, they're getting pinker as it unfolds and unfolds until it looks so small. Like the center of a massive, pink flower.

And right there, as the last layers shift, is the hole. Her hole. That same outline burned into her leaking brain, the one that Red left, the one that made and broke so many promises.

Only now those promises are for real. She can feel it.

And she can understand what this will look like from the outside. The blood trail, scattered bits of bone and brain, all leading to the maw of what even she knows must look like a monster. She hopes Baby can get away from this. Grow wings or legs, or maybe a whole human body with the blueprint it'll have soon. Now that people know about it, because Gary must be calling people to blab about the pink-and-purple people eater that almost got him, this place isn't safe.

But Baby isn't eating her. It wasn't eating any of it, she doesn't think, and definitely not the roadkill. Because they're all there, waiting for her, in the hole. She can see the fox now. The raccoons and dogs. Even the fawn bends its spotted neck down to look at her with those big, big eyes.

She thinks about those MRI slices one more time, and all at once she understands.

Like the doctors with their giant magnets, Baby's been looking for the source of the problem. It's finding the poisons in broken things and putting them back together, better, in the hole. The plastics and the chemicals and the tire marks that liquified the bones inside that poor fox. Baby excised them, one slice at a time. That's why they're happy, in the hole.

But for Joanna? There's no poison to take out. Every bad thing in her life, it had all just been her. Her choices and her failures, stacked one on another until she's left a withered husk dealing cheap food and cigarettes from behind a plexiglass window.

What she deserves, she knows, is to be sliced beyond all recognition.

Her deli meat should be discarded on the edge of the highway and scattered with every passing semi. That's her redemption.

But after all that blood, her Baby wouldn't do that to her. Her Baby, who wasn't a Baby at all, but an Angel. A Miracle.

So her Baby-Angel-Miracle, in all its beneficent wisdom, has called an audible. She will remain intact, in the hole. She'll be herself, in the hole.

Because Baby loves her. Loves her in all the ways she thought had abandoned her. Love that would have her, intact and imperfect, rather than not.

Her throat drags at the air, her lips moving like in prayer. Her severed neuron highways try desperately to cry. It is the religious ecstasy one can only feel from their child. It is the need that can only be met, never sated.

It is the rippling peristalsis of Baby's widening mouth, and it is the empty sky that waits beyond.

But most of all, it's the gentle nose of a fox, dappling her forehead wet.

On Nights

BY HAILEY ROSE HANKS

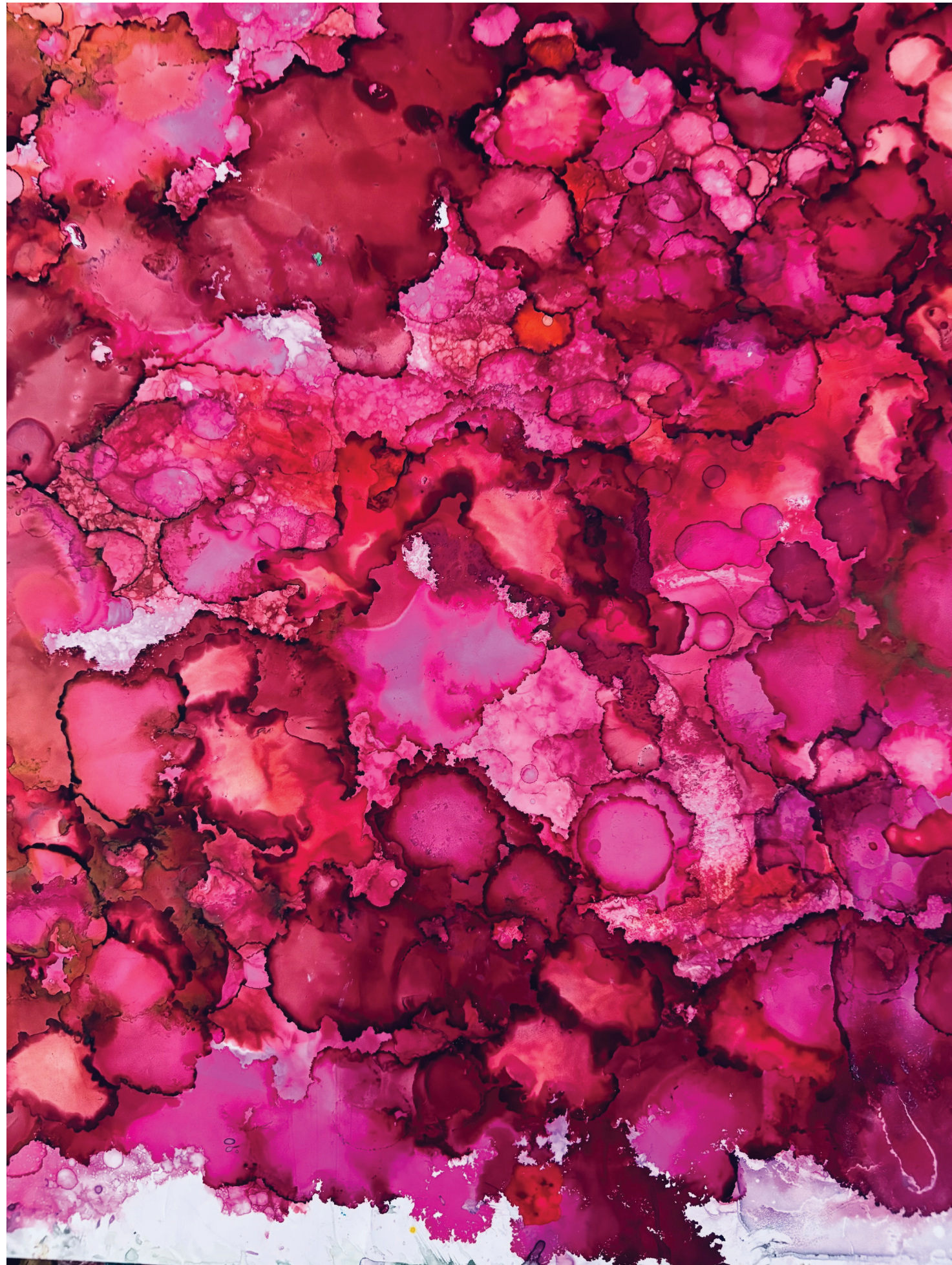
If I dream now it is of
blue angels, of blood, of a baby
folded neatly into a dark
suitcase—

all snug among
sequined socks &
clean underwear—

being safely transported through
a security scanner at
Louis Armstrong airport & then
returned to me—

still comfortably coiled
& sleeping between the legs
of my best jeans—

so finally we can run
toward home or else
anyplace we can both be
unpacked together.



The Avant Gardsmen

BY PRESTON LANG

IT WAS NEW Year's Eve, and I stumbled towards the nearest open door. The ball had already dropped in Manhattan, but in Winnipeg we were still twenty minutes short. In that slender envelope between past and future, I walked into Marina's Tavern where the TV was broadcasting live from Times Square. High above that insipid city, in the year still to come, there they were: The Avant Gardsmen, Canada's premier avant-garde boyband.

"Oh, I just love them," the woman at the end of the bar said to no one.

"Yeah?"

I sat down next to her. We watched and listened.

"This song really is kind of—well, it makes you think. It's pop music, but it's smart pop music."

"Who's your favourite? Your favourite Gardsman?" I asked.

BJ, Tony, and Lance were all cute, straightforward heartthrobs, but Smitty was dangerous, with his cheekbones and lips and romantic asymmetry.

"Smitty," the woman said and giggled.

Smit, Smitty, Smitten: Inevitable. The frontman, who crooned and swayed and occasionally delivered faux freestyle rap.

"Sure," I said. "He's a real sweetheart."

A boy who'd cut your throat for half a dollar and a piece of fudge. Just that morning, he'd had security remove me from the lobby of the Saint Regis Hotel. All I'd done was boo sombrely after he'd played Chopsticks" on the grand piano to the squealing delight of affluent tourists.

"Boo! You know what you've done. Boo!"

Less than twenty hours later, he was blowing kisses to me from a barroom flatscreen. The boys did obvious four-part harmony, punctuated by the occasional dissonant chord or spoken word non-sequitur. Pitchfork had called them "BTS for the Instagram intellectual; the thinking girl's One Direction." Smitty raised a fist and smirked as they cut to the tipsy host. And I was back in the cold, throwing up into rock-hard ice. I couldn't remember leaving the bar, but it was certainly the right choice.

"Are you all right?" a man called from inside an Acura.

"I'm terrific."

"Okay, Happy New Year."

He rolled up his window and left me alone at 28 below. My bare hands grew large and indifferent. Gorgeously puffy, they were tough to shove inside the jacket pocket where I found six dollars and my passport. The document fell onto the ground, open to the photo—dour-faced and impossibly ugly. Not quirky, not *beau laid*, I was profoundly unappealing. My great aunt Claire had described my appearance as "ominous and frustrating." It was a problem. You couldn't front a boyband with a face like this. It didn't delight tweens. Yet I'd always thought that an ugly man could form a band, provide its soul and direction, and sing backup. This was hopelessly naïve.

I shut my passport. That afternoon, I'd flown in nonstop from JFK, landing just before sunset. Driving in, there was light enough to see Route 57 clearly—lumps of dirty, grey snow lining the road like manatees. Winnipeg, that most avant-garde of cities, was where we'd first found success. In Toronto, we'd been a nuisance, shooed from

subway stations and Dollarama parking lots, jeered at by hipsters. But in Winnipeg, we'd been accepted. In early gigs, cold, dreamlike wraiths would file into small, sour-smelling venues, remove layers, then begin to thaw like frozen fish; but as they did, they were open to anything. In semi-consciousness, they were ready to be transformed by music that hung in front of them like eternity or the slime of cankerworm silk descending from a powerline.

We stayed in town four months, playing warehouses, tunnels, out-of-service washrooms at the U of M. In a North End sublet, we survived on ramen, popcorn, and chocolate almonds bought from a catholic school ringette team. Smitty paraded young fans through the shared space into the back bedroom, which had become his private boudoir. But no one was bothered by this. We had Art. Late into the night, we discussed theory and aesthetics. Well, I did. Lance and Tony would get stoned, BJ would ask if he was doing a good job, and Smitty would turn on white noise and copulate. It was a golden time for the Gardsmen, but it couldn't last.

Now I'd returned to this magical city for New Year's. The flight left me broke, but I believed that only in Winnipeg could I begin to find what I'd lost. Riding in from the airport, the radio was tuned to *Our National Tapestry*, an interview program taped the week before. A familiar female voice pitched half an octave below middle C introduced Canada's number one avant-garde boyband. She called them "mind-expanding ear candy, the yummiest flavour in the experimental spice rack." This middle-aged intellectual who ordinarily engaged poets and choreographers in erudite dialogue about intentionality and narratology was now cooing like a boy-crazy middle schooler. How did the Gardsmen manage to be so daring yet so accessible? What kind of pets did they own? Did Smitty require special shampoo for his astonishing head of hair?

"And how long will the ultramodern boyband craze last?" she asked.

"Well, we're at least six months ahead, and time moves slower for

us, so we've got more than a decade, right? That's just basic logic, yo."

Nonsense from Smitty. The closest he ever came to innovation was drivel, but the host lapped it up like cream. Then she lowered her voice.

"Is there room for—love in the avant-garde?"

Smitty let the fellas handle this: *no doubt; we meet demand; yup-yup*. But Smitty was the one everyone wanted to hear from, the man whose picture hung on bedroom walls and junior high lockers, whose dancing aroused deep, enigmatic feelings in North American girlhood: the booty bodhisattva himself.

"Oh, I'm always looking, sugar snap."

The host's blush was audible. I'd seen this hundreds of times: women and men liquefying in the face of his charm. He needed the adoration. Early reviews had called our music "pretentious buffoonery from preening squawk-merchants." He was furious; I was thrilled. Of course, the *Free Press* wouldn't understand. It would be a problem if they had. When I explained this, Smitty looked at the floor and didn't respond. Hated by critics, but increasingly embraced by the youth, we were flown to Los Angeles by Seismic Records. Smitty enchanted the flight attendant, who slipped us tiny bottles of Tanqueray while the boys sang SoulDecision without shame or irony. Only I was apprehensive. After the meeting with suits, the fake laughs, the improvised studio session, and the near promise from an executive vice president, I went out to find Mountain Dew, which was surprisingly hard to locate. When I returned, I could hear the boys from out in the hallway, laughing and sliding around in swivel chairs. They met me with smiles, Hawaiian pizza, and Sprite ordered from room service. There was no need for my three-litre bottle.

"Have a seat, Ted," Smitty said. "We have something to tell you, yo."

As shocking as it was, it felt inevitable once it was underway. Tony sat blankly with dilated pupils, BJ wouldn't look me in the eyes, but Smitty laid it out like he was ordering lunch. I was done. The Gardsmen were moving forward without me. Just as Oppenheimer

lost security clearance, and Charlie Parker was banned from Birdland, I'd been ejected from the house I'd built—a horn player who'd become destroyer of worlds spewed into America without record contract or return ticket. Of course, this wasn't the first band I'd been kicked out of. The Ekphrastic Journey, Un-Sink, Giggle Palace, and Mah Jong Afternoon had all axed me. But those were the dreams of other people. The Gardsmen were my soul, and it was about to leave me behind while recording the tunes I'd written.

It had always been my band. I had the vision; I assembled the pieces. First, I'd found Smitty in an East York supermarket. He was trying and failing to open a plastic produce bag near the lettuce. I suggested that he put his hand under the mister to moisten his fingers. It worked. And so at first, he looked at me as a sage and a fixer.

"Romaine is just lettuce, yo."

That was the first full sentence he said to me, and I sensed his obvious charisma and sweet, spinto tenor. He told me about the groups he'd been in: The Scales, Narwhal Norplant, Sensu-Owl, One Man's Bridge. When I mentioned I was putting together an experimental boyband, Smitty jumped. But just as easily, he could've gone country, Broadway, emo. Avant-garde wasn't in his blood like it was in mine.

My great-grandfather had been in a small group with Arnold Schoenberg and a few other boys in Vienna in the 1890s. They were called The Expressionaires, Arnie and the Fancy Lads, or sometimes *Sprech-sassy*. Schoenberg, of course, was the cool, scowling one in a vest with no shirt underneath. My forebear was the sweet, cute one who played bass and occasionally performed unusual acts, like eating soap or casting doubt on the concept of linear time. His daughter, my great aunt Claire, a pilot and guitarist, joined the Mac-Paps and sang for the soldiers during the Spanish Civil War. But she was disappointed to find that when it came to music, anarchists just wanted three chords and a smile.

The rest of my band was gathered from the detritus of other groups.

They had to be squeal-worthy, but I didn't want them with too many ideas, and Smitty didn't want anyone quite as good-looking as he was. We quickly found Lance and Tony. I got to work on arrangements and hounded venues for gigs. Smitty put product in his hair and texted photographs of his torso to young women across the GTA. BJ was the last to join. Cute as he was, there was a melancholy to his face that I knew we needed. He would appeal particularly to asthmatics and the children of divorce.

On New Year's Eve, in that cab in Winnipeg, I listened to BJ tell the radio host how he'd left Petit Claude and the Zydeco Malaise. They were part of the Zydeco Triste movement that was very big in Gatineau a few years back.

"I played a percussive washboard, but—you know—it was broken, and the paint was toxic. Our accordion player was still deeply depressed because her mother had not shown her love in adolescence."

It was the saddest of all Cajun-inflected genres.

"What made you leave them?" the host asked.

Here is where he'd have to describe the night when *I* pulled him from that depressing gumbo, bought him a clean shirt, and laid out his future. BJ began to speak, to tell the truth, but Smitty cut him off.

"Petit Claude was kind of a dick," Smitty said. "Excuse the language." But the host was undeterred. She'd done her homework.

"Wasn't Ted Raines a founding member of your group?"

"Who?"

The tiniest tremor soured the honey of Smitty's delivery.

"Ted Raines."

Finally, I had a defender broadcasting across the prairies at 990 kilohertz. My gyrating tormentor was about to be unmasked.

"That dude? Nah. I mean, we may have met him once or twice, but he was never a Gardsman. And you said *founding member*? Get real, bruh."

Smitty's laugh was now tight and false. He was on the ropes, and the

brave journalist would confront him with video, email, sheet music: proof. Instead, something happened in studio. I could only imagine what Smitty did with his eyes or pectorals, but the host segued back to gooey promotion.

"By the time this airs, you'll be in New York, getting ready to perform in Times Square."

"Auld lang syne, yo."

BJ sang the old Celtic air then broke off in atonal melisma. He was a sweet boy, a true believer but weak and softheaded. That night in Los Angeles, just before I left to get Mountain Dew, minutes before he voted me out of the band, he'd pulled me aside.

"I respect what you're trying to do. I respect that so much."

But what *was* I trying to do? Aunt Claire had asked me this just before she died. She was the one who'd introduced me to truly avant-garde voices like Susan Lepage and the Alphagetti Gobbler. She taught me how to sieve the bulky grain of popular culture into a fine, subversive powder. All the answers I gave her were unsatisfactory, and she died disappointed.

I still felt the sting of this in that cab, listening to Smitty gloat on the CBC.

"We're the only ones who count. We're the only ones who are, like, really modernistic," he said.

The field had grown thick with experimental boybands. The media pitted them against each other.

"What about The Avant Gardians, The Skibidi Soldiers, The Rizzingtons, or The Avant-garde Dogs?"

"Woof woof," Tony barked.

"Imitators, not rivals," Smitty said.

He was right. The Gardsmen were international stars. The others fought over scraps.

"And I say that with love," he continued. "Nothing against them. I speak truth. I speak love. I make love."

“And how *does* an Avant Gardsman make love?” the host asked.

“A Gardsmen loves the same way he creates: intensely, experimentally, full of invention and profanation. He implements unorthodox instrumentation and doesn’t fear ridicule. He seldom follows a strict tempo or tonal orthodoxy. In love as in music, he is unafraid to disgrace his family with absurdity, narcissism, or nihilistic thrusting. Sometimes the erotic possibilities of dissonance are overwhelming, birthing unrealized excess of body and soul. Other times he is satisfied with some light snuggling on the couch and a frozen yogurt.”

But that wasn’t Smitty’s answer; it was mine. I’d said it aloud, and the cabbie demanded I get out. We were downtown, a short walk from the three wise men on Osborne Street, who sat high up on camels loaded with riches. I was down to my last six dollars, just enough to buy the cheapest bottle of red wine. It was still December, that season of candy cane and Bubl  , and I wandered the skywalk, sipping discreetly in the hallways and shops.

Just before midnight, I fell out into the cold and immediately looked for a barroom. In Marina’s Tavern, I watched the Gardsmen perform live from New York then was thrown out, possibly for hurling aggressive comments at the screen. Had I called Smitty a rat, an empty-headed dilettante, a fornicating poseur, an anti-rhythmic cypher, a rapacious manchild, a gyrating malignancy? Maybe. I’d also lacked the cash to pay for my drink. Whatever the reason, I was shoved, then kicked to the pavement. But this was nothing new. I’ve been thrown out of bars, cabs, schools, subreddits, the keyboard section of Long and McQuaid’s, lawn bowling societies, Japanese tea ceremonies, the Dutch Reformed church, and at least seventeen bands.

I can remember the snow, the Acura, and increasing numbness, but I have no recollection of entering the emergency warming centre. Four of us sat in the large open space with a view of the Assiniboine: two men without faces—no eyes, nose, or mouth, and my great aunt

Claire, neatly attired in high-collared dress and running shoes, 117 years old. Her voice quavered and her breathing was laboured, but she said this was an intentional musical choice. She’d seen the Avant Gardsmen on TV that night and wasn’t a fan.

“Nonsense lyrics with occasional dissonance. Bah!”

“I was thrown out of that band, you know?”

“Of course you were. What does that tell you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does it tell you that you were too avant-garde for the Avant Gardsmen?”

I began to feel optimistic and perhaps a little fevered. The faceless men had come over, but they simply sat and listened politely. When I told my aunt that I was broke, she took a Loonie out of her pocket. Her face was etched on the front.

“It’s not the most flattering picture,” she said.

“Don’t you have to be dead to be on the money?” I asked.

“The queen is on the money. Is she dead?”

“Yes.”

“No, she isn’t.”

I wasn’t going to fight about this because that last phrase—*no, she isn’t*—formed a perfect figured bassline, a starting place for something daringly outr   but catchy as hell. Finally, I’d found what I needed: one ancient aviatrix, two liminal ghouls, and me.

And that’s how I formed the Avant Gard Rails.

Corn Snake #31

BY MARY SOON LEE

The diary of your days unpenned,
a prairie reaching east and west
to lands uncharted, unexplored--

October 28th. Stretched, basked.
Pondered the nature of time,
whether linearity is provable.

October 29th. Flexed, pooped.
The more I eat, the vaster I become.
Is there a limit?

October 30th. Took a dip in my bowl.
How does the water conform herself
to my shape with such supple speed?

October 31st. Noises from street.
Carousing? Why do they gather?
Are they not sufficient to themselves?

November 1st. Stretched, basked.
Toyed with human by toying with rat.
Lunged repeatedly without grabbing.

November 2nd. Danced alone at dawn.
Considered the cat, seen only once,
but his smell a constant creeping.

November 3rd. I should eat again.
The more I eat, the vaster I become.
Given time, I could swallow the cat.

North of West Erie

BY DALE SCHERFLING

THE BRICKS ON Sailortown streets were always wet, even in August. I never understood that. No rain for two weeks and still the bricks would sweat, dark and slick under the streetlamps, as if the lake itself were seeping up through the ground, reclaiming things.

I was ten years old and I knew every bar on that strip.

Not the way you'd think. Nobody looked for me there. Nobody was looking for me anywhere, particularly. My mother believed I was delivering papers, which I had been two hours earlier. My father believed whatever my mother believed. I had route money in my pocket and a head full of nothing much, and Sailortown was three bus transfers and a world away from the house on Reid Avenue, which was recommendation enough.

The place I liked best had no sign. The regulars called it Dooney's, though I never met anyone named Dooney and never thought to ask. It smelled of cigarettes and the particular sweetness of spilled beer that had soaked into old wood and given up trying to leave.

The bartender was a big Pole named Stash who wore the same undershirt every day — or an identical one, which amounted to the same thing. When I climbed onto a stool he would already be reaching for the Grapette without my asking. He set it in front of me with a paper straw and went back to whatever he'd been doing, which was usually nothing, performed with great concentration.

The sailors came off the lake freighters — International Harvester, Henry Ford II, Crispin Oglebay — men who had been on the water long enough that land made them restless and drink made them still. They argued about things I didn't follow and some I did.

A man named Gustafson once explained to me, in patient detail, the proper way to throw a punch, using a barstool for demonstration.

Another time I watched two men settle a disagreement about money near the cigarette machine. It was fast, the way real things are fast, nothing like the movies. One of them went down and stayed down and everyone went back to their drinks.

The man still standing looked at me.

I looked at my Grapette.

After a while he went out the back.

There was a newspaper man named Cavanaugh who came in most Fridays with a cigar he never fully lit. He had a hat he wore indoors and out and a way of looking at you that made you feel you'd already said something wrong.

Once, he asked me what I was doing there.

I told him I liked it.

"You like it," he said.

He seemed to consider whether that was stupid or not. Then he bought me another Grapette and showed me how to score a boxing card, which I've done correctly ever since.

I never told my parents. Not because I was afraid of punishment — though I would have been punished — but because there was no version of it I could explain.

How do you say: I go there because something there is true? Because the men in Sailortown wanted nothing from me and asked nothing and let me sit among them like a piece of furniture that had always been there? Because the wet bricks and the Grapette and the sound of pool balls knocking together in the back room added up to something I couldn't have named then and can barely name now?

I took the ten-o'clock bus back. I always made it. The city slid past the window, the lights doubling on the wet pavement, and I'd sit in the back with my hands in my pockets and my paper route money and whatever I'd taken in that evening, carrying it home like something I'd found and wasn't sure yet what to do with.

The bricks were always wet.

Even in August.

I don't know why that mattered, but it did.



YELLOW LAKE

Open Mic Night

BY JOHN DAVIS

In men's faces I have seen
women who have stretched
their men like goat-skinned drums,
pounded sound as deep as a gorge.

From a tongue I have heard
a man's not-guilty plea
scrape like a wooden shoe
against a gravestone.

Who hasn't lived inside
the jump blues this night,
plunked a ghost-town rhythm
that hollowed his bones?

Can't say every man here has dug
a grave before he steps
on stage to feel the gorilla's
roar, the belly's belch,

but under lights as red as
the eyes of a barbary lion,
I have heard a man bang
the crooked nail of a song.

I have heard him inside me
when the galvanized pipe of my
voice grumbles like thunder
hungry for lightning.

Unstageable: The Plays of Irene Sabian

BY ERIC HILL

ONE NEED ONLY skim the first few pages of any play by Irene Sabian to recognize her unique style—and then realize why only a handful of her works made it to the stage during her lifetime. This is not to say that her work is unworthy or offensive in any sense. Quite the contrary. What makes her scripts so intriguing is precisely the same characteristic that keeps them from being easily translated into conventional theater. Each play seems intentionally designed to make it impossible to stage for most traditional means and venues.

So, one might ask, why write plays that cannot be produced? Was this a deliberate act of self-sabotage or act of rebellion? Before I answer this, and before I review and analyze some of her more challenging works, I'd like to offer the following passage from her essay, "The Incomprehensible Magician":

If a play is easy to stage, easy to direct, and easy to perform, if the point is clarity, if the dialogue is so flawlessly wrought so as to be immediately comprehended, then it is a play that need not be written, much less experienced. The same holds true for any work of art, whether it is theater, painting, music, literature, etc.; when it makes perfect sense or reaches out to the audience, it has already failed. This is precisely why so many artforms

have evolved from simple, straightforward, and so-called meaningful expressions into exasperatingly cryptic and arcane displays from which the audience feels alienated and unworthy. Consider the assault of abstract expressionism on those schools of art that originally strove for clearly representative images. Or consider the shock of audiences whose previous experience of music had been traditional, tonal, and pleasing symphonic compositions, which in no way prepared them for Stravinsky or the Serialists. Or, to take it even a step further, when so-called musicians began to destroy their instruments on stage or spit on the audience that came to hear them, that is when music ceases to pander. Theater is no different in this respect.

It would be a grave error, however, to mistake Sabian's take on such confrontational theater as merely a retread of the Avant Garde movements that preceded her, as several have tried to do. Consider this response from journalist and theater critic Aldo Bonetti who attended a performance of Sabian's first play, ".", in which all dialogue is replaced with punctuation marks, forcing the actors to find a way to communicate without words, as well as expecting the audience to understand what the actors were "saying."

In her first attempt at playwrighting, Sabian reveals her love for Artaud, at least in the sense that she seems more interested in alienating her audience than having them experience anything remotely relatable. I must admit, I watched with pity as her poor actors plead with her during rehearsal to allow them at least to voice inflections or grunts in order to convey the "dialogue." Sabian instantly shut them all down, insisting that they were to convey meaning with silence. When they asked her how, she turned and glared at them. "With a look!"

“.” closed after a run of only three performances, not due to lack of interest or poor reviews, but because Sabian accused one of the actors of “misrepresenting the semicolon time and time again.”

In the particularly volatile opening scene, the protagonist, “/”, attempts to make what he thinks is a profound declaration to his confused student, “*”. The resulting escalation between the two grows palpably uncomfortable:

by Irene Sabian

Cast of Characters

- /: 45 years old, motivational speaker with a limp.
- /: 30 years old, amateur serial killer, always on the lookout for a mentor.
- &: 23 years old, exotic dancer who is hopelessly in love with ;.
- ∴: 42 years old, unemployed janitor who is hopelessly in love with *.

ACT I
Scene 1

Setting: A library rotunda, surrounded by shelves of reference material, dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias, atlases, and bibliographies. A large table with several chairs occupies center stage.

At Rise: * is seated at the table, looking somewhat confused. / stands over him, gesticulating in what appears to be an aggressive manner. * listens meekly, a mere footnote to /’s apparent declarative narrative.

/ (confidently)

.

*

?

/

.

* (unsure)

??

/

.

* (confused and frightened)

???

/ (frustrated and angry)

!

* (completely lost)

...

In her next work, Sabian refused to include dialogue of any kind. *The Defenestration of Lyle Tango*, from her “Theater of the Implied” series, utilized unusually long and detailed stage directions that seemed to come from the audience’s perspective:

AT RISE: We see LYLE standing at the window of his 33rd-story apartment, a view looking out over the clamor and confusion of the city below. He is smoking thoughtfully, gazing through the glass that, because of the room's lighting and the darkness outside, has gradually transformed into a vague mirror. He appears to be mulling over something distant yet significant, turning it over in his head as he regards an unseen world just beyond the pane.

Suddenly, without warning, he opens the window and pushes himself through, presumably plummeting to the dead-end alley below. And while we cannot see him now, we are certain that he must now be lying perfectly still, having landed supine, crumbled in a puddle of his own quietude, a model for a police chalk artist, another fossil on the pitiless pavement of the city. We also know, having read the program, that nine months later he will climb through the very same window, only then he will step through from the other side. But for now, he is out of sight—at least for the moment. Yet, we all sense that something is up.

Lyle enters again from stage left and it is then we realize it was all in his head; he did not, in fact, jump at all, but had merely fantasized about jumping. Perhaps as a rehearsal for the real thing? We realize all this not so much because of some clever theatrical device or as the result of any obvious asides to us by Lyle (he remains pensive and silent), but rather because we have been to the theater many, many times before and are beginning to comprehend the subtleties of the stage. Unlike television viewers, those passive eaters of dung, we can appreciate just how much theater demands from us in terms of our attention, suspension of disbelief, and level of sophistication.

Lyle is back at the window now, still staring and smoking. And we are beginning to sense that there is an entirely different play going on inside his head, a drama to which we evidently are not privy, and, frankly, this begins to annoy us. This has become a one-man performance playing to a house of one, the fleshy curtains are parting just beneath the bony proscenium

arch of this homo thespian's heavily furrowed brow, but what is revealed is revealed to none but him.

We listen for any sign of life, but to no avail. Someone sitting near the back row drops a pin. But the actor playing Lyle remains unmoved, continuing to gaze away from us and through his mirror/window. We also know, incidentally, that the character's name is not really Lyle. We know this because we read it in the program before the house lights went down. We also know that the character has chosen this new name because he intends to jump from the window (and we only know that because we looked up the word "defenestration" in the dictionary last week right before calling the box office to reserve tickets for tonight's performance). What we don't know is why he has chosen this new name.

And then, as if the actor playing Lyle is able to read our minds, we are suddenly made aware of his reasoning, not through some cheap and condescending narrative or overexplanatory monologue that could easily leave us feeling manipulated, but rather through a series of graceful motions, a series of subtle yet complex eyebrow movements, and several well-executed lighting cues.

We now fully understand this desperate and lonely man who stands before us, his back to our searching gazes. Poised at the border of his demise, he has made the decision to rechristen himself with a fictional name since he is about to become nonexistent. Like a performer who seeks to reinvent himself for the public eye, the character of Lyle has chosen a nom de plume in order to rewrite his role, to reinvent himself as he proceeds into the land of the late and the mythical. For Lyle knows that to be no more is to become fictional, joining the ranks of dodos and unicorns, of Jimmy Hoffa and Rumpelstiltskin.

We also realize that if a fictional character commits suicide, thereby relegating himself to a state of nonexistence, isn't he in a sense merely birthing himself into our realm, much in the same way that when we surrender to death we are essentially passing into the fictional? For with this one act of sacrifice, won't Lyle bring us into the play? Won't

we, the living and nonfictional, at the moment of his fictional death, then pass through the fourth wall and into the play, while Lyle, the fictional character, moves past us on his way into the negative capability of reality?

But we do not stop there, for we also realize that the real actor who is playing this fictional human being is as real as we are, an actor who is likely going by a stage name and is only pretending to kill himself.

Or is he?

And at this point we must smile slyly, stroke our chins, and nod in approval. The author of this play has given us much to ponder, and we find ourselves, along with Lyle, gazing through that prop window that now serves as a screen upon which we and Lyle project our deepest inner thoughts; together we mull over the precarious legitimacy of our own suspect existence in which we have given largely random and counterfeit monikers.

Just as we have surrendered to this moment of actionless, dialogueless musing, we are suddenly stunned by what occurs next: Lyle jumps. And we know in our heart of hearts that this time it is the real thing (real, that is, in the theatrical sense; we are neither children nor developmentally challenged). This is not a flight into fancy, but the moment we had been simultaneously dreading and anticipating. And while we cannot see Lyle plummeting to his death, we are certain that it takes him forever to fall those 33 floors—or at least we are certain that it must seem like forever to Lyle.

And as he falls, we have little doubt that Lyle catches glimpses through many windows on his way down, each floor a reminder of chapters of his life: Mrs. P who gave Lyle two weeks of piano lessons when he was nine; Helena and Dimitri Lukashanko, whose Doberman, Jeffrey, Lyle took care of while they traveled back to Minsk for a funeral . . .

Theater critic and author Gene Hunsaker suggests in his biography of Sabian (*Darüber muss man schweigen*) that her aversion to dialogue

arose largely from her work in semiotics and musicology. Her doctoral dissertation, *Decomposition: The Musical Semiotics of Silence*, analyzed selections of scores by Alphonse Allais, Irwin Schulhoff, and John Cage, discussing their notation of silence. This, no doubt, greatly influenced her theatrical endeavors and inspired her to include their music, especially Schulhoff, in much of her work.

In her play, *Intermission*, for example, she has the orchestra perform Schulhoff's *In futurum* (from his work *Fünf Pittoresken*), a piece that she adamantly insists was shamelessly plagiarized by Cage for his "inferior" piece 4'33. While both pieces are notated with nothing but rests, Sabian insists that Cage's rests are "lazy, rendered with neither nuance nor inspiration."

During one of her university lectures, Sabian described Schulhoff's *In futurum* as "the love child of Ravel and Joplin as overheard by the late Beethoven." When one of the attendees asked whether she meant "late" as in deaf or as in dead, she assured him she intended the latter. "Although," she went on, "this is not to say that we should confuse posthumousness with silence. Death is not silent except to the living; it is the audience who refuses to shut up. The dead make an ideal audience. Schulhoff has written not for the deaf, but for the silent audience."

When another attendee asked, "What do you consider to be your greatest work?" Sabian replied,

As has been said about Ringo Starr, what made him a genius is not what he played, but rather what he did not play. I believe this sentiment carried over into his other endeavors. Ringo took up painting and photography, yet it was what he didn't paint or photograph that showed us what an eclectic master he is. I attended an exhibition of the work he did not do, a mixture of paintings and photographs he never produced, and I have to say, it was inspiring. So, to answer your question, my greatest

work is the play I will never write. Unlike my other works, it will stand the test of time and will continue to echo long after my demise.¹

What many critics failed to see is that, unlike Artaud's "theater of cruelty," Sabian's motivations came from a place of expectation more than assault. She expects more from her audience but knows all too well that they have been fed a steady diet of TV sitcoms for so long that the nuances of live theater may leave them confused and frightened. Rather than cater to them, however, she challenges them to rise to the occasion. If they fail, then she, like a patient parent, does not respond with anger but a kind of sad disappointment.

In her final attempt to challenge audiences, Sabian wrote what many considered her most arcane and inaccessible work: *Knows*. In this play, she strips away what most of us would consider essential components: actors, script, sets, and lighting.

Once the house lights come down, the audience is subjected to two and half hours of darkness. The only clue as to scene changes comes from odors pumped into the theater. During Act I, Scene I, there is the scent of rain (i.e., petrichor); the play begins just after a downpour. Then there is the unmistakable smell of wood smoke, followed by the ghost of freshly brewed coffee. Act II plunges the audience into an olfactory narrative far more violent and alarming: gunpowder, the unmistakable iron scent of fresh blood, and, finally, decomposition.

Fiona Agnew, theater critic for the *Connaught Telegraph*, describes her experience thusly:

In the program's director's notes, Sabian, who is also the author, describes how she came about writing the play; the inspiration came from a psychic she had visited in the late 1960's who could only smell into her clients' futures. The psychic would ask

Sabian questions like, "I'm sensing a cross between cinnamon and patchouli. Does that sound familiar?" Sabian left frustrated, but became intrigued by the idea of a play based solely on the sense of smell. And, indeed, this is easily the most malodorous production in Sabian's oeuvre.

Knows would be Sabian's swan song, premiering and closing at Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin after two nights.

Today Sabian's legacy, unfortunately, remains silent as well. Her plays are largely ignored; few theater historians, much less critics and audiences, know of her work. In the end, her bold and revolutionary works proved far too challenging for those who lacked the imagination or courage to recognize her contribution to the American stage. Yet perhaps it is this silence she would have been the proudest of. As she once said, "Silence is not the absence of sound, any more than peace is the absence of war. All our dirges, taps, and requiems are played for the living; the dead are spared these cacophonous displays of performative pathos and disingenuous mourning. Silence is the rest we all need from noise. And we shall all, in the end, rest in silence."

¹ At her request, the title of this unwritten work was not chiseled into Sabian's blank headstone.

The Janitor

BY P.B. BREMER

His power is in reading secrets—
the students'
whose combinations he keeps
deep in the fold of his wallet. He reads
love letters in purple cursive,
hate mail scrawled in black Bic.

A cock and balls scribbled in pencil
throbs stiff and simple next to a pot leaf
and a phone number all fives
in the margins of a diary
praying to blow a boy after the dance.

All night he walks the dark halls of the high school
wing by wing, lighting fluorescent sunscapes
with a Seymour key, throwing open
classrooms so boredom can breathe.

His is a loneliness no one knows
vacuuming candy wrappers, bubble gum,
Cheetos pieces, Kleenex wads of snot.
Requisites for the real work: buffing
forever his likeness
into the high shine of the tile.

CYNTHIA YATCHMAN



CHENGDU

Gravity Man Faces the Cost of Employment

BY STEVE MINNICH

IN THIS EPISODE GRAVITY MAN CONTEMPLATES THE MEANING OF EASTER

everyone says that Gravity Man's life went out and then returned, but no. returning to the surface of the world after a journey into its invisible center is not returning to the living world after a journey into its death. the difference is one of accounting.

what rising Gravity Man has done, Gravity Man thinks, is no more mysterious than a jump. who bears the blame if the rise of every jump is followed by a return toward the center of the world? and can it not be said in reverse—that every journey toward the center be followed by a return, some day, to the surface? there is a balance that must be accounted for.

what goes up must come down, the old song goes. of dust we rise and to dust we must return. this is how accounting was born, how Gravity Man pays his rent. but then, another story goes—after three days of death, the dead man rose. gathered the dust of his old dead bones. jumped from this world and never returned. some things, thinks Gravity Man, in the great all of history, are never accounted for. no.

no—so when the boss comes knocking for a full report, for confession of anything unaccounted, any sin against balance, all that Gravity Man has to confess are miracles and mystery. and in a world that confesses miracle, what loss is lost to mystery? oh, boss. look around. how can this world ever be accounted for?

but he is trying oh lordy
believe in all miracle believe
he is trying his best

IN THIS EPISODE GRAVITY MAN TRIES ON A NEW SUIT

but the fit is never right
and his tailor is on holiday.
that is what he tells the kind human
helping him try on the suits

every one just a little off.
oh but the sleeve is too long
Gravity Man says
himself a little off

and my tailor isn't around to take in this loose middle.
the tailor grows less distinct with every detail.
the secret
thinks Gravity Man

is in telling a lie so gravely
so buried under
weights of worlds
that you forget where

the lie begins.
if it is
a lie
to begin with.

Gravity Man flings off the new suit.
reveals another
already
in its place.

IN THIS EPISODE GRAVITY MAN IS GOOD FOR NOTHING

on his way to work Gravity Man overhears a snide remark
from the other side of the street. *there goes that good-for-*
nothing, Gravity Man thinks he hears.

when he turns, slowly, careful not to disrupt his balance,
there is nothing there. still, all the way to work, Gravity Man
walks in a cloud. passing every window, a passing whisper:
good-for-nothing. every time Gravity Man turns to see who
calls him that, only Gravity Man looks back.

when Gravity Man sits at his desk, he hears it in every
number that he must account for that day. *nothing! good*
for nothing! furiously he begins to work, balancing every
account, bringing every number back to nothing.

every something that once was, in the accounts of Gravity
Man, becomes nothing. yes, nods Gravity Man. when it
comes to making nothing out of something, there is none
so good as Gravity Man.

IN THIS EPISODE GRAVITY MAN ACCOUNTS FOR HIS OWN EXISTENCE

right after the Big Bang, particles of matter and particles of antimatter annihilated each other. but for every billion pairs of particles, there is one extra particle of matter. that tiny imbalance accounts for the existence of Gravity Man (that is, the fulcrum of annihilation).

think of it this way : for every balanced action, there exists a point outside the action on which its balance rests. a point which would, were it to exert any force of its own, render the entire action obsolete. unbalanced. incomplete.

and what is the universe if not its own greatest balancing act? and what is Gravity Man if not just outside the action?

when a child chases a ball into the street who but Gravity Man can account for what is to come? and what will remain after the point of annihilation? neighbors burn effigies of neighbors. nations declare war. oh great balancer of great ledgers, stars burst. inward forces exert forces so powerful as to tear holes in universes. oh Gravity Man, a ball has bounced into the street; a child lingers just off screen. how do we account for violence?

Gravity Man bows his head to the task, checks the books again.

IN THIS EPISODE GRAVITY MAN DROPS HIS MASK

and knows it will never
be picked up again. not
by Gravity Man. think.

to bend over for the mask
would unbalance the world
in search of an object
already left behind. but

to let the mask lie
to let the world in on the secret
face of Gravity Man : that
would unbalance the world
in ways not yet described.

given a choice between the two
why not give something new a try.

Permanence

BY JAMES EKENSTEDT

Man, let that poor sucker sleep. I can't form words.
I can mythologize a bomber leather jacket,
a blue cowboy, a handsome guy with a great vacant
yawn. See, whitewashing personal histories is
easy. The devil looks just like me. He is a
long-distance runner who ran the length of
the horizon to find time boxed and compressed.
His eyes are microscopes for this vehicle of sound
and motion. Looking for me? I'd forgotten
who I was. My lease on this body is cheap
man fabric. My violence is seductive and inherited.
Find me driving a pickup truck with murals of nude, fat men.
As a kid, they were my heroes, muscular beer can smooth.
I remember. Now, no body holds the wheel.

One More Jump

BY VICTOR McCONNELL

THE LENGTH OF Frank's pre-show walks had grown, though the change occurred so gradually he hadn't noticed. Before setting out, he lifted each thigh to his chest, trying to loosen knees and hips. A breeze was strengthening from the west, and low clouds hung heavy with no hills to hold them up. Frank walked past the battered wagons and worn-down Ford motor car that carried them from town to town. He'd never been granted the honor of driving, and he paused at the driver's side, reaching in and running his hand along the cracked leather wheel. He continued onto Main Street, passing the church, the saloon, and the handful of shops and clapboard houses. He stopped just past the General Store, in sight of the cotton fields that abutted the edge of town. They would be picked bare soon enough, but for now they lay unblemished.

It was a Saturday afternoon and Frank figured that everyone would have gathered in the town center for the show by now. Yet he could make out the hunched back of one picker in the distance, canvas sack slung over his shoulder as he moved slowly through the rows of the otherwise empty field. The figure looked as his father had when he'd watched from his bedroom window. His father worked until nightfall, until Frank's mother called out that supper was ready two or three times.

Seeing the solitary picker from afar reminded Frank of the day of his first significant jump, an afternoon when his mother had gone to town

for supplies and his father was outside. Frank was six years old and supposed to be sweeping. Bored, he'd suddenly remembered the half-smoked Sunday cigar that his father kept above the kitchen door jamb.

Even after dragging a chair beneath the door, the cigar remained well out of reach. Fear of the forbidden made him act quickly. After a few leaps, his fingertips grazed it and it bounced to the floor, sending a thin spray of tobacco across the wooden boards. Frank quickly swept up the reddish-brown dust and carried it out on the front porch, dumping it in the dirt. He scanned the field until he saw his father, still focused on the soil. Frank planted himself in his father's rocking chair and struck a match, feeling very much like a man. He sucked in and his throat seared and he thought the smoke was disintegrating his insides. He hacked, expecting some piece of lung to come out. When he could breathe again, he decided the cigar wasn't for him and scrambled back onto the chair in the kitchen. He tried to return it to the door jamb, but even when he jumped high and focused on the moment of stillness at the apogee, it kept rolling off.

He was sweating with effort when the screen door creaked open. Frank felt panic in his chest, realizing he'd forgotten to look up the road to see if his mother was approaching in the wagon. He breathed and gathered himself for one last attempt. He flexed his knees, springing and arching his back, straining for extra height. For all his effort, he soared little higher than he had on his previous jump and thudded to the ground in failure. His mother wondered aloud at the noise, calling his name. He suddenly felt stupid; he could've stacked things up on the chair to reach the door jamb instead of jumping. With a surge of shame, he stood and jumped without thought or hesitation, placing the cigar with ease above the door, landing, then lifting the chair and setting it back by the kitchen table. He picked up the broom from where it leaned against the sink just as his mother entered the room.

FRANK LOOKED AT his timepiece and realized he needed to make his way back. He'd been leaning against a post outside the General Store and, when he turned to go, he almost bumped into a man that was hurrying past.

"Fire?" Frank said.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Just what's the hurry?"

The man smiled. "Ah. Got caught up closing the store, and now I'm liable to be late for today's show. I don't want to miss any of it. It's a rule of mine to not be late, you know."

"That's a good rule to have."

"It's one that has stood me in good stead. I often leave early, but I ain't late. Two go hand in hand, you know. Better to leave something a bit early than to get to the next place late." The man saw Frank looking at him. "I ain't been even close to late in a while until now. Don't go thinking I plan to make a habit of it."

"I didn't think it. And I reckon you got plenty of time. I'm one of the performers and I'm not there yet."

The man seemed suspicious, as if Frank would lie about such a thing.

"Your face don't seem familiar. What's your act?"

Frank considered how to answer. He didn't really think of it as an act. "I don't want to spoil anything. You'll see soon enough."

The man shrugged and hurried off a little faster than before. Frank trailed along behind him, turning before they reached the crowd, winding his way toward the troupe tent and settling himself on his empty wooden crate. The surface was worn smooth, and the boards flexed beneath him and seemed on the verge of cracking. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the canvas.

A pair of boots scratched to a halt in the dirt, and he waited to be addressed. It was rare that someone sought him out when he was off by himself. Neither the boots nor the person wearing them made a sound, and Frank waited before cracking his eyelids. It was Mordecai, the show's

new magician. Frank looked up at the young, freckled face as Mordecai fiddled with one of the straps on his faded suspenders, cinching it tight and pulling it up toward his collarbone. Even after being tightened, the strap slid a few inches down the boy's thin shoulders. Frank didn't think he looked a day past sixteen. Mordecai still said nothing.

"Well. Can I help you, kid?"

"Don't know. Milton told me that you wasn't busy and that you might could."

Frank waited. Mordecai finally continued. "Sorry. I didn't aim to bother you. I'm pretty sure I can figure things out anyhow."

"I didn't say I was bothered. And I didn't say I wouldn't help. But we don't got all day, so come on out with it." The sun had eased out from behind the clouds and Frank lifted a hand above his brow, shielding the brightness so as to better see Mordecai.

"Well, Milton told me no magician worth his salt does magic without a bowtie. He ain't told me that when I signed on, and I might not of done it if I'd known I'd have to dress up."

"What's your point? I don't have a bowtie."

"I got a bowtie that Milton gave me. Thing is, though, I just don't know how to tie it." Mordecai paused for a moment. "And I asked Milton but he sent me over here."

Frank thought maybe the others were playing a joke on him. "Kid, why would I know how to tie a tie? They don't make a chair leaper dress up like that."

The boy brushed at some unseen dust on his shirt sleeve.

"Like I said, I don't know. I didn't figure you could or couldn't. But I was just going on what Milton said and I figured I could ask cause it didn't look like you was doing much."

"Well. You can't always judge on looks."

The boy stayed quiet and stood his ground. Frank pulled out a small gold watch from a sewn canvas pocket on the breast of his overalls. "Show starts in ten minutes. You shouldn't be bothering folks so soon

before, no matter who tells you what. But it doesn't appear that I got a choice in helping you." Frank breathed out and rose up off his box. "I ain't tied a bow before, but let's see if we can't puzzle through it."

Mordecai offered a low thanks and pulled the crumpled tie from his pocket. Frank had seen one tied a couple times, and he helped the young magician fumble and twist the bit of silk until it bore some resemblance to a bow. "You got everything else ready?"

"Yep," the boy said. "I can do any trick there is." He paused, his young face crinkling in a half-grin. "I mean, as long as they don't ask me to tie no ties."

Frank smiled when he realized the boy was expecting him to laugh. "Fair enough. You best head on and do a final check. I got some of my own thinking to do before the show."

"Alright." The boy turned to go, paused as if to ask another question, and then went on. Frank watched until he disappeared around the corner of the tent, back toward the bustle. He was their third magician in the last six months. The most recent one had been kicked out after several shows made it clear that he couldn't perform a tenth of the tricks he'd claimed. And the one before that had been too good—he'd left their troupe when he was offered a better paying gig with a show that stayed in the cities. Frank couldn't remember having trouble finding a stable magician in years past and wondered what had changed.

A few seconds after Mordecai disappeared, a sharp crack rang out, followed by the tinkling sound of falling glass. Frank stood and saw that the trick shooter was already warming up the crowd, tossing glass balls high in the air and exploding them from his hip with a revolver. The crowd didn't know that the pistol was loaded with bird shot so that hitting the balls was no special feat. Frank heard Milton call out that the next act would be starting soon and for everyone to set up where they had a good view.

Frank sat down and rubbed his legs, flexing them outward several times. The plains in front of him were already brown and dry from

early summer heat. This day was cool, though, and Frank slowly settled into a sedative calm, his memory circling back again to the day when he smoked his father's cigar. He'd long pondered whether his parents had known, having initially believed that he fooled them. His mother said nothing upon seeing him sweating while sweeping and his father said nothing that Sunday about a more used-up cigar. As the years passed, however, Frank found himself thinking that they had known but allowed him to get away with it. He was never sure exactly why, and he sometimes thought that they realized how high he'd jumped and hadn't wanted to punish him for being such a marvel.

Milton announced the juggler and Frank stretched his stiff knees one last time and ambled slowly around the backside of the crowd. Once he was close enough, he could see the juggler concluding his performance by allowing the crowd to heave objects up onto the platform, which he would snatch out of the air and seamlessly meld into his routine. When he finished, he was tossing up his original three juggling balls, a felt hat, a boot, a baseball, an egg, and a rusted tin coffee cup. He feigned losing control, staggering forward and sending the objects, one by one, back to their proper owners in the crowd. Frank watched the baseball head up out of his hand and then smoothly down into the outstretched arms of a small boy in the front row. The boy held the ball aloft as the people around offered their congratulations. When the egg arced toward its owner, a slightly built woman in the second row, tension swelled in the crowd at the expectation of her covered in yolk. But she cradled it softly and slipped it into a pocket in her dress. The juggler bowed and trotted off the wooden platform as Milton stepped up, clad in secondhand slacks, a tweed jacket, and a white ruffled shirt.

"Yes, yes, Ladies and Gents, a round of cheers for our juggling marvel. I would allow no one to follow such an act, save one. Luckily for us, that one is here. He's a man who's spent more of his life off the ground than on it, a man who can defy the undefiable—gravity. And I tell you this—if the Wright brothers had come a few decades later, then our man

here would be credited with the first human flight. Don't believe me? Well, I never claimed that my words do him justice. I'll allow you to see for yourselves: one of our longest running performers, the Legendary Leaper, Frank W. Lexington!"

Frank took the stage and bowed to the crowd, fixing his eyes on his feet as if preparing them to jump. The stage was nothing more than two by fours on wooden rafters laid crosswise above the dry, black dirt. The beams were lashed and nailed together to hold them steady. Atop the platform, two outward facing chairs stood on opposite sides of a four-foot-long table. One of the table legs was too short, and someone had stuffed a rag under it so it wouldn't rattle. The crowd formed a semi-circle around the flat ground on which the display was erected. A few children were perched on their parents' shoulders. Frank did not stretch or meditate or gesticulate to the crowd. Nor did he shake his head doubtfully at the setup. He just glanced at the chairs with an air of disdain then knelt and ceremonially retied the leather on his shoes. He wore boot soles but had removed the actual boot. In its place was a soft rawhide wrapping that he slipped over his foot and fastened to his ankle with stiff, cracked leather from an old mule harness. Over the years, Frank had heard countless crowds comment on his shoes. Deriding him for being able to afford nothing better or asserting that he couldn't be the real Frank Lexington with such shoes or claiming the shoes to be spring loaded after seeing him jump.

With his shoes fastened, Frank stood and felt the collective gaze. He could hear the murmuring of bets between men regarding his chances. He broke into movement. Four or five bounds and he rose up off the creaking boards and glided above the chairs and table. He landed in a crouch then stood straight and bowed his small bow. The crowd cheered.

"Put something else on up there. Hellfire, I could've cleared that," someone called out. Shouts of agreement followed, and two small boys who traveled with the show as extra hands dragged two more chairs across the stage. They set these as bookends to the existing arrangement

and then scurried off to watch.

Frank was smiling slightly. The crowd took it for confidence and the wagers were almost all in his favor. This pleased him, and he stood poised on the balls of his feet, looking as though he were barely on the ground at all. The wagering stopped as Frank jogged forward and flew over the chairs and table. He was feeling good now. Light and smooth. The jumping felt easier than it had in ages. He crouched low on the stage, listening to the banter and waiting for the two boys to set up the next obstacle. He wondered why he felt so light today. He'd always tried to discover the reasons behind such a feeling and never could. Something he ate, something he thought or heard. The cause seemed a mystery, which had always frustrated him. He didn't like the idea that it was just randomness. He hadn't had a day like this in a long time, and it occurred to him that he needed to unearth the cause before his chances ran out.

The boys set a chair on top of the table and Frank fell into his routine, squatting and staring at the setup in disbelief. He waited for the crowd's response and shook his head in apparent resignation. In the old days, Frank often shed his shoes and jumped this height barefoot, particularly when the crowd heckled him about his footwear, but his heels had become sensitive to the jarring landings and he'd given up barefoot jumping the previous autumn. Yet he felt so light on this day that he considered slipping off his shoes and going for it.

At the edge of his vision, Frank caught sight of the other performers coming out to see his jumps. He never really felt as though his performance had begun until they were watching. And it pleased him that over the years his jumping had not grown old, that more of them came out to watch Frank than any of the other shows. Perhaps because his performance was real, not illusion, and there was something at risk. He spotted Mordecai amongst them, and he nodded when the young magician met his stare.

The two boys who'd set up the chair vacated the stage and Frank

exhaled and prepared himself. The crowd waited. Frank finally sprang into motion just when he thought that neither he nor the crowd could continue to bear the stillness.

He leapt off his left foot and flagged his right out in front of him in the air. As he approached the chair, he had a moment of worry. Had he taken it too lightly? He couldn't remember whether he'd even tried to jump high. He arched his back and his toe almost skimmed the chair, but he landed cleanly and turned and bowed to the crowd and began to walk off the platform. Voices cried out that this man could jump anything, someone even suggested that he jump the General Store. Milton rushed to the stage.

"Thank ye, ladies and gents, thank ye. I believe our frog-legged friend has another jump in him! What do you think? Can he pull his magic one more time?"

Frank shook his head but everyone watching wanted to see a final jump and they called out as much to Milton.

"Very well. We will need a volunteer to sit in the chair," Milton said, looking out at the people. Everyone looked at the chair on top of the table, already shoulder height to the jumper. Their faith in his ability seemed to waver now that they had to stake themselves upon it. Someone suggested a short person would be safest and the mothers of children in the front row pulled them back and forbade them to volunteer. The tallest men in town shrunk down when others called out that it should be a big man up there so that it could be seen how high this fellow can really jump. Finally, an average-sized, balding man raised a hand. It was the hurried man.

Milton bowed and complimented the volunteer for his bravery. He led him to the chair and assured all of his safety, saying that Frank Lexington had not missed a jump in over a decade and was not likely to start now.

When the hurried man sat in the chair his head and neck added about two feet to the overall height. He was smiling and waving at the crowd

as if part of a parade. Frank caught his attention, and the man nodded in recognition. Frank thought he detected more respect in the man's gaze than he'd felt when they met earlier that day.

The volume of the crowd's wagering grew, suggesting more doubt about this final jump. The hurried man turned from Frank toward the crowd. "Every person I hear who bets on me getting kicked square in the forehead is getting charged double from here on at the store."

The crowd laughed and someone said that it seemed like his prices had always been double. Frank began pacing off his steps and the ripples of talking smoothed out. He marked a spot a full stride back from where he stood the previous time. He didn't want to take off too early. Or too late. The hurried man wouldn't understand. You must jump at just the right time; neither early nor late is good enough.

The blood flowed through Frank's legs as he squatted down and bounced up into his ready position. He suddenly broke into a lope and saw the fear spread across the man's face. A few feet in front of the first chair, he lifted off and headed upwards. He sailed over the first few chairs and it felt calm and easy. Gravity seemed to kick in all of a sudden, though, from nowhere. Frank could sense his height decreasing and he fought it, watching his front foot approach the man's head. They were about to collide, and he twisted his ankle six inches to the left at the last moment. With this small move to the side, he was able to sail cleanly past, and he landed in a half somersault roll and then stood, raising his arms toward the applause. He listened for some signal that they'd noticed his deception. It sounded no different than before, only a little louder in celebration of a jump that was a little higher. They didn't know.

As Frank gave a final, exaggerated bow, Milton ushered the hurried man off the stage. The man must have squeezed his eyes shut during the jump, else he'd surely have seen Frank's foot pass to the side, surely have known of Frank's failure and would've called it out. Frank stood in a daze, absently waving while the two boys cleared the obstacles and

Milton introduced the next performer. Up next was the magician, and Frank felt a pang of regret that he couldn't stay and watch the kid. He looked across the platform toward Mordecai, who was staring at Frank while waiting for Milton to finish his introduction. The kid's eyes were pinched a little and his head was tilted to the side, as if he were puzzling over something. He somehow seemed less youthful. Frank broke eye contact and dropped his head. When he looked back up Mordecai appeared disappointed. Frank mouthed *good luck*, waved again, and descended into the crowd.

THE CANVAS FLAPPED in the wind as Frank entered and quickly swept his things into a small rucksack. He considered leaving a note for the others but decided against it. What was there to say? His old crate he left in place behind the tent, figuring someone else might squeeze some more use out of it. He stood still for a moment, looking about and wondering if he'd forgotten anything. Then he set off down a thin dirt path that paralleled Main Street. Dusk was beginning to fall, and Frank wondered if the cotton picker he'd seen earlier had already gone into his house for supper. The field wasn't visible from the path he was on, though, and he fixed his gaze a few yards in front of him, realizing he'd have to watch close to keep from stumbling into a pothole in the fading light.

Rancor

BY ABDULSAMAD IDRIS

For years, grandmother fermented in the rafters of the sky—
her voice calcified into a swarm of crows
that taught our ears how to flinch
before a sentence even ends. We sat —
bone-drunk on mildew draped in dew,
as the morning forgot how to mean itself.
The sky wilted like a blued bowie knife,
its blade tucked into the gums of silence,
awaiting something less suffocating than chaos—
We read corpses like scripture.
We read them until bullets became braille
across our corneas, until seduction unfurled like war's exhale—
Every body undone, skin loose,
a gospel of maggots etched across the firmament.
My mother carried the continent's collapsed lung
in the soft ache between her shoulder blades.
She prayed in the shape of waterboarding, prayed until the sky split
from the weight of unpronounceable names.
I'm afraid heaven has begun to descend,
has started wearing riot gear,
has opened its mouth only to let out funk songs
coiled in barbed wire, rooftop symphonies of wrath
& echoes of burnt sugar.

A girl is stuck in the throat of a flag,
her bones cataloged by genocide's algorithm.
A man cups a vinyl record in a Wurlitzer
and demands God press play.
Haven't you asked the sky how young a child must be
to redden its edge like that?
Haven't you seen it— the soft-throated children
dissolved mid-sacrifice, gunned down into emptiness.



La Iglesia

BY JANELLE VICTORIA

WHAT COMES BACK to me tonight is washing each other's feet in the upper room of your childhood church in Santo Domingo. We climbed the open-air stucco stairs with noonday sun on my bare shoulders, the back of my neck. We walked into the room with its burgundy tile, windows without screens or glass, cream-colored plastic chairs with stools in front of them lining one wall.

You filled a big steel bowl with water from a hose and threw a towel over your shoulder, motioned for me to take a seat. You sat on the stool in front of me and lifted my right foot with one hand, used the other to scoop water from the bowl and wet my sole and heel, my toes. My white polish had come off in the ocean days before, so my feet looked plain—I was embarrassed to have you study them, and said so.

The congregation does this ritual a few times a year, you explained—an act of love and humility. Imagine, you said, I had to wash the feet of strangers as a kid, old tías with bunions and long curved yellow nails. This is easy, you said, and winked at me as you finished, wiped up the water with the towel, and slipped my feet back into their white high heels.

We switched places and I knelt before you in my linen dress, red poppies blooming on the fabric. I was happier having something to do—taking your leather shoes off, pulling your socks down, rolling

your pant legs up to mid-calf. I massaged your callused heels with the water, ran my thumb between each toe. I tried to say I love you with my hands.

You don't love me, at least not enough to say it out loud, though you've told me it's inevitable with time. I'm not sure that's how love works. What I remember is how tender we were with one another in that church, how it was almost enough.

Pet Rattlesnake

BY JENNY ROOT

My lawyer called me her pet rattlesnake: a real danger now that I been released. Cool, I thought, so I tatted the rattler on my neck. Look at that, they whisper in the frozen food aisles where I buy my pizza and Amy's Enchiladas. I'm not a danger anymore but people think what they think. Twenty long years for dust in a baggie and now I'm out on the meanest streets

of the twenty-first century, but I fit right in. I know where to hide the bodies. I've got eyes in the back of my head, a knife for anyone who won't pick up their goddamned trash. Heh heh. I sound bad but I'm a pussy cat. A tomcat. Cops wanted me to snitch on a bitch but she and I are tight, like a water balloon at a gunfight. Inside

I learned Blackjack and read the Bible. This one dude wrote on loose-leaf paper all the time we was out in the yard pumping iron, you could tell he had something to say. *Whatcha writin?* we'd ask, the sky blank as a judge. What he said is what I learned when I got free again. *An ace in the hole*, he'd say. *I got an ace in the deepest, darkest hole.*



The Glass Eye

BY MEGAN PERALTA

“EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR a reason,” Mother said the day Jimmy Boyle was fitted for his prosthetic eye. The round ball of glass was a bright blue that exactly matched the other. But Jimmy couldn’t see any reason.

He didn’t remember much of the nail accident—just pain, encroaching darkness, and an underwater scream—something a fish might hear.

His father took him out of school until he could be fitted for a prosthetic and told the principal he had laryngitis. Dad’s lip developed a twitch, a slight pull downward when he looked at his son. Jimmy didn’t understand it until he stood in front of the bathroom mirror and saw the cave-like hole staring back at him. He almost vomited. The surgeon had given him an orbital implant, and when the glass globe was snugly inserted, weight and pressure replaced the void. The socket seemed to close around it like a hand, grateful for something to grasp.

The eye felt both alien and comforting. Its cool glass took on heat, until it seemed as alive as he was—as alive as his father’s reciprocating saw when it had dislodged the nail. In his dreams, Jimmy still heard the high-pitched *whirrrr* as the blade plunged in and out of the shed siding. He had coughed on the dust and mold it kicked up. No one but Dad and Jimmy knew how Jimmy lost his eye, and Jimmy never told.

“Stay on the bench, freak!” his classmates jeered when it was his turn to bat.

“Everything happens for a reason,” Mother said when she asked why he’d been crying. Jimmy stopped going outside during recess and stayed in the classroom, reading books and pondering the glass eye. Sitting alone in the back of the class or in his room, the only company he felt was the eye squatting like a toad in its cave.

THE MORE TIME he spent with the eye, the more he learned its preferences. It burned when Andy Larson strutted past with his sack of lucky shooting marbles. It didn’t like those marbles. Jimmy stole the sack and smashed them with Dad’s hammer, which made the eye relax.

“You’re not so cocky without your marbles,” the other kids sneered at Andy, and Jimmy felt a private pride.

When Jimmy failed his driver’s test, the eye again gave him an answer.

“I’m not paying for another test,” Dad had said. Some mornings, Jimmy found him still on the couch, a bottle in the crook of his arm and empty cans around his feet. It had been getting worse since the nail incident. The eye showed Jimmy the solution, and he stole the money from Dad’s wallet. He passed the second time, which meant he could drive Dad to the hospital when he got alcohol poisoning.

“There’s always a reason,” Mother said. “Even if we don’t see it.”

But the eye had seen the reason.

“Boyle, you’ve got a shot at a scholarship,” the gov teacher told Jimmy in his senior year. “You’ll have to take an exam, but you’ll ace it.”

Jimmy had a reputation for acing exams now, thanks to the eye. It heightened his vision, dragged his left eye to the right classmates’ papers. He beat Andy Larson to the scholarship, and the eye was warm and happy in its cave. It softened, radiating heat up through his ear and scalp. When he showed the university’s letter of acceptance to his mother, she pointed her index finger to the sky and reminded him there always was a reason.

In the university library, sophomore Jimmy Boyle noticed a pretty brunette. He might not have looked her way at all, if he hadn’t felt a certain pressure behind the glass eye. It drew his gaze and quivered when Jimmy saw her. After that, he frequented the library—he didn’t really have a choice.

One evening, a young man left a note on the pretty girl’s study table while she was in the stacks. Jimmy could read it from several desks away.

Meet me later at Dave’s Bar? —Fred

Fred was nowhere in sight. Jimmy pocketed the note and introduced himself to the girl, whose name was Graciela.

“Can I take you out?” he asked. She looked straight at his glass eye, and instead of flinching, she smiled. Jimmy felt the eye relax in the beam of her gaze. Six months later, he asked if he could marry her. Standing at the altar waiting for his bride, he thought about the equation that was life. The eye twitched, but also gentled. Jimmy offered it a silent prayer of thanks.

When Jimmy Boyle entered the world of politics, the glass eye directed him. Graciela was perfect for the role of Politician’s Wife. She always knew how to act and what to say. Jimmy felt the glass eye warm in her presence, and she seemed fond of it in return.

“Our little secret,” she would breathe in Jimmy’s ear, running a fingertip over his right eyebrow. Sometimes he didn’t know which of them she was talking to.

He voted to cut funding for veterans’ hospitals. His conscience spasmed, but the eye relaxed, radiating a gentle warmth. And in the end, it was the eye he trusted.

But the eye wanted more.

“Are you alright, Sir?” a colleague asked when a vicious stab of pain went through Governor Jimmy Boyle. He held a gold pen poised to veto a bill for harsher punishments for school shooters. He felt someone younger—innocent—shudder inside him. The eye would not be refused.

It burned and ached in the deep place in his mind, the pain burrowing into his head. “Sir? You’re sweating.”

Governor Jimmy Boyle realized his hand was trembling. The eye saw more than he could, but sometimes he wished . . . With as much force as he could muster, he signed the paper.

Jimmy Boyle continued to rise.

But there were snags. He couldn’t pinpoint the first sign of trouble, but somewhere in the last year, Graciela’s warm and gentle hand had stiffened in his, perfunctory and distant. And he had caught her looking at him—at his eye?—with the expression of a scientist watching an organism mutate.

“Jim, there are people out there who can’t help themselves,” she’d ranted as they undressed after last year’s Christmas party. “The homeless, the—”

“Everything happens for a reason,” he had reminded her.

“You haven’t visited the hospices and shelters.” The eye had ached. For the first time, Jimmy felt it grow colder in his head. Graciela had frowned. She was staring at the eye, but not with fondness or fascination. “Jim, does it ever . . . move on its own?” The eye twitched. Jimmy heard the distant sound of waves cresting, but it was just high blood pressure. And that weight was on his chest.

“I don’t have time for this,” he snapped. He went to clean the prosthetic. The eye had become gritty and heavy. Almost like it was pulling away from him. That worried him more than anything else.

JIMMY LISTENED TO the television in the bathroom of the White House presidential suite. His graying hair framed his stoic face, and his eye was still bright blue, though it looked a little off-center.

“—the eastern region should be secure before Thanksgiving,” the handsome news anchor was saying. “But the War Department says we’re not out of the woods, yet.”

The blonde co-host smiled. “The Bureau of Land Management has reported that the oil and gas shortages are coming to an end.”

The shortage *had* been a crisis, but the eye had given Jimmy the only solution that made sense. Planting a terrorist presence in a country with fossil fuel reserves had saved the U.S. Those who knew the truth had credited Jimmy’s genius.

He and Graciela had attended the funeral for fallen soldiers at Arlington that morning. Graciela had not waited for him to help her out of the limo, nor did she hold his hand for the cameras. Jimmy gave his eulogy for the heroes who had died fighting terrorism, and when he left the podium, the sunlight glared and he had the impression his wife was frowning at him. But no. He blinked and her face was pained. The glass eye grew heavier. He repressed the urge to touch it, to make sure it was still firmly in place.

He couldn’t shake the feeling that the eye was tiring of him. It had been with him since childhood. One could argue he was here *because* of that nail and all that had come after. Jimmy couldn’t remember life without his eye.

President Jimmy Boyle shook himself. He’d been sitting on the bathroom counter for several minutes. Tonight, the vanity lights seemed dimmer. The burning had turned into an aching pressure behind the glass eye. It felt like his body was trying to push the blue orb right out of his head. His features had become craggy. Wrinkles had spread from his lips down his chin. He stared hard at his reflection. The eye stared back.

It was just stress. He shivered. Memories made him paranoid. The ache was growing and he couldn’t risk a bad night’s sleep—not with the press conference in the morning.

Just to ease the pressure, he popped his eye out with a wet, sucking squelch. He fumbled and almost dropped it, but caught it in his palm and grasped it in relief. Was it just another twinge of paranoia, or was the eye trying to abandon him? The possibility spread a strange numbness

through his shoulder. Without his eye, who was he? It twitched against him. He cleaned and rinsed it. His fingers slipped on the glass when he squeezed it back into its socket.

He got into bed but was careful not to touch his wife. To his chagrin, images of the funeral surfaced in his mind, like so much flotsam from a boating accident. He saw the widows' faces sitting beside the coffins, faces gray with grief.

Something nudged him under the sheets. He froze.

"Jimmy," Graciela said. The ache redoubled.

"Hmm."

"Be honest with me," she turned toward him. "There were no terrorists in Zandura, were there?"

He opened his mouth, a hot retort on his tongue. Pain cut through his words. The ache burrowed into Jimmy's skull. An electric current radiated down his jaw to his neck. The curtains on the bed seemed to drape their blackness over the room.

"Jim?" Graciela suddenly sounded concerned. "Sweetheart?" She took his hand. Her face was melting, nose hanging off her chin. Graciela hugged him to her. "Jim!" She shook his shoulders. The shell of Jimmy's body slumped. The ache in his skull reached its highest pitch, the glass eye bulging. He caught the faint odor of something decomposing, something like old sweat.

With a hawking spit of sound, the eye wrenched itself free and spun across the carpet. He bit his tongue and tasted copper. The cold flooded inward, drowning him. He felt a scream tear his throat. It was something a fish might hear underwater.

FORMER FIRST LADY Graciela Boyle stood at the podium behind the flag-draped coffin. She looked out over the crowd. Arlington Cemetery's verdant green was wilting into the brown grass of winter. She dabbed her tears and gripped the mic.

"Jim lived for this country," she said. "He would be glad to know our servicemen and women are coming home."

She looked out on the crowd of softly crying women and blinking men. She squeezed the piece of bright blue glass. She couldn't tell if her hand was warming it, or the other way around.

"If Jim were here, he'd say, 'Gracie, I told you everything happens for a reason.'"

The eye grew warm, nestled into her hand.

Mass for the Unburied Daughters

BY MUHAMMAD UBANDOMA

The day is mutating again—
its spine cracking into headlines.
Every broadcast births a throat: a mother hemorrhaging vowels into the metallic bowl of evening.
Her love is not soft.
It is a machete rinsed in milk. &. War does not knock.
It tucks my sisters into its armpit,
combs their hair with shrapnel, called this tenderness.
Before the first janazah finishes learning how to be dust,
death stretches its legs—
cracks its knuckles— orders another body like takeout.
On my Facebook page I conduct an interview with a bullet.
the bullet puts on a tuxedo, slips into parliament,
Lust coils around my neck— not desire,
but the hunger of men who turn into doormats
whenever a song with hips begins to preach.
Who poured sorrow into our music and told us to dance?
Who wrapped a girl's head in cactus and called it modesty. Ya Allah. Ya Allah.
My mother sits outside in the rain as if auditioning for resurrection.



Two for the Road

BY S.R. KRIGER

YOU PROBABLY THINK they chose me for this stuff because I was a doctor or nurse when I was alive, but I wasn't. I didn't want that. Lots of people think that means I didn't want to help, to cure cancer or save babies or whatever it is doctors are supposed to do, but I did. Want to help, that is. I just wasn't good at it. Living things are too messy, and I'm bad with messes. But that doesn't mean I didn't want to.

I guess that's why they—whoever 'they' are—sent me here. They could tell I'm really the helping kind.

My patients always appear in the same patch of grass by the dirt road. This version of the lake is better than the real one I remember, not as noisy—no Sea-does whine-bump, whine-bumping over the lake or laughter and music from other people's parties carried over the water—but it doesn't matter. No matter how hard I listen, there's never the rumble of an engine. No cars or trucks or SUVs to drop anyone off. So it makes no sense why they show up roadside, but they do, and I decided long ago that's all I need to know.

I can tell from far away when there's another patient waiting. There's that gap in the seed-heads where the body's crushed the stalks underneath.

This new one is a girl, lying there still. Couldn't be more than six or seven, not that it means anything here. I used to come over awful about the little ones until I'd done a few and learned that how old they looked outside didn't have anything to do with age.

Right now, though, she looks like a baby girl, and she has this Hello Kitty romper and pink patent-leather shoes. I figure she comes from a city, maybe Ottawa or Kingston or I guess it could be as far as Timbuktu, really, since things like distance don't matter once you croak.

It's not wrong, when she might not really be so little, to let out a sigh of relief at how small she is. Small size doesn't mean a small problem—I would never say that—but I've noticed over time that the little ones are simpler. More... something. Maybe purer, always brighter, but not knotted or gunked up with trouble.

As I lean down to touch her cheek, the crickets buzz electric around us. Her skin is sun-warm and soft. You could believe she was just asleep. When I lift her to bring her back inside, she weighs hardly anything.

A couple times on the way, I imagine throwing her up into the sky to see if she wafts away like dandelion fluff. Of course I don't. I have to put her down on one of the porch chairs, though, because the screen door jams, and I need both hands to yank it open.

I guess the ratty old sofa in front of the TV isn't any more comfortable than the porch chair, with the way you can feel the frame through the cushions, but I sit her there anyway so at least she'll be out of the sun. I tinker with the rabbit ears on the mantle until it picks up Pat Sajak making R-S-T-L-N-E light up on the last puzzle of the show.

Even though her eyes are closed, I can feel the girl watching me instead of the screen. Most of the patients they leave for me don't stare. It itches the space between my shoulder blades like feathers. I tuck my chin down and hunch up my back.

"Jeopardy is soon," I tell her, so maybe she'll watch the TV instead.

Then I go into the kitchen to turn on the heater. No matter how small they are, I make sure to give the hot water plenty of time to warm up. That's only hospitality.

The big aluminum tub from the shed is what I use, the kind you bob for apples in. There's the bath, too, but that's where they—if there really is a 'they'—put my caution, so I don't go in there if I can help it.

Like time, water flows nicest when it's warm and gushing. Or should it be that time is like water? I do my best to think of things like this to say to my patients, because sometimes they like for you to sound wise. Maybe I'll try out one of the versions on this girl and see if it helps. I fill the basket with the hot stuff and lug it, sloshing, beside the sofa. Stupid to carry it to the patient instead of carrying her to it, maybe, seeing as how she's much lighter, but it doesn't seem fair to move her again. She already looks uncomfortable.

"Okay," I say. "I'm back."

In this place, clothes are part of her, just like the lake and the room and the couch and the TV are part of me. So I lower her gently into the tub, pink shoes and all. She only fits up to her waist. When I try to bend her, she's still too stiff, so I hold her there and wait.

When the steam starts to breathe on her, you can tell what she's wanting to say.

How did I get here?

"I don't know." And I add, awkward, because you have to be friendly with kids, even if they're maybe not really kids, "Honey." I try again. "I'm gonna start on your knees again, okay?"

Her legs are already pretty loose. I bend them under her and get her kind of sitting with her chest halfway under the surface. I try her arms.

Ow...

I prod from her shoulder all the way down, but she doesn't wince again until I get to her palm.

Ow!

"I know," I say, though I don't. "We'll see what we can do."

I hold onto the wrist with one hand and cup the other under her chin. I feel sort of stupid, but I always close my eyes for this part. The steam helps, too, making everything thick and sleepy.

Hurts!

How?

Hurts!

A big hand wrapped around stubby baby fingers, reassuring as a hug. This?

No.

Oh, I get it: it's what happens next. Suddenly, the big hand is gone. All that's left is the prickly after-feeling of its calloused skin against hers. There's nothing left to clutch. The big hand is there, it's gone. Another hand is there, it's gone. And another. And the empty air they leave behind—

Hurts.

I open my eyes. Gently, I uncurl her fist and massage her palm in the heat. Slow. I need to take this careful, because it's harder to help with a nothing than it is to help with a something. I rub the webbing between her fingers, and I draw my own fingers up each one from base to tip, they way you'd put a point on the bristles of a paintbrush.

"Things are different here," I tell her. "Everything good is forever, and everything bad is never again."

I believe it, even though for me it's never been anything but the waving grass sentries and the cool summer breezes and not the faintest human sound. But I know, when I bring my patients back, they're on their way to somewhere better for them. The people they love. Or that they would have loved, if they could have. Otherwise, why would I be here?

I have to curl her up like a newborn to make her fit all the way in the tub. Her eyelashes are long and glistening.

It's peculiar, but the longer I let my patients soak, the more their heat seems to soothe my own skin. I feel the sweep of her cheekbones travel up my face, the crook of her knees in the joints of mine.

Maybe that's why I make the mistake. Maybe I'm just too focused on making sure she's all right.

A small bubble escapes her mouth and pops on the surface.

And before I can do anything to stop her, real words: "Not by myself."

I pull her out so fast her legs knock over the tub. My ribs ache with

her sucking emptiness. The liquid streams off her and over the floor.

Too long. I must have left her in too long. I've never done that before, but I must have. Which means I messed up. And if I messed up—if nobody else gets sent here—if I'm—

I make myself check. Her hair and her clothing are still bone dry, but she's softer than before. I play with her feet to make sure. Her ankles roll smoothly as if they run on ball bearings, and when I let them go, they flop loose.

She feels like the others. I let myself breathe. She's all right. So even if I don't know exactly how I did it, it's fine. Maybe she's so small and it was so simple that it's already OK. Of course it is.

Her eyes move back and forth under the lids. I hoist her up with her head leaning back behind me. The faintest wisp of her breath tickles the nape of my neck.

Darn it! They aren't supposed to wake again before I leave them off. Nobody's supposed to *talk* to me. I'll have to hurry.

I'm halfway across the field, with the bugs' monotone hum around my double-time legs. The girl's hand traces a path down to mine. The movement catches me so off-guard, I nearly drop her. Of course I don't. But when her fingertips brush the inside of my wrist, not stroking but grasping, aiming to clamp, a bolt of pure-white cold shoots from my head through my feet. I gasp and pull myself away.

For a second or two, I stand there, trying to get air in again. My chest is packed with snow.

The girl's arm hangs listlessly from her shoulder, but I hold her straight out from me before she reaches for me again.

Get a hold of yourself. I think it's just a thought, not a voice, and that it's me who thinks it, but it's hard to be sure. Even in the sunshine, icy beads of sweat run down my spine.

I lay her down where they delivered her. My fingers tremble. Normally, I just let them lie there, like they drooped over in the middle of the day. But her, I straighten out her legs and put her arms

by her sides. I don't know why. I watch her belly rise and fall for a few seconds. Her eyelids flicker again, and before I know it, I'm flying back over the field.

I swing open the screen door and let it crash shut behind me.

Jeopardy is on in the den. The episode is a rerun with that guy who did really well for almost a year or something, but instead of listening, I sit on the sofa and stare at the inside of my wrist. At the lines of shadow where tendons or veins or whatever they were stand out against my skin.

I want to touch them. But remembering that feeling of cold freezes my muscles. So instead, I sit staring and not watching TV.

I turn off the TV.

I'm not one of the dropped-off patients, I remind myself. I'm not that bad.

I am here to help.

Almost from the other end of the field I can see the dent in the grass. I wade through the swaying stalks, pushing my way through. Another patient, and for once, I'm almost eager.

But it's not another patient. The girl is still there.

The unrelenting static drone of the bugs saws in my throat. She should be gone by now. I've always been able to help the ones they send me. Every single time.

Maybe I missed something. That has to be it. They would never send me anything they didn't think I could handle. Heart wings beating wider and wider, I bend over her small body.

And those little, sneaky baby fingers clench around mine, tight and strong.

I yank my hand back, but hers comes too. My skin is slick with sweat, but she doesn't slip off. I pry at her knuckles.

"You have to let go," I tell her, voice hitching reedy. "You have to go. I can't come with you."

"Why not?"

She doesn't whisper it, because she can't whisper it, because my patients don't do that.

There's nothing around to help me but the waving grass. I pick her up again. What else can I do? My feet take me back toward the porch, the den, the couch. As if this is normal. I turn on the TV.

Her fist tugs at me. Toward the bathroom door. Crickets leap up my throat.

I sit firm. Helpers, I tell myself, are patient.

We don't sleep, because there is no sleep here. I let the sun hang pink and low and infinite, and we watch *Jeopardy*. After the first nine hundred times, I can feel her getting bored. I hope. Hating this. Hating me. Wanting to leave.

Her fingers don't loosen.

"Not alone," she says.

For the second nine hundred episodes, I start to say the answer aloud before the host can. I sing along with the commercial-break jingles. I do what I have never done before and turn the volume as far up as it will go so there's no escaping the sound of someone else's booming voice.

Finally, I can't take it. "Are you trying to punish me?" I demand. "Is that what you want?"

If that's what she wants, then I'll show her. She can't do worse than what there already is.

I get up and wrap my hand around the dull bathroom doorknob. Age has made the linoleum inside curl up against the bottom of the door. My arm shakes, but I tug it open anyway.

Everything else here smells—the grass drying into hay, the mothballs rolling around in the drawers, the wind carrying the promise of rain—but the bathroom never does. My caution inside stains out everything else—sound, colour, scent, air.

It is a bathtub full of water, the same old one I remember, with rust around the taps and scum on the tile. Steam that I can't feel rises off it, and its surface is so calm and unrippled that I'd see my face in it, if I

could see without my stomach turning inside-out.

The caution is, if I'm not fit to be a helper, I'll only ever be somebody else's patient. I'll be the one without weight, light as air in some better person's arms. The grass will bend temporarily under me, and then I'll be gone in the noiseless cars, and the field will spring back like I was never even there.

"Open your eyes!" I yell at her.

If she did, then I'd know for a fact what she was looking at, and I could make her look where I wanted, but instead, she just sees everything. Like they all do.

She sees, and she knows, and she still doesn't let go.

I want to cry.

If I can't fix her up ready to go, they won't send me a new one. But if I do get her all set, then I... then I won't...

I jump at the feel of thin dry fingers on my cheek. They wipe away wetness.

She has another hand. I forgot about that.

"Please," she says.

And then it seems simple. Well, it's always been simple: she's a little one, and they always are. But simple isn't the same as easy.

I stretch my legs out and turn on the tap as high as it'll go. Lucky I kept the heater on for so long. The warmth crawls up around me, and I close my eyes.

If I won't be a helper after this, I tell myself, at least I'll have helped one more.

From beyond the glassy surface and also at the same time right in my ear, she says, "Two more."

I let myself sink amid a whirl of feathers. For a moment, I know I won't stay down, that I'll float insubstantial, a soap bubble on the surface, but I don't. I slip against the porcelain tub bottom and lay there for a long time, and she keeps holding on.

When I'm done, she doesn't lift me out, and I don't carry her. I stand.

We walk together, hand-in-hand, to that same familiar roadside patch of grass. My eyes are still closed, but that's okay. After so long, I could find the way in my sleep.

Ages have passed since I stopped wondering where my patients go after they leave. There's a lot of highway, a lot of places you could travel in a vehicle that passes with the silent flash of headlights in the dark.

It's been a long, long time since I felt the breeze in my hair and watched trees and telephone poles and ditches whiz by.

We lie down side by side. The sun beats down on my face. And somewhere in the distance, faint and far-off, is the rumble of an engine trundling toward us and the crunch of tires over gravel.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

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Jay Orlando (he/him, they/them) is a queer, trans, folk punk poet from the region of Pennsylvania where the Appalachians kiss the Rust Belt. His poems have been published by *Red Branch Review*, *Fifth Wheel Press*, *Ouch! Collective*, and others. His debut poetry collection, *A Tangled Lineage* (2024), is available now from Redhawk Publications and his most recent chapbook, *A Book of Queer Prayer* (2026) is available now from Last-Picked Books. When not writing, Jay enjoys singing karaoke, collecting comic books, and attempting to herd his cats. You can follow his adventures in all of these things on Instagram: @jaybird.orlando

Megan Peralta is a former newspaper reporter, published poet, and writing coach. Her short fiction is scheduled to appear in *The Penn Review* in Spring 2026. She and her wife live in the mountains of Northern California with their menagerie of pets.

Tendai Rinos Mwanaka is a multidisciplinary artist, editor, publisher and producer with over 70 individual books and curated anthologies published in US, Northern Ireland, UK, Cameroon and Zimbabwe. He has 4 music albums, with new album, *The Choice is not Mine* (2024) recently released and his music is playing in at least 18 radio stations in US, Canada, UK, France, Israel, Brazil and Australia. He has produced hundreds of paintings and drawings, thousands of photographs, some exhibited, published and sold, with latest exhibitions in 2026 at 13b gallery, Slovenia, Herri, South Africa and Fox Yard Studio, UK.

Jenny Root is an editor and event planner with a nonprofit in criminal justice in Eugene, Oregon. Her poems appear in *Eclectica Magazine*, *Emergency Horse*, *About Place*, and *Cloudbank* among other journals and in the anthologies *New Poets of the American West* and *Bookstore Clerks and Significant Others* where her work received mention by Kirkus Reviews. Root's work was featured in "On This Land" Winter Writers Series by the McKenzie River Trust. The recipient of residences at PLAYA and the Spring Creek Project, she is the author of a full-length collection of poems, *The Company of Sharks*. The line, "Twenty long years for dust in a baggie," is respectfully borrowed from Billy Strings.

Dale Scherfling is a fulltime writer/poet and a creative writer and photographer instructor. He is a former newspaper sportswriter, editor and photographer and retired U.S. Navy photojournalist. His work has been accepted by *The Monterey Poetry Review*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *Chiron Review*, *Mangrove Review*, *Letters Journal*, *The Blotter Magazine*, *25:05 Magazine*, *Discretionary Love*, *Writing Teacher*, *Third Act Magazine*, *Yellow Mama*, *Close to the Bone*, *Flash Phantom*, *Dispatches Magazine*, *Five on the Fifth* and *Oddball Magazine*. He is the recipient of three U.S. Army Front Page Journalism Awards and is also a college lecturer

and instructor of photojournalism, photography, and music.

Judith Skillman paints expressionist works in oil on canvas, board, and paper. She is interested in feelings engendered by the natural world. Her paintings have been featured on the covers of *Thin Air Magazine*, *Torrid Literature*, and *The Awakenings Review*, and have appeared in *Penn Review*, *Southern Quill*, and elsewhere. Skillman has studied visual art at McDaniel College, Pratt Fine Arts Center, and Seattle Artist League (SAL). Shows include The Pratt, Galvanize, and SAL. Her work will be featured at the March 2026 Artist Trust Benefit Auction. Visit <https://www.saatchiart.com/account/artworks/823323> or judithskillman.com.

Alina Suleimen is a Kazakhstan-based visual artist and author working across oil painting, mixed media, printmaking, weaving, and photo-based collage. Her dreamlike, emotionally charged imagery explores memory, grief, silence, identity, conflict, and survival, moving between vulnerability and endurance. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including at Saatchi Gallery in London, and published in a growing number of literary and arts journals. Her artworks can be viewed on Saatchi Art: <https://www.saatchiart.com/account/collection/961497>. She is also the author of *The Strokes and Weaves of an Art*, available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0D9NF21WL>.

Muhammad M. Ubandoma is a Nigerian writer and poet, as well as a feminist, whose work explores themes of identity, violence, and spiritual longing. His poems have appeared and are forthcoming in esteemed literary journals such as *Chestnut Review*, *Brittle Paper*, *The April Centaur Network*, *Eunoia Review*, *Poetry Column*, *Kalahari Review*, *AfroCritic*, *Spillwords Magazine*, *Soul Poetry*, and *Prose & Arts Magazine*, among others. He shares his thoughts and writings on Instagram: @muhammad_m_ubandoma.

Janelle Victoria is a poet, artist, and educator living in Spokane, Washington. Her writing has appeared in dozens of literary journals, including *Driftwood Press*, *Jet Fuel Review*, and *Hobart*, while her paintings have been featured in venues throughout the Pacific Northwest. Janelle is the author of five books of poetry, including *Talk Louder* (Tulipwood Books, April 2024). As a fifth-generation resident of eastern Washington, Janelle has a deep love for cedar groves, lilacs, and small towns with one main street.

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based artist and art instructor. She shows extensively in the Pacific Northwest. Past shows have included Seattle University, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the Pacific Science Center. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections.

Author and artist **Amanda Yskamp**'s work has been published in such magazines as *Threepenny Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Boxcar Review*, *Rattapallax*, and *Caketrain*. She is a poetry editor and frequent cover artist for WordRunner E-Chapbooks. She lives on the 10-year flood plain of the Russian River, teaching writing from her online classroom, WordWise Instruction.

