

Lumière

The background image is a photograph of a room. In the foreground, a light-colored sofa is partially visible, with a dark red and white patterned pillow and a plain light-colored pillow. Behind the sofa is a wooden door with a brass handle, slightly ajar. The walls are covered in large, detailed tapestries. To the left, a tapestry depicts a scene with several figures in a wooded area. To the right, another tapestry shows a large animal, possibly a goat or bull, in a similar setting. Below the tapestries are white bookshelves filled with books. A tall, dark, patterned candle holder stands in the doorway. The floor is covered with a red and white patterned rug.

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lumière

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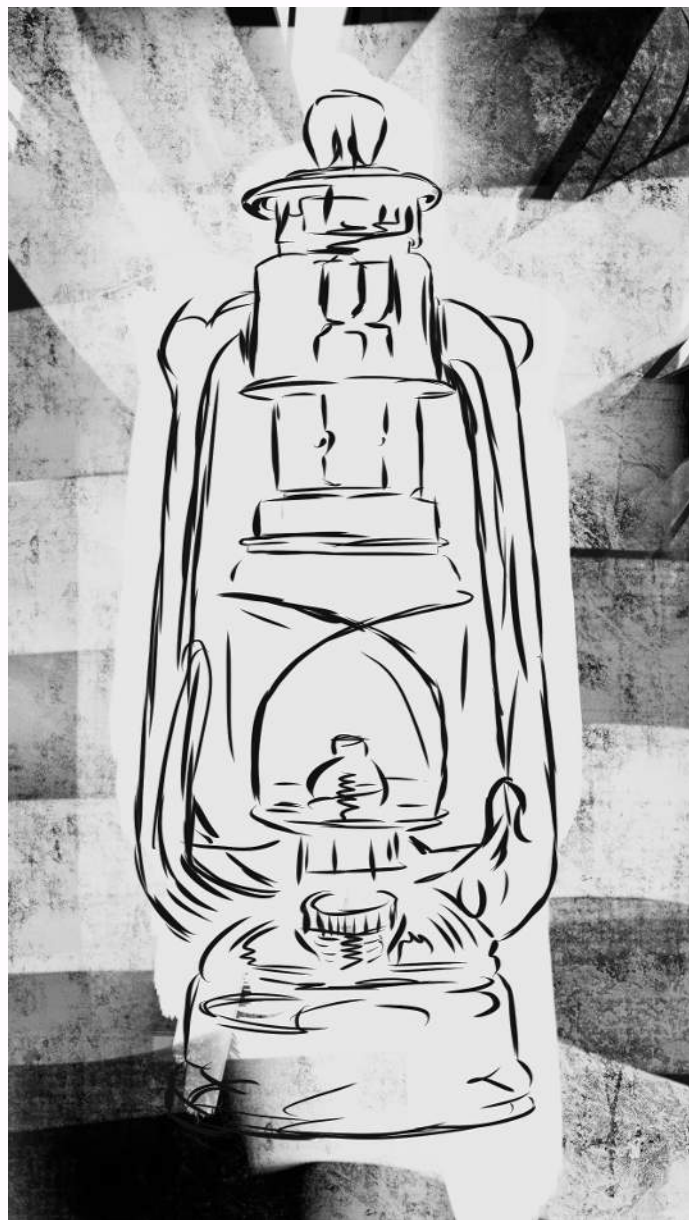


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The **lumière** editorial staff is the flashlight of the literary and artistic shenanigans happening at MassBay. We floodlight the heck out of your creativity. If you've got some wonder, tantalize our eyes, oil up our brain gears; we'll showcase that super-duper, unique expression. **lumière** is here to illuminate ALL the passion, ALL the authenticity, and ALL the awesome.



Family Vacation by Jill Silos–Rooney

Coins

by Alix Scarlet

TWO hundred aged display cases live inside a small room by the sea. Preserved from the turn of the nineteenth century, they stand stark against the fresh, white walls. Each of them rests alongside another, turning the rows they live in into wooden city skylines. The place smells musty. The back of my nose burns a little, but I’m too excited to be bothered. I rub it into the back of my hand and venture in farther.

The room is filled with tourists in scarves. They buzz between different sized cases holding up phones and cameras and small children to the windows. Some little ones stand on their toes and press the tips of their cold noses into the glass. Other little ones hang back with scrunched faces to observe their siblings meeting with the contraptions.

Inside palms, quarters jingle like hollow bells. The racket brings me back to eight years old, carrying my arcade tokens around in a sandwich bag. Once a wood box is fed, it begins to purr. Some displays jolt to life. Others, lit with muted light, brighten until the glow is a spotlight. Then, their contents shake back to life. I’ve never witnessed both people and scenery breathing in the same space.

In one box, five painted men wearing red bow ties bob back and forth, their crooked legs jiggling for sixty seconds. In another, four Edwardian couples hold each other, while two others look on and raise a toast. The dolls swing along a track cut in green felt, circling wildly to muffled piano notes. The words *A Message from the Sea* are painted beneath the window in a flowery script, both capturing and confusing me. This one is my favorite.

Meanwhile, a relentless carol of ragged tunes calls out over the raincoats and the cameras. Over my shoulder a walnut-stained Wurlitzer catches my eye. At first look, it’s just an ancient upright piano. Until someone’s child in a pink t-shirt scrambles up and stuffs some coins into the slot. Spectators step back, chattering. I listen to my breathing while the piano builds up juice.

Through a tiny window, two fat rolls of punctured paper start to turn. The papers flow over their cylinders and feed into each other, then disappear into the depths behind them. Another breath, and the keys begin to jump. The piano enters

into a bouncy march with such careful attention that I’m sure a ghost is present. Inside their own window, a triangle and some wooden pipes are lit by a yellowed bulb. An anchored metal stick starts to strike the triangle on the beat, while shallow phantom breaths perform on the pipes behind it. The phantom even gets its own solo section. Living lungs couldn’t play wood pipes this fast.

Strangely, my heart pumps love. It’s as if I’m witnessing some elaborate human ensemble. The idea of the programmer living on inside his machine’s body feels warm in my chest. It’s a creepy thought, but it makes me smile. The piano is alive. The little one in the pink t-shirt looks half-horrified, half-hypnotized, standing frozen behind a pair of legs. Bystanders have ceased their conversations. Everyone is vibrating in their silence with an energy from another plane.

But, if there had to be one thing in the room that possessed a soul, it would be Sal.

She stands, freckled cheeks protruding, against a wall inside a 6-foot plexiglass case. She towers above her spectators. Sal wears a ruffled blouse and a plump head of springy red curls. Her over-sized hands lack digits, like papier-mâché mittens. A gaping mouth turned up at the corners is molded into her face, and a gap sits in the center of her top teeth.

From somewhere between Sal’s gears and wires, a deep, maniacal laughter echoes. Her glass case softens the intensity of her joy, but she doubles over at the waist, anyway. Her uncontrollable spasm-ing forces her head and shiny curls to bounce aimlessly. Her arms raise and lower as if she’s trying to silence whoever or whatever is causing her laughing fit.

Sal keeps howling and lurching for an entire two minutes until finally, the track ends and her gears lock in place. Though her switches are off, she’s still alive. Her soft body is quaking, absorbing the aftermath. Her face stays happily twisted. Her breathless mouth will never close. Sal rarely has time to catch her breath before someone else bribes her with more coins. Some people think her laughter sounds demonic. But even the smallest kids race over to plop coins and smile with her. I wonder if they, too, can tell she’s breathing. ▽

Lucy

by I.M. Bolt

LUCY turns the slippery brass valve as fast as she can. It is slick and hard to crank with its monstrous size and the sultry water vapor all over it. She sweats in the heat of the factory, which is sweltering, even at night, with the humming amber electric lamps hanging overhead like false stars against the black-as-pitch ceiling windows above. The greedy glass holds the curling acrid smoke and burning vapors that rise from the machines. They, like the workers, are trapped in this infernal greenhouse, where dead cotton textiles are the only things that grow.

It bears down on her and it is all she can do, in fact, not to swoon.

To do so would be disastrous, she knows. So she focuses all her will on keeping herself in the here and now. But how tempting, in the listless stupor of the factory, to simply float off into the freedom of nothingness like the stray cotton strands that sometimes break free off the belts. The airy threads drift on the heated updrafts, soaring lazily, until they get too close to the fires in the massive burners that drive the machines or the arching lights above, then burn in a flash, and are gone.

She shudders, closes her eyes, and redoubles her efforts to turn the hated wheel.

A burst of steam is the reward for her success. It almost scalds her face, but she drops her mousy brown head to the side just in time. A passing bobbin girl, five if she's a day, screams as it blasts just above her tiny self, then turns and runs away.

Lucy stands in place for a single shaking second. That's all the reprieve she gets, before the Agent sees her. He rolls over yelling at her to get going again. His too-perfect handlebar mustache hangs below his pointed rat-shaped nose and beady black eyes. His metallic voice reverberates like a struck tin drum as he cusses her out for laziness. She just blinks at him, lost in exhaustion and the absurdity of the bellows-driven squeak that powers his voice.

She almost giggles, and maybe she would, but she can't quite remember how.

The Night Bell rings, tolling out the death of another work day. The Agent cocks his head sideways as if hearing it for the first time. Then he turns and rolls off on his one, hard rubber tire, as

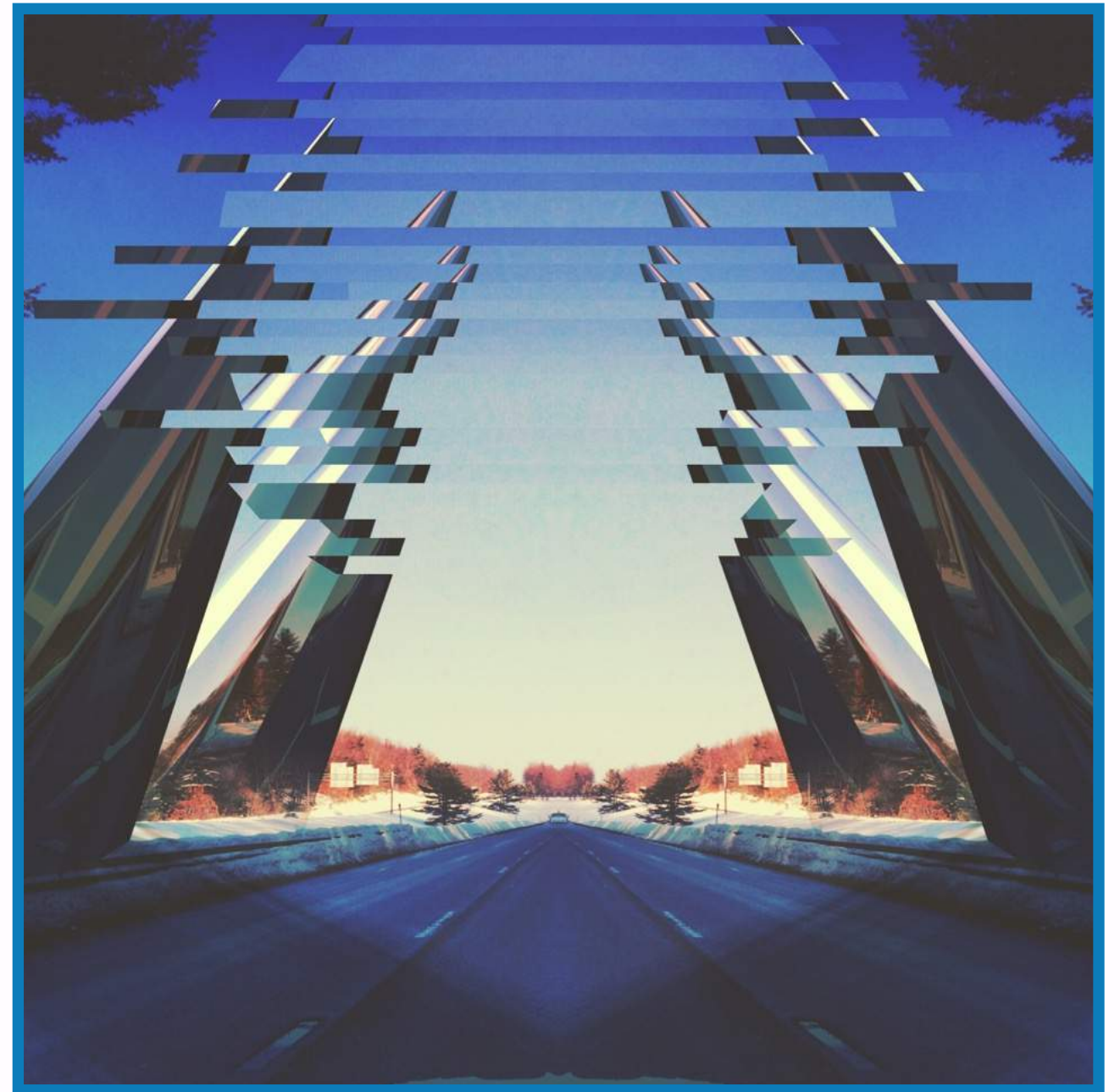
stiff and regular as the clockwork that powers him. Forgetting that she exists as the shift ends, so single-minded is his existence.

Lucy wipes her brow with her dirty green shirtwaist sleeve, shakes her head and sighs.

A heart's beat of bliss (or maybe it's a watch tick, she can hardly tell the difference between herself and the mechanical Agent anymore) as she walks out of this nightmare and into the night.

The air outside is only slightly less burdensome, but she can see the stars as she looks into the summer sky. Sirius the dog-star winks at her, teasing, and she remembers how to giggle.

Tomorrow is Sunday. She'll trade the wearying work and tyrannical heat for a hard wooden church bench and stifling boredom. Maybe there will be an airship race in the afternoon and a precious few hours of lazing in a green park near one of the canals. If she's very lucky there will be iced tea made at the frost block factory on Dutton Street. A good supper, the sweet oblivion of sleep and then Monday, when the whole cycle of hell begins again. ▽



by Troy Lindberg

Something from Major to Minor

by Kelvin Telon

HE asked me to wait for a moment. That’s when he got his Electrolarynx. I was afraid he’d try to taze me with it if I moved, so I listened:

Vienna wanted me out because I smoked.

And he kept on.

She asked one time, “Do you always leave without saying goodbye?” I told her no. Not this time. She didn’t follow up with anything else. Why did she ask? I knew Vienna didn’t care whether *she* left without saying a word or not. So why was she trying to get me to say something? Vienna just sang instead.

*My love will not chill, And the longer my absence,
More loving she’ll feel.*

Lyrics that struggled to find their way out of a wheezy lightning bolt.

So she said to me, “You’re breaking my heart. But I know you mean well.” Singing and crying. Crying and singing on the bed. With her back turned towards me. I took a pen, and wrote on the back of a twenty bill, which was a lot back then:

*I grew up with either two
options: shoot or smoke*

I left that bill on her dresser. Left wondering if she had wanted a smackhead instead.

Before the door closed she said, “*For a while we must part.*” I guess it’s been a long while.

I met Bakester. Things were going fine with her. She played the keys and sang. I worked security for the joint. I knew she had a habit. Saw the cause and effect every time we met at the club on High Street. Now *she* could sing. They called me over one night. There was trouble. . . .

The train that passed by on the other side was not the one I was waiting for. Gone. He continued:

Someone was telling me how she *couldn’t* sing. I came over to her. She was chiefed and stoned, or maybe screwed and loose. She wanted to sing, but hummed instead. Everyone knew Bakester meant well. She didn’t know how else to put herself into words but she still tried. She didn’t function; it was hard seeing her on this.

Every time we say goodbye, I die a little.

Every time we say goodbye, I wonder why a little.

She tried. She really did. I asked what she was on. When I saw the needle and spoon they brought over I understood. We laid her down on top of the bar. I sat on the counter, and got her to sit up a little bit. Someone called the cops. They must have thought she still had a chance. But no, she took one too many. She held my hand, and I stayed for her.

I knew Bakester was dying, and she knew it too. She had me feeling hopeless, but I knew she meant well. The music quit playing, so *everyone* was looking at her. Let me tell you man, nobody said a word. There we were, attending death. She was losing her strength. The ceiling-bulb reflecting in her eyes. I could see those eye-bulbs looking towards the crowd.

Everyone was so goddamn quiet. I even began to hope the band would start playing again. Just to hear her try to sing. That’s when the ride-along came in looking like heroes. Before they carried her off she looked at peace. That memory always fucks me up. You think I could get something? I felt I was losing something. Maybe my mind? It’s a sick feeling that stuck with me forever and *always*. All she wanted was to fade out peacefully around some good company. I never got to say goodbye; I think that’s how Vienna must have always felt.

Do you think it would have helped if you stopped smoking? I inquired of him, socratically.

It was obvious he wasn’t hearing me. He was still listening to the change from major to minor. It felt strange. But I got the vibe this man’s vice was a different tempo. His march towards annihilation was a bit slower.

I didn’t have the heart to remind him about the spoon and the needle. But something told me he was already on it. I caught him scratching his golden arm.

I know there’s quicker ways. I’m just going about it with my own grace, he said, following my gaze. He took a sip out his beer can. From the chaser for the chaser.

Honesty was not something I had expected from him.

Have you ever met a man who took his time? He’s the one singing, “*Major to minor. Major to minor.*” I would have given him twenty dollars but the one I had in my wallet didn’t have those words he

was looking for. I tucked the twenty aside since I didn’t think he saw it, but I gave him a dollar instead.

If you ever get Vienna’s twenty dollar bill you can find him roaming the tunnels of Downtown Crossing. If you’re his Vienna, he wanted to tell you he quit smoking. If you’re a pretty girl missing an arm, he might confuse you with Bakester.

Just listen out for the electrical murmuring coming from the guy holding a tazer to his neck. Six

feet tall, Caucasian, former security guard. Never forgets to say goodbye. No way to communicate you either see him or you don’t. You can try the Blue Line, too. The man liked to ride in the same color as his vein.

Major to Minor was always on the move because that was part of the job. Any train track suited him. As long as he went about it with his own grace. ▽



Photo by Jamil Abbasy



Photo by Jamil Abbasy

Grotto of Druid's Shade

by Christian Hardy

Harden your resolve.

Become Angels in the night,
Demons in the light,
Harbingers of Glory's sight,
Wraiths of Oblivion's plight,
Shades in pale moonlight.



It rests in Grotto of Druid's Shade,
wraith shroud of a father long dead surround.
Awakening in stark beams, its dreams of fire and death enshroud.
The Speckled One walks, finding man traveling in his realm.
Following tracks, crossing mighty Oak's path,
full of pause, beseeching Oak, answers granted.
Hand upon bark; cold, coarse, weather worn and rough,
crumbling leaves tell of Winter's coming.
He must brace himself, season's change upon the land,
northly winds pull him southward.
Ceasing the man-following he gathers honey and herb.
A time for fattening, a time for snow covered rest till the thaw,
he returns to Druid's Shade.

Parting the moss hanging over the hallowed home,
down he goes between winding
roots that still hold strong. The ashen tree remains from the time
before memory. Motes dance, ensnared in low beams that cut across
his down pine resting place.

Dreams of cleansing fire, abhorrent and unnatural change.
Grasshopper becomes Butterfly. Molt becomes corrupted rot.
The predawn air catches dark visions as he awakens in his own dew.
His father again traces his mind. His near grave holds answers;
it yet may illuminate these dark omens.

Walking past shadowed glens, nearing man's settlement,
before the river border he finds his father's rest in sullen gully.
Hands plunge, beseeching the soil,
visions roil before his eyes.
The sun hangs only in mind, truly night's fall wakens him.
His Father, full of rage,
parted a terrible charge upon the Speckled brow.
Man must be purged with cleansing fire.
Man must be usurped with blighted green.
Slowly, wearily, he finds his way toward Druid's Shade.
The night wanes on, the moon found low and guiding.

You & I

by Jackie Ng

To Do for Wednesday, November 23rd, 2011

- *Feed Jeff breakfast*
- *Introduce Skyler to soulmate on train*
- *Create a storm to cancel flights in and out of Chicago*
- *Trap National Geographic team in Antarctica*
- *Find Garfield a family*
- *Encourage Paula to attend first AA meeting*
- *Break generator and induce power outage at the California Hospital Medical Center*

Thank you for your work yesterday. Best of luck today.
-H.P.

I LOOK down at the scroll that materializes in my hands every day at midnight, replacing the list of tasks from the day before. H.P., formally known as “Higher Power,” has a flair for the dramatic and refuses to grant me a modern-day tablet to use in my daily rounds. Or at least, that’s what I choose to believe drives H.P. to deliver my duties on ancient Egyptian papyrus, which, despite being what humans would call “magical,” smells like it was buried with King Tut’s mummified body.

I guess I shouldn’t complain though. This is my norm, what my existence consists of, what I was created to do when H.P. wanted help controlling the fates of the rapidly multiplying mortals. I honestly don’t think H.P. factored in how much the Earthlings would love to reproduce, but I don’t question The Almighty’s reasoning and motives.

Speaking of not always understanding H.P.’s motives, it’s time to get to work. “Feed Jeff breakfast” seems like a good place to start.

Despite there being approximately 271,311 Jeffs and Jefferys in the world, I know exactly which fellow H.P. is referring to. Bracing myself for The Transport, I feel myself clench up as the nothingness consumes me, bending time and space and logic to deposit me at Jeff’s location.



I arrive to find Bismarck, North Dakota experiencing a ruthless cold front and its first of many snowfalls in what’s gearing up to be a frigid winter. The snow is sticking to the sidewalks and roads and resulted in an ambulance skidding into a fire hydrant three blocks away. I can sense the water

gushing, flooding Main Street and almost instantly icing up as it hits the chilly air. I chuckle to myself, knowing that there’s no such thing as accidents or coincidences.

H.P. has already been here.

Jeff is slouched outside of Mama’s Diner, his back resting against a light post with peeling black paint. The cold has his pale skin tinged blue as his eyelids flutter furiously to stay open, weighed down by sheer exhaustion and thick lashes crusted over with ice. His shoulders are draped in a plastic trash bag and an itchy brown blanket, his gnarled fingers clutching a cardboard sign that reads “EVERY BIT HELPS.” There’s a tin can in front of Jeff with a bit of change in it, but not enough for him to buy something at Mama’s to warm up.

This is where I come in. Though part of me wonders if I should ignore H.P.’s instructions and snip Jeff’s life string to put him out of his misery, I don’t want to know what happens if I disobey orders and interfere with The Plan. Improvisation is not in my job description, so I stick to the script where I’m The Creator’s compliant sidekick.

Standing in the middle of the sidewalk as the citizens of Bismarck walk in front of me, behind me, and through me, I invade the manager of Mama’s Diner’s consciousness and relay my instructions.

Go outside. Invite Jeff in for a free meal. Get him another couple of layers to wear. Let him stay in the warmth for as long as he needs. Guide him to the nearest homeless shelter.

And just like that, it’s done. The scroll marks my first task as complete, and I can feel the rumblings of the universe contracting in on me, preparing for

another Transport. Right before I’m fully consumed by darkness, I see the manager escorting Jeff inside, calling for the kitchen to fry up some bacon, eggs, and home fries.



“Hey, sorry, I’m heading down into the subway now, so I’ll have to call you back, mom,” you say hurriedly into your phone before the lack of underground cell service prematurely ends your call. “Love you, too. See you soon. Bye.”

The sound of your voice is enchanting, like nothing I’ve ever heard before. Despite the sensory overload of New York City’s subway system, your voice resonates within me, blocking out the noxious fumes, the jazz performers, the clanking turnstiles, the bright graffiti over cheesy ads, and the chugging and screeching of trains arriving and braking. Something about you is magnetic, drawing me towards you, making me want to bask in your presence for all of eternity.

I am mesmerized.

You hop on the N train. I follow suit. You slide into a seat and put your earbuds in, scrolling through your phone for some music. You possess an air of unassuming confidence, a refreshing quality that starkly contrasts the aggressive, hyper-ambitious attitude of most New Yorkers. Nonetheless, you seem at ease in The City That Never Sleeps, tapping your fingers against your denim-covered thigh to the beat of “Piano Man” as the train prepares to leave the station.

I’m so focused on trying to memorize every part of you that I almost don’t notice the figure that plops down to your right.

It’s Skyler.

And just like that, I’m yanked back to reality. The reality where there could never be an “us” because you’re meant to be with Skyler and Skyler is meant to be with you.

I know what I have to do.

I should compel Skyler to comment on your similar tastes in classic rock.

I should create some sort of fifteen-minute delay on the tracks.

I should make the lights flicker and dim for added intensity and romance.

I should encourage you and Skyler to converse and flirt and exchange numbers, making plans to meet up tonight in Brooklyn for some live music and drinks.

I should not interfere with H.P.’s plans for your lives.

But I can’t bring myself to do any of that.

Instead, due to panic and uncertainty and unfamiliar emotions, I freeze this moment in time with a wave of my hand, promising to return after I complete a couple more tasks.



I am sent to create a storm in Chicago that will cancel flights in and out of the city. As I hover among the clouds, I conjure up the most turbulent, unfriendly skies, releasing violent winds, thunder and lightning, and precipitation that makes Bismarck look like a Caribbean vacation with just a twitch of my fingers. I know that I’ve overdone it with the weather, but at least I did my job. Now thousands of people won’t make it to their destinations for Thanksgiving, and the thought of them missing their loved ones makes me feel a little bit better about not having a future with you.

The Transport moves me to Antarctica where a National Geographic team is trying to document the effects of global warming on the shrinking continent and its wildlife. H.P. wants me to trap these good people here, so I do, even though being stranded in this environment is one of the most painful and surefire ways to die. In one swift motion, I raise my arms high above my head, and the ice that the crew is camped out on cracks into five pieces, all rapidly floating away from each other. The helicopter that the team arrived in teeters precariously on the edge of one of the ice chunks, so I exhale softly in its direction, coaxing the humans’ only hope of escape to lose its balance and sink to the bottom of the Southern Ocean for a permanent slumber. Some of the crew’s supplies float, but they all know that diving in to grab a backpack or a water-logged satellite phone is not worth the instant hypothermia. I can’t bear to watch the despair on their faces, can’t stand to listen to their cries for God, Allah, and El Shaddai. A wave of relief washes over me when I feel the beginnings of another Transport preparing to extract me from this frozen hell, a Transport that promises I won’t have to witness the aftermath of my actions.



Instead of being deposited at the location of my next task, The Transport leaves me floating somewhere in an unfamiliar region of the vast universe.

What are you doing, my child? asks H.P.’s voice in

my mind. *Why are you no longer able to detach yourself from the humans’ lives? Where are these emotions coming from?*

I refuse to answer, partially due to this stubborn streak that has recently emerged and also because H.P. can read my thoughts.

Trust me and trust yourself. Go try again, urges H.P., and then once again I’m off, hurtling through darkness and defying all laws of science.



I’m planted back on the N train, facing you and Skyler. This reality is still frozen in time, so I take a moment to flip through your brain’s Rolodex of memories, something that I swore to H.P. I’d never do for reasons that were never explained.

I peek at your happy memories first, the ones filled with family and friends, passions and achievements. I see you learning how to ride a bike without training wheels, celebrating every birthday with chocolate cake and trick candles, getting into your dream school, and moving to New York City for a fresh start.

Then I help myself to your painful memories. I see your father walking out on you and your mom, your best friend moving away a month before starting high school, your grandpa’s sudden and brief battle with pancreatic cancer, and your first real heartbreak that left you shattered.

You deserve happiness.

You deserve Skyler.

But I still can’t bring myself to unfreeze this moment and help you two fall in love, so I move on to another task.



The MSPCA is crowded for a Wednesday afternoon as people flood in to check out the litter of kittens that just arrived. The shelter posted about its five newest feline residents on its Facebook page, and it seems like all of Boston is hoping to take one home for the holidays.

The nearly deafening cacophony of meowing cats, barking dogs, begging children, and stressed adults makes this place sound like a zoo run by anarchists, and the timid orange tabby hiding in the shadows of his cage is frightened. Even after three months of waiting to be adopted, Garfield has yet to become accustomed to the shelter’s madness. He’s seen countless other cats come and go, but no one seems to be interested in him.

So, I intervene. A family of five strolls through

the doors, and I whisper a suggestion to the youngest.

Go into the cat room. Find the orange kitty against the far wall. He’ll be perfect for you, your mommy and daddy, and your sisters. You guys will make little Garfield very happy.

The six-year-old follows my advice, and as the universe prepares for another Transport, I watch the Richardson family fall in love with the once-neglected, one-eyed cat.



Paula stares at herself in her bathroom mirror. She tugs at her gaunt face, purses her thin lips, and wipes her tired eyes.

For the last five years, she’s been promising that she’ll start attending AA meetings and has never followed through. Up until last night, Paula has refused to believe she has a drinking problem, telling herself that this is the norm for stay-at-home mums living in the affluent suburbs of Cheshire, Britain.

I watch Paula make empty eye contact with her reflection for about two minutes before I decide to flood her with the memory of yesterday’s traumatic events.

The nanny had picked the children up from their horseback riding lessons, and they walked into the foyer to find their mother passed out in a pool of her own vomit. It was certainly not the first time this had happened to Paula, but the kids had never seen this side of their mum. The oldest one thought she was dead while the youngest was confused and inconsolable.

This was the final straw for her husband. James gave her an ultimatum: get help or lose him and the children forever. Fighting back tears, he ushered Emily and Oliver into the car, telling Paula that their kids shouldn’t have to witness their mother hit rock bottom. He told her that they were going to visit his brother in the countryside for a while and then drove away, leaving her all alone.

Remembering this is painful for Paula, and she starts dry heaving into the sink, eyes stinging with tears.

I walk up behind her and try to put my hand on her shoulder to offer some comfort, but it passes right through. I sigh, wondering why I thought I’d be able to make physical contact with a human, and settle for aiding her mentally with helpful thoughts.

You want to achieve sobriety. Brush your teeth. Splash some water on your face. Call the chauffeur. Go

to the AA meeting in the basement of the church downtown. You will achieve sobriety.

And with that, Paula takes a deep breath, her once lifeless gaze filled with determination to get her life on track.



As The Transport moves me towards the destination of my next task, I’m feeling better about myself. I’ve fulfilled all of H.P.’s daily assignments for longer than I’d care to admit, but today has been different. I’ve never experienced much emotion while carrying out people’s fates, and I don’t know how to feel about this change. I am responsible for causing countless scenarios of death, destruction, and despair, but I also get to help others, which is a pretty marvelous ability. I don’t understand why H.P. wants me to subject society to sadness and evils when we have the power to ensure constant happiness for all. It just doesn’t seem right.

The universe opens up to reveal my next stop: the California Hospital Medical Center. I pull out the scroll to review my second to last job, and my heart plummets into my stomach over H.P.’s request. I’m supposed to break the hospital’s generator and induce a power outage, which would put a majority of the patients at risk of pain, injury, and death.

I can’t do this.

I won’t do this.

I think about you and how you unknowingly made me feel something. I know what I have to do.

“H.P.! Are you listening, H.P.? I will no longer force your helpless creatures to endure such brutalities. I’m sorry, but I can’t do this anymore. I will go back to the N train and help Skyler, but then I want out. I, uh, don’t really know what “out” means, but I want it. Do you understand me?” I’m shouting at the sky like a lunatic, and I’m especially thankful that I’m invisible to all except H.P., who does not acknowledge my speech.

For one last time, I tense up as I feel The Transport begin.



The N train is exactly how I left it, and with a wave of my hand, I unfreeze the scene. I do what I should have done earlier. Skyler comments on your similar tastes in classic rock. The train stops, and the conductor reports that there will be a fifteen-minute delay. I flicker and dim the lights as you and Skyler smile shyly at each other. You converse and flirt and exchange numbers, and before you two know it, the

train is moving again. Skyler’s stop is next, and you make plans to meet up tonight in Brooklyn for some live music and drinks. You wave goodbye as Skyler steps off the train, and the butterflies in your stomach relax.

“Wow,” you whisper, clamping your lips together to try and suppress a grin that threatens to stretch from ear to ear. “Just wow.”



And with that, my final job is done. The universe opens up once more to envelop me, but this time it’s not for a Transport. This is the end of the line.



Photo by Shannon Smith

Motherly

by Zoë White

I BITE my lip as I fill out the top form;
Name_____, Age_____, Height_____,
Weight_____.

The waiting office is large and cold. The cool air causes the hairs on the back of my arm to stiffen and my nipples to perk up. Page two’s questions are more complex.

Complete history of illness_____
Complete? Everything from sniffles last month to Mono in Freshman year? What about lice in second grade? I leaf through the rest of the forms.

Health history: Matrilineal_____
Three pages. Then onto the patrilineal. The fluorescent lights soak through my eyelids and settle as an ache deep in my skull. I put the forms aside and rest my head on my hands, elbows digging into my thighs. *Just leave*, that little voice says. *Just stand up and leave. Go anywhere. Anywhere but here. The world is your oyster!* Except that, of course, it’s not. The world is an oyster for the rich. Those with money for bus tickets and clean clothes to change into. Those who have taken a shower in the past week. The water at the youth hostel is so cold it makes my stomach ache when it touches my skin.

I haven’t had the guts to brave it since last Thursday, ever since I heard the promise of hot water and fluffy towels and a clean bed.

I wish she had never told me. The neo-punk girl with the purple hair and the geometric tattoos. That morning she jumped out of her bunk, swaggered over, and plopped down on the end of my bed. She smelled of sugary perfume and sour gin. “Did you have a good night, beautiful?” she asked, as if we were old friends catching up.

“Good enough. Get off my bed.” I said without getting up from my pillow.

“That’s rude. Especially when I come here bearing such fortune. They say you’ve been here for a while. Seems like you could use a little good fortune.”

“If Fortune is some new drug, I’m not interested.”

“Please, we both know you couldn’t afford it.” she said nonchalantly. She traced the outline of a tattoo with her pointed fingernail. “You’ve never had an abortion, have you? ‘Cause that would disqualify you.”

I sat up and smacked her across the face.
“Leave. Right now. Or I will claw that tattoo off your arm.”

“Woah woah!” She cries, jumping up off my bed. “I’m trying to help you out here. PheroCorp has got a gig. You’d get your own room. Full amenities. Honestly, it’s like a Holiday Inn. I used to go in once a week and they would give me these yellow pills and connect a bunch of wires to my head, and then I just got to sleep! For like, 17 hours! It was awesome. A guy tried to offer me the job last night, but they won’t let you do it if you’ve been a junkie. So I thought it’d be perfect for you. You don’t seem like a big party person.” Before I could respond she had turned away and slipped out the door. It was too early, and I was too tired to follow her.

I knew about PheroCorp. They posted ads right outside the hostel, and sometimes smooth men in sharp suits would be there to tell you about the “excellent work opportunities” at PheroCorp. Gigs with them were generally short, easy, and paid in cash, so the people at the hostel liked them. As long as you met the physical requirements, no questions got asked. They liked us because we were young, healthy-ish, and desperate. I’d never thought of myself like that. But maybe it was time I admitted that hostel surfing and credit card fraud wasn’t a sustainable lifestyle.

On Friday I walked the two-ish miles to the PheroCorp offices. The woman at the curved brushed-steel reception desk greeted me with a huge smile. Her nails were a perfectly manicured sky blue. *Why can’t I just have her job?* I thought to myself. *I’d clean up alright. Smile, answer the phone, look good in a tight dress. I can do all that.* When I told her my tale of the neo-punk chick who brought good fortune, she smiled even wider and pulled out a shiny pamphlet. “Here you go honey. I think this is what you are looking for.” Big, glossy letters above a picture of a woman’s hand gently caressing her rounded belly. **“Is Surrogacy Right for You?”**



I didn’t leave. I sat in the waiting room for three hours filling out the forms, signing, printing, and initialing away the rights to my womb. I then

proceeded to give a PheroCorp company doctor samples of my urine, blood, and saliva. The doctor was kind to me though. While a quiet nurse took my blood, he told me about what his kids had been for Halloween and asked my opinions on the cold weather.

It was a full month before they decided I was ready. In the meantime, I moved into a room on PheroCorp campus. Having an entire room to myself felt like the epitome of luxury. It was small, with a soft bed I could spread out on, a large flat screen television, and a set of sleek white drawers stocked with simple clothing, all of which said PheroCorp. There was even a pair of sleek white running shoes with blue laces. The walls were comforting shades of blue, and there was a small bathroom attached, stocked with PheroCorp brand toiletries. The bottles of hand cream and shampoo reminded me of being on vacation when I was a little girl. It made me smile to see my name on the card next to the door. It had been so long since I had had anything to myself. My room was up on the 17th floor. I had to scan my badge in the elevator to go up that far, and then again to unlock my door. It was the most security I had had in years. It was nice to know that every asshole I’d ever met and every sucker I’d ever ripped off were all on the other side of a magnetically locked door.

Each morning I had to choke down three huge vitamins, I was required to do a minimum of two hours of cardio every day, and check in daily with a doctor to get shots of estrogen in my ass. But who cares? The gyms at the facility were gorgeous, with sleek treadmills that tracked your heart rate, calories burned, and blood pressure, and I was allowed to eat anything I wanted from the cafeterias thanks to my gray plastic badge that read ‘Research Practice Associate.’ The food was made on site by company chefs, and finding out the lunch options each day brought me bliss. My doctor encouraged me to eat lots of red meat. Probably to get my body weight back up. The estrogen wasn’t quite so pleasant. In the first week my breasts began to ache and my nipples grew sore and tender. By the end of the second week they had filled out and were spilling out of the cups of my bra. When I told my doctor, he just nodded and fixed his glasses, but that night a plain white bra of the correct size was delivered to my door. It had strong underwires and the words PheroCorp embroidered on the band.

At my daily appointment, near the end of the

fourth week, my usual doctor called in another man. He had a combover of wispy yellow hairs that clung to his scalp. This man looked my chart, and read each page thoughtfully. “Call in the techs.” he said “It’s time to implant.” He dropped the chart back onto my doctor’s lap and left.

“Well, I guess today’s the day. Are you ready?” asked my very flustered doctor.

“Do I need to be?” I replied. It didn’t seem as if this part was going to be very taxing for me.

“Not really. It has been decided that you should be anesthetized for this procedure.”

“Alright.” I was a little shocked, but I wasn’t comfortable enough in my position to refuse. They could still change their minds.

“Is that, you know, normal?” I asked.

My Doctor cleared his throat. “Not exactly, but given the, uh, importance of this particular undertaking the relevant parties have determined this would be best.”

“Doctor knows best I guess.” Apparently I was not a relevant party. He gave me a satisfied smile and called for a nurse to put me under.

When I woke up I was back in my bed. I felt exactly the same. A little thirsty, perhaps. I got up, went to the sink, and drank two glasses of water. I was sore between my legs, but that had been a symptom of the hormones for a while now. My eyes went down to the reflection of my belly in the bathroom mirror. *Hello?* I thought. *Anyone home?*



Soon enough, the baby made itself known. Within a few days after the procedure, the walk to the cafeteria was no longer one of excitement, but of dread. The smell of cooking meat was so strong it clung to the insides of my nostrils and turned my stomach, while pasta felt too heavy and gummed up my insides like they had been poured with cement. I tried to eat some plain broccoli, which was an enticing green, but when I bit into it I found the stalk had been boiled so long that it turned to a mush on my tongue. I felt my throat contract and found my plate covered with a mixture of the green, chewed up broccoli and the watery brownish remains of my breakfast. I started avoiding meals all together. Instead, I would collect those little boxes of cereal and some apples in the morning, and hoard them in the drawer of my room.

My breasts began to hurt even worse, an ache from deep inside that ended in my nipples, which

were now so sensitive I flinched each time I brushed them by accident.

I spent almost a week without leaving my room. I would sit on my bed, completely naked, eating cereal out of the box, getting crumbs everywhere, and watching TV. I hadn't had the opportunity to sit and watch TV since I was a teenager. I felt like I was getting a crash course in all the culture I had missed out on over the last few years. At least PheroCorp didn't skimp when it came to channels.

Eventually my doctors decided this wasn't good for the baby, so they ordered that a warm bowl of a gray oatmeal-like substance be delivered to my room twice a day and that I was to eat it all. It was mostly flavorless, except for the light metallic aftertaste, so it wasn't too bad. But even still, I felt like a child, scraping up the last of my dinner just to clean the bowl. The doctors continually encouraged me to resume attending the company gym, even if the exercise I did was light. But with my eating so sporadic and my body so tender, I didn't have the energy to use any of the fancy machines in the gym. Instead I opted to go for long walks. The building I was living in had a well-kept rooftop garden with a lovely view of the city. When I suggested I might actually go out into the city for my walks, my doctor furrowed his brow. "All those people... what if you got knocked over? And you know how sensitive you are to smells. And it's cold this time of year . . . No, I'm not sure that that would be appropriate." And so I stayed on the PheroCorp property.

One morning I went to my dresser to find that I had an entirely new set of PheroCorp brand clothing. The pants were large and soft with high stretchy waistbands and the shirts were so long they might have reached my knees, if it weren't for the belly. There was a new pair of white and blue sneakers and a set of bras in yet another size up. I hadn't even noticed I needed them as the pain in my breasts had simply become a constant. In fact, I hadn't noticed much about the changes in my body, besides the nausea and aching breasts. I walked into the bathroom and turned on the light directly above the mirror. I stripped my shirt off, with some difficulty, and stared at my body. My belly jutted out from below my breasts just the tiniest bit, and curved back down into my pelvis. The skin looked tight, but hadn't yet begun to stretch. I squirted some PheroCorp Extra-Soothe Moisturizer into the palm of my hand and rubbed it over the curves of my

stomach. *There is an actual person in there.* How wild was that? I stood up straight and smiled. Despite all of the side effects this pregnancy had been causing me, I liked the way I looked, with my big breasts and curved belly. Almost like the woman on the pamphlet. Almost maternal.

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As my bump grew bigger, I found myself overcome with a feeling of loneliness. Not exactly surprising, considering that my only contacts by that point were all nurses and physicians who were more interested in the baby than in me. I couldn't go into the city, and none of the regular PheroCorp employees seemed interested in talking to me beyond giving me directions around the building. Now that my belly was obvious, I felt less like an employee and far more like an experiment myself. I got weird looks when I walked down the halls, as if I was always out of place. I must have looked odd with my round belly hanging off my wiry frame.

However, I wasn't used to feeling lonely. I had been mostly alone for a few years now, with friends and lovers that changed quickly, when I had any at all. *It must be the hormones.* I thought. *Making me all mushy and sad. It's like the worst PMS ever times a thousand.* And it really was. I was tired all the time. My days had become a patchwork of naps. I couldn't even stay awake to watch TV, and constantly awoke in a puddle of drool, unable to remember when I had slipped off. I cried at everything and was so out of it I managed to mislay my access badge multiple times and would have to go to the reception desk moaning that I needed another.

I started to have nightmares. Weird stuff at first, like attending a play where the audience withered to bones around me, or getting my face stuck in my food and suffocating. But one night, I had a nice dream. I was in a warm room. Not my pristine blue and white room in the PheroCorp building. This room had the feeling of a log cabin, or a grandmother's house you only went to for Christmas. All homey and safe. And I was holding her to me. The baby. In the dream, it was a her. I breathed in her smell, like I had seen mothers on TV do with their children, and I was happy. I wasn't alone anymore. And then the man with the combover was there. He reached out his arms and I handed her to him gently. As he turned and walked away, panic overtook me. He wasn't coming back. I leapt to my feet and ran after him, screaming, but he

was out of my reach. And then I felt something hit me in my stomach, and I lurched awake. My face was covered in tears and sweat.

My body felt raw and painful. Two more blows to my left side sent me moaning to the floor. I was gripped with nausea as I felt my stomach turn. Something was squirming inside of me. I crawled to the toilet and vomited until there was only bile left. I curled up between the toilet and the counter, resting my head on my knees. Breathe. That used to be a lot easier when there wasn't a child sitting on my diaphragm. A little girl. I remembered her from my dream, or at least the feeling of her. And I could feel her now, digging her little elbows into my soft tissue. It was as if she were trying to fight her way out. Who knew a baby could hurt you this much from the inside? I pulled myself to my feet and poured a glass of water. Staring into my own tired eyes in the mirror, I wanted to fling the glass at the woman I saw. What kind of money-starved capitalist whore was she, that would grow and nourish a child for nine months and then go on her merry way? My stomach lurched again as I began to cry fat, angry tears. I had never been the motherly type, but something deep within me was disgusted at the idea of letting my baby go. As I sobbed, the child inside me kicked, and that night I felt I deserved every blow.

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The pain was everywhere. My back was tight from supporting the weight, the skin on my belly was stretched out of shape and large purple and yellowed bruises bloomed on it. One of the nurses tried to rub a salve over the bruises, but it hurt so much I screamed her out of the room. My shoulders had tensed into chunks of granite on either side of my neck. My feet were swollen so far that I refused to wear shoes, much to the dismay of the nurses. My breasts were like bags of sand pulling me down. I felt like an estrogen zombie. Slow and tired and always searching for more food. My skin even looked grayer. So much for the glow of pregnancy.

I was exhausted, as if I hadn't slept in weeks. Although I spent almost all my time in bed now, I could never sleep more than a few hours. The new shape of my body was impossible to get comfortable. When I did sleep, I dreamt of men taking away my baby and imprisoning her, cutting her up for parts, or feeding her to large slimy creatures, while I stood there paralyzed. I don't think the real baby liked this very much, as it would always wake me with a storm

of kicking shortly after I had fallen asleep. The doctors said that was where the bruises came from.

"It isn't supposed to bruise, is it?" I asked a nurse as she measured the curve of my stomach, from belly button to bra line.

"You'll heal up fine, don't worry sweetie." she mumbled as she wrote my measurements on her chart. "Wow-ie. Almost 7 inches, and the professor says you still have about a month to go. That is one big baby. At least you'll be fully prepared for if you ever have any of your own!" I stared at the place where my feet should have been, but was now taken up by the bump.

"Right. A child of my own."

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I think that was the day I decided to run. I knew what she meant. The child wasn't mine, not biologically or legally. But it was mine in that it was sitting inside of me and eating my food and weighing down on my back. And goddammit I wasn't gonna leave it here. I didn't know why they hired me to make her, but I wasn't going to leave my only creation to be destroyed. I wasn't going to leave my child.

Leaving was surprisingly easy. The lab technicians on floor 10 would leave their jackets in a coat closet in the morning, when they changed into their clean white coats. Once they had all filed into the lab no one was left to see me take one. I chose the largest coat I could find, a brown leather jacket that belonged to a middle aged, fairly overweight technician. My arms swam in it, but the zipper only just made it up around my middle. At least it would keep me warm, and it was nice to have something that wasn't branded with the little blue PheroCorp logo. No wallet left in the pocket, so I rifled through a few others until I had \$150 in cash. That was good enough for now. There were phones, but no chargers. I left them, as people tend to check their phones on break, so they would quickly notice if it was gone. Anyways, I'd never really needed one in the past. I took the fire escape the rest of the way down, and walked out of a back exit. The cold air hit my face and whipped my hair around, but the sight of the dirty parking lot filled me with joy. I was free. *Not quite yet.* I told myself. I would have run, but my condition didn't really allow me that option. Instead, I began to walk, out into the city, and far away from this place.

I had been walking for almost an hour when I

reached the bus terminal. My entire body ached from the shear strain of holding itself up. My feet were throbbing, and my tight shoes didn't help. I scanned the departures board. I needed somewhere far away. And big. Somewhere I could get lost in a crowd.

Baltimore, now boarding.

This time I did run, or at least energetically waddle. People literally jumped out of my way as I ran. I was breathing hard when I got to the gate. "You got a ticket?" the driver asked.

"I got sixty bucks." I said as I pulled out the cash. He looked at me, and then down at my bump. Suddenly his tone was very serious.

"Are you alright ma'am? Do you need help?"

"The only help I need is a seat on this bus." I answered, trying to sound confident. He considered this before saying, "Alright ma'am I got a seat for you. But it's gonna be a long ride."

Perfect, I thought as I slumped into a seat. I felt as if I could sleep for days.

Somewhere a baby was crying. An angry shriek that seemed to get higher and higher and sweep in and out of focus. Was it my baby? I began to run towards it across a barren white plain, and as I ran it got louder and louder...I woke to the scream of sirens and the flashes of blue and red. The bus had stopped moving. Out of the window I could see three police cars. As the officers boarded I panicked and started to scream. I kicked one of them in the balls as he lay his hand on me and tried to smack the other with the back of my hand. I was crying now as they wrestled me off the bus. I was shoved into the back of one of the police cars, and had just enough time to see the man with the combover looking back at me from the passenger seat, before I felt something sharp in my arm, and slipped back into a dream free sleep.

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The bed I woke up in was clean and smelled of fresh laundry. I was terribly thirsty, and the ache in my belly was worse than it had ever been. When I opened my eyes I saw I had kicked off part of the blanket in my sleep, and my right foot was sticking out from under the covers. It was the first time I had seen either of my feet in months. As the truth began to wash over me in nauseating waves, I lifted the covers and saw no bump. My stomach looked fairly normal, except for the bandages plastered just below my belly button. My throat was too dry to scream, so the noise that came out of me was cracked and gargling. In rushed a nurse, and behind her, the man

with the combover. He handed me an envelope thick with cash. "Your services were satisfactory. Once you have completed your recovery your employment with PheroCorp will be at an end." As he turned to leave, I found my voice.

"Can I see her?" I croaked.

"Her?" He frowned. "Ah. Well, it is technically against protocol, and you signed a release of anonymity, but perhaps . . . yes. I think that would be ideal." He turned and left, beckoning me after him.

The nurse helped me shakily out of bed, into a wheelchair, and I rolled after him, into the elevator. He swiped his gray badge at the sensor in the elevator and it began instantly to descend. I felt as if the journey would never end. I longed to see her.

"You should know" the man said, still staring at the elevator doors "That you have been a part of a landmark procedure. Your name may not appear in the history books, but you will always have the knowledge that you were a part of what made this possible."

His words confused me, but I didn't care. I didn't give a damn about him or anything he said anymore. I just wanted to see my daughter.

Once we got off the elevator, there was a long corridor made of simple gray cement. The traditional PheroCorp blue and white had been abandoned here. The man walked briskly in front of me, and I struggled to keep up with him in my chair. We made our way through three more secured doors and around two corners. Finally, we reached a large window set into the wall, that looked into a small room, with three men in lab coats crowded around a small table.

There he stopped.

"Where . . .?" I asked.

He raised his fist and knocked loudly on the glass. One of the men turned and started towards us.

"There." He pointed into the arms of the man approaching the window.

And I saw. My blood turned cold and goosebumps pinched my skin.

"Take it away," I said. ▽



Deer in the Headlights by Brittney Snow

Peach Cobbler

by Alexander Washington

THE first time the neighbors knocked over the fence, I was amused. They were slip and sliding, drinking Bud Lights, and the big bald one came bursting through, gripping the section of fence like a raft. I had been watering my wife’s petunias. All of them were flattened.

“Har, har, har,” he bellowed. “What an ass I am.” He extended his hand like a parcel from the butcher’s.

The second time, the neighbor kids were on the trampoline (the wrecked fence still leaned up against my tree), when a red-haired girl came barreling through, spraying splinters through the air, cannonballing into the door of my Toyota Tercel. My wife ran out with band-aids and alcohol.

“You could’ve parked in your garage,” one of the dads said (there was a complicated kind of arrangement at that house), “And none of this would’ve happened.”

“Oh, those are just the Hendrickson’s,” the officer said. “They’ve been here for generations.”

“But they’ve been using my grill without asking,” I said. “They don’t even tell me when it’s low on gas.”

“That sounds like Benny,” the officer laughed.

“And they’ve been washing clothes in my basement. I hear voices at night. They’re drinking my best wine!”

“Merry pranksters.” The officer waved as he pulled out of the driveway. I hadn’t even gotten to the point of my call.

My wife and I talked about moving again. She made me sleep by the cellar door. I would’ve gotten a dog, but I’m allergic. The kids wanted their toys back, but the hives on my hands got worse when I thought about going over.

I prayed about it. I meditated. I read a book on conflict resolution.

In the end, I baked my special peach cobbler, and I walked it over myself. ▽

Pinpoint

by Chris Minor

There must be something I can say
About this mad world
That you've never heard before

If we lived in the space age
The sky still clear blue
Maybe I could implore
You for the time

I look at the screen
Try to pinpoint the hour
That the selfish disease
Metastasized

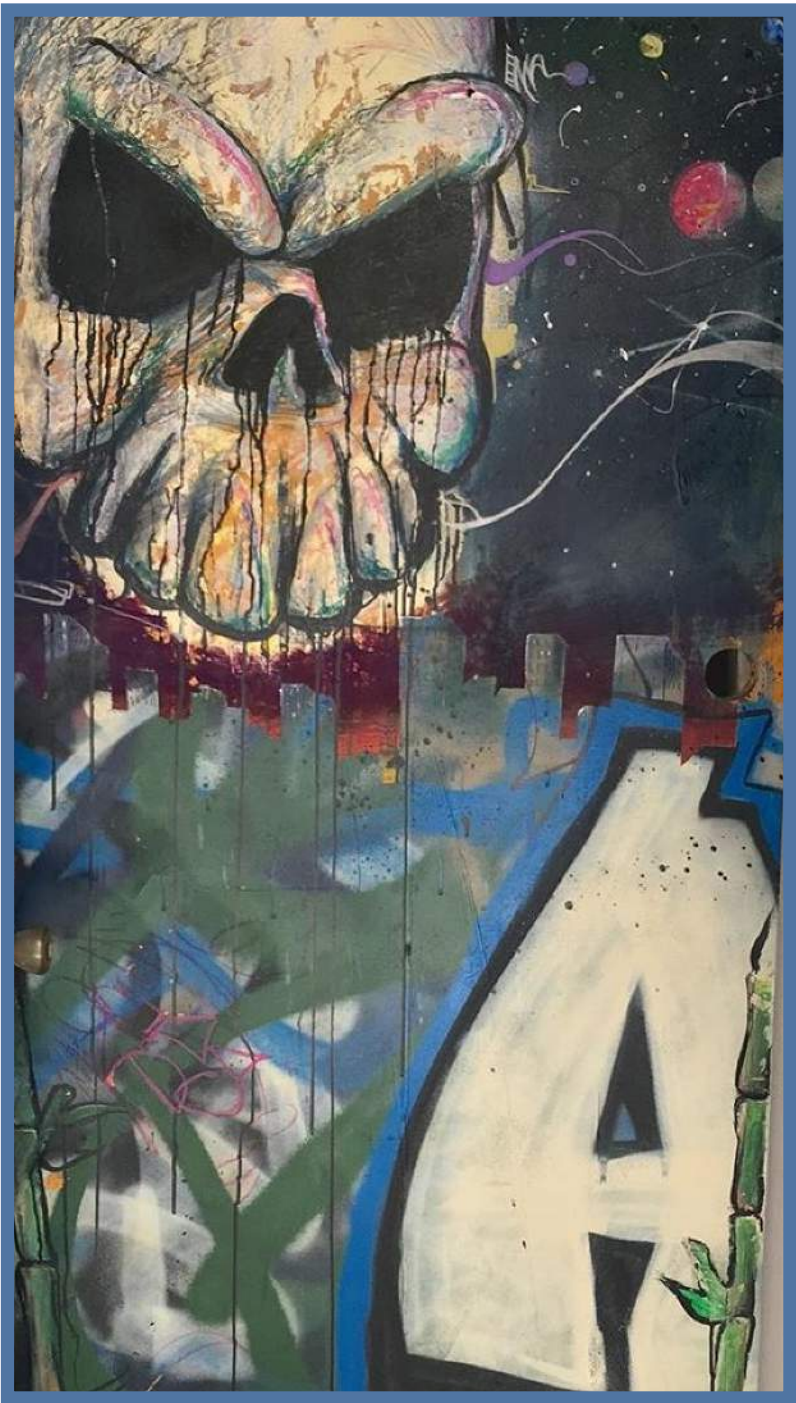
Were we all asleep?
Infected early?
Or just sprawled on the rug
Given our toys?

Idiots fly and
Classicists cry
New-age sadists
Force feed us manure

But a woman with work
Or a man without words
Just smile and wave
Could that be the cure?

How many years have passed
Since I considered
The destruction
And loss of my mind.

I gladly resisted
Declined their gift
Of infection, abandon
And a cheap glass of wine



by Mike Walsh

Moon in the Water

by Jacob Reinhard

“THIS would be perfect for my Insta. I wish I brought my phone up,” Kendyl was pointing at the moon.

“I didn’t know you could go anywhere without it,” ribbed Carlos. And then, less jokingly but lighter, “You’re a slave, man. That’s not a photo op. That’s an actual thing.”

I agreed with Carlos, but I was the one who imposed the sorority girl on him and Mason, so I bit my tongue.

“Whatever. You should try caring a little more about your profile, Carlos. I thought a year in Austin would make you hip. You wore that same t-shirt to tennis practice two years ago.” Kendyl was wearing a fitted shirt with cat silhouettes printed on, black leather pants, and one-inch heels with red soles – a getup worth two weeks’ pay for me, courtesy of the discovery of oil on her grandparents’ east Texas ranch a few years prior. She no longer wore my sister’s hand-me-downs, and the excessive arm hair she used to be bullied over in middle school had been lasered away last summer before she started at Texas State.

“Now, children. Let’s play along. Your mother and I brought you up here as a special occasion. You should show some respect.” Mason liked to joke that we were the parents – him because he was the youngest, only making it to the varsity squad his sophomore year, when we were on our way out. Me because of my “motherly ways,” whatever that meant. It had been Kendyl’s idea to take Mason along – we asked him on a whim when he had called last night to see what I was up to before going back to Houston at the end of August. I liked Mason. He was a good-looking guy, a little boyish, with dark features, skin the shade of brown that white kids who surf a lot show, bright eyes.

Carlos grabbed the Jambox (I was playing my dad’s mix of oldies – Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker and Dwight Yoakam), and Mason grabbed the ice chest (the booze cruise had been his idea, so he had to carry the booze. Mother says, I had told him). I held Kendyl’s hand and led everyone out of the buggy, which I left parked on top of the rocky path, down a more jagged

one, dodging huisache and mesquite and cactus. The limestone crunched as we descended the thirty yards to the overlook some four hundred feet above the pasture. At night there was no mirage like there was during the day, but the shape of the field and the shadow of trees growing along the Frio River in the distance and the flicker of headlights running along highway 75 as it snaked through the hills was beautiful. “God blest Texas with his own hand,” sang the speaker.

Carlos and Kendyl and I sat along the ledge, dangling our feet. Mason handed us each a Shiner Bock from the cooler and, taking one for himself, joined us. “Whoa, man. Just fucking whoa. You didn’t tell me how gorgeous this view was!”

“Eh, I tried.” I smiled. Mason’s enthusiasm was infectious. Maybe it was the beer. Maybe it was the weed. Probably it was something purer, easier than either of those. After a few minutes he had everyone lying on their backs, looking at the stars. The Texas hill country is a zero light pollution zone, and you could see every constellation in the sky: Orion with his belt and his bow, Scorpio, Pisces, Gemini. Well, you might have been able to see it. I was tipsy and never interested in constellations, so I just saw a bunch of pretty lights. Still, the lights I saw were pretty.

“Holy shit! That one moved! Was that a shooting star?” cried Mason, arms flailing after a green-yellow streak.

“Must have been,” said Carlos, pointing at another.

“Man, this is awesome! There’s a meteor shower! Wow. This is so great. You guys are the best. I missed you so much last year. And this year’s gonna suck. Me and Thomas are basically the only seniors worth a shit, so State’s probably not gonna happen. At least Coach Radford will put me in at number two.”

We drank beer there on top of that hill – a mountain by our flat south Texas standards – for another hour. I let Mason count up to twenty-something shooting stars before I thought it would be sufficiently cruel to tell him he’d been counting lightning bugs.

Sometime around six in the morning – after we’d had three or four more beers on top of that “mountain,” after I’d drunkenly flipped the two thousand pound buggy on top of us at the base of the hill, after Carlos and I had strained and strained and barely pulled Mason’s ankle out from underneath, after we had all limped the mile across pastures and the Frio River back to the house, after we had propped Mason’s leg up there in a twin bed on a pillow, after Carlos had retired to his own room, after Kendyl had asked me to stay up, to “get drunk,” to “relax, Jacob, shit happens; let’s have some fun,” after I had told her to go to bed, after she’d looked me in the eye and said Mason needed company, after I’d watched her curl up next to him in that twin bed, after she’d come out thirty minutes later and tried to apologize by straddling me there on the couch, after I’d shoved her ninety pound frame off of me (it felt heavier than that vehicle had, smoother, more manufactured) and sent her back to bed – I still couldn’t sleep.

☼ ☼ ☼

I woke Mason, loaded him into my hand-me-down F-150, and ferried him into the nearest town, population four-hundred. “Soaring to success,” read the sign. “Welcome to Leakey. Home of the Eagles. State Football Champions 1975.” The minor emergency clinic was housed in one of those gray prefab aluminum barns with the concrete foundation that you buy from a tv commercial. He had a contused nerve, and wouldn’t be playing tennis this semester. He’d be walking normally in a few weeks with some luck.

Mason’s mom met us there a few hours later and took him home. I returned to the ranch a few hours past noon, and met Carlos and Kendyl down in the river where they were floating with the catfish and lilies and perch. Kendyl asked me to take her phone from the shore and I did. I snapped a picture: Kendyl sitting there like the moon in the water, a black inner tube, my big straw hat shielding her back from the dappled green light on the green water, a brown glass bottle displayed slyly, leaning like the brown cypress trees that stretched along the shore and formed an imperfect, symmetric frame. That photo made it to the official Gamma Phi Beta Instagram page. Over one hundred likes in the first day alone. ▾



Where I'm From

by Yukimi Miyashita

*I am from a pair of muddy work gloves,
from a trowel and soil from the compost.
I am from the spring-wild herbs besides a brook
a butterbur sprout, a bracken, a flowering fern,
a dropwort, a shepherd's purse.
(It tasted like bitter medicines,
which cleansed blood)
I am from a silkworm
eating mulberry leaves
and making a silk cocoon.
I'm from obedience and perseverance,
from silence is golden

I'm from a prayer to Buddha,
a bunch of chrysanthemum,
an incense stick, a bowl of rice,
a cup of water for our ancestors.
from the Mandolin my grandfather played,
the faith in Christ my great uncle believed in.
I am from Tatami-mats, smell of straw, cool under my bare feet,
an old house nobody lives in anymore
but use as a storehouse
oil paintings my mother and I drew,
my acoustic piano,
a nursing bed my grandparents and my father used,
piled boxes I "temporarily" left
until I go back home.

I am from fields and a mountain, which my brother inherited,
no descendants after him ---
to take care of our ancestors' graves.*

How Perspectives Change

by R.J.

Ages 37-41
She's your baby girl
She's your spanky
She's your skunk
You take her to the park
You pick her up from school
You take her fishing
And you let her fall asleep on your chest

Ages 1-4
He's my daddy
He's my hero
He's my best friend
He gets me home safe from school
He cooks me dinner
He let's me stay up late
And I love falling asleep on his chest

Ages 44-48
She's your daughter
She's your spanky
You pick her up from school
You drink a little first
You fall asleep early on the couch
And this time she's not on your chest

Ages 8-12
He's my daddy
He's my friend
He picks me up from school
He forgets to cook dinner
He drank tonight
And so I didn't fall asleep on his chest

Ages 51-54
She's your daughter
You no longer pick her up from school
You drink a lot
You never see her anymore
And you don't even remember the times when she would fall asleep on your chest

Ages 15-18
He's my father
He refuses to drive me home from school
He drinks enough to kill
He forgets the day I was born
And my mother tells me I used to fall asleep on his chest



Double Cherry Blossoms

by Yukimi Miyashita

*The flowers droop their heads
in the spring rain
Every multifold petal holds rain drops
heavily
looking down at the ground
The flowers hang their heads,
under dreary clouds,
taking on a red tinge
languidly
Even though the flowers soak up the sunshine,
the shadow is always there
Misery
never clears off,
in full bloom
The flowers cover the sky
beyond a man who lies down
under the tree
The thousands of frilled flowers
come down to him
heavily,
heav-
enly,
sink into his organs
He seems intoxicated with empty,
day-dreams
The petals multiply and fill up his lungs
He is crying without tears
(but shaking his throat
slightly)
staring at the air, remaining still.
Honey bees don't visit the tree anymore
The flowers have gone
gone
with the man*

Gonzales and Many Others

by Karielys Arteaga Calles

He left behind the noisy street,
the gossiping neighbors.
He left at least one Maria and one Carlos.
He left behind the child
who holds up his hands
letting everyone see the dirt
under the nails
to ask for a few coins
that rarely bother the pockets.
He left behind those almond eyes,
those wrinkled hands,
and that treasure of silver
that some people call wisdom and others old age.
He just called it “mom’s hair.”

He embraces the promise of the new,
of the better,
of golden and green treasure.
He envisions the silent neighborhood,
the garage with no doors,
the clean walkways,
something that didn't exist in his imagination
but that has always existed in his destiny.

He surrenders to the bite of a beast,
a very starving one.
He realizes it is survival,
survival and submission seem the same.
He lowers his head and looks
to his side, looking for familiar faces
he finds them, surviving too.
He raises his head and looks,
up there no one looks like him,
up there the sun is brighter,
up there the skins are lighter.
Something that didn't exist in his imagination
but that has always existed in his destiny.

He painfully detaches from who he is,
in front of the world.
He tries to fit, he forces himself
to speak like others,
“An 800 lb gorilla” is not an animal
but the same child he left,
the one who begs for coins.

He clings to what's left of him,
inside
he goes hopeful and convinced
that he can write a new story
better than the one of his fellow traveler,
his dreamer brother,
the familiar face he sees
every time he lowers his head.
Something that didn't exist in his imagination
but that already existed in his destiny.

He works, quiet and incessant.
He is rewarded,
under the table,
by the beast.
He complains,
he resists
he recovers
he regrets
then remembers how much he left behind,
how many
why?
for what?
realizes he does not have an option
he is confined to the bite of the beast
resigned to feel its teeth
inside, outside,
something that didn't exist in his imagination
but that already existed in his destiny.
He left behind the noisy street,
he left behind the old,
he detaches from who he is,
he works quiet, incessant,
his hands get dirty, they hurt
and the wound is deep. it reaches the soul
he knows the true face of fear.

None of this was his promise, his self-pledge.
None of this existed in his imagination. But,
it always existed, most certainly, his destiny.

Venezuela: Democracy in Construction

by Karielys Arteaga Calles

Here they go again looking for a change
The child, the man and the elder
The student, the sick and the healthiest
Even the pregnant, all expecting to break the chains

Be grateful to have something to eat
The ones in power say
While the poor eat from the garbage
And the formers savor the banquet

You know what? It’s not the poor
But anyone in there
You no longer distinguish
Is that the equality that they meant?

The thief is justified
You don’t dare to criticize
He just does it for his family
He is just trying to survive

The doctors and the nurses
Stealing the jobs of the taxi drivers
They have all been replaced
by the Cubans, the fellow survivors.

All the cities and towns
Are farewell places
Half of the youth is gone
What a tragedy the nation faces

For those younger than ten
Everything is more of the same
If you are twenty five my man
I know you live in pain

It has been eighteen years
Living under a yoke
The same time people have thought
That this whole thing was a joke

All the people came out armed
With their voices, with tricolor flags
With their will and immeasurable hope
With gallantry and stamina

Down the chains!
Claims the mother
While watching her son die
Protesting, uncovered

Five sons have already died
Five heroes have been named
Five days of resistance so far
Five tv channels have been banned

What are you afraid of, Great tyrants?
Is it of the people and their strength?
Of the world and its rejection?
Or is it to lose the throne?

You have nothing else to lose
Not even shame you hold
I suggest you look at your people
And may God save your soul.





by Mike Walsh

Hiring the Gun

by Sabella Mastricolla

CHARACTERS

- SWITCH: Switch is a man of the road. He is rugged and calloused, built like a mountain, and is more hair than man. He is the quintessential lone wolf, but without fail he will flirt with anything that breathes. He can often be seen walking down a dusty road in his leather cowboy boots, sharp silver spurs, a blue silk handkerchief knotted around his neck, a beautiful handmade black stetson cocked on his head, an off-white cotton shirt, vest, chaps, wrist cuffs, and thick rope made from bovine strapped to his belt.
- AKINARI: Akinari is a man with wealth and power. He is quick-tempered, intelligent, and well-groomed. He lives his life as the shell of the man he once was. He sleeps with his eyes open, one hand always on his gun under the pillow.
- CANDY: Candy is the lone waitress at the diner’s night shift. Her dyed afro is redder than her lips and nails.
- LUCILLE: Lucille is a prostitute. Her tiny waist, brown curls, and doe eyes capture any man’s attention.

SETTING

A roadside diner, the year is 1962 in the Arizona desert, right in the middle of monsoon season.

LIGHTS UP

(Switch sits alone in a red, fraying booth tucked in a corner away from prying eyes, his gun on the table. Two old men sit at the counter, stetsons sitting next to their half-eaten midnight meal. Rain pelts the smudged windows and rattles the weak metal door. The dull, fluorescent lights flicker occasionally. Rolling thunder sounds periodically, but not too often.)

SFX: *BLUESY COUNTRY MUSIC PLAYS SOFTLY IN THE BACKGROUND.*

FADE IN: *(Akinari enters the diner. His suit is bone dry, immaculate. He assesses the diner, finds Switch, then sits across from him. He eyes the gun for a moment before he folds his hands on the table and stares Switch down.)*

- SWITCH *(Switch exhales a long puff of smoke, blurring the man across from him. He smirks lazily as he stamps out his cigarette in the ashtray.)*
- Howdy, stranger.
- AKINARI You know exactly who I am.
- SWITCH That I do, hoss. Any code names you wanna go by? For your sake?
- AKINARI Ken will work...
- SWITCH *(Switch slams his hands on the table and laughs like that’s the funniest thing he’s heard in years. The men at the counter jump and glare.)*
- Shit, really? ‘cause if I’m callin’ you Ken, you’re sure as hell callin’ me Barbie!
- AKINARI On second thought, Akinari will do just fine. What do you prefer to be called?

SWITCH *(Switch puts his muddy boots up on the cushion right next to Akinari, who visibly flinches. Switch stretches his arms above his head and pops his spine.)*

 Most folks ‘round here call me Switch.

AKINARI May I ask why?

SWITCH You may not.

(Switch grabs his lonely glass of whisky and downs it in one shot.)

AKINARI *(Akinari stares at the glass of whisky for a moment. Had that been there when he’d sat down? He must’ve missed it, though he can’t understand how. He shakes his head and lets it go.)*

 You know why I’m here. As I said via post, I would pay you handsomely for your–

SWITCH Let’s talk over dinner, yeah? I’m so hungry I could eat the north end of a south-bound goat.

(He shoots his hand in the air and like magic the waitress appears at their table in seconds.)

CANDY How can I help you sirs tonight?

SWITCH Miss Candy, I’d like some of your best fried chicken and collard greens with a cup of the strongest coffee you have. My partner here will have some tamales since he’s never tried one before and that’s a cryin’ shame.

CANDY Sure thang, uh... how did you know my name?

SWITCH *(Switch nods at her chest and she looks down, blushing.)*

CANDY Oh goodness, I completely forgot I was wearin’ that darn name tag. I’ve gone an’ made a complete fool outta myself.

SWITCH Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, Miss Candy.

(He offers her his most dashing smile.)

CANDY *(Flustered and weirdly aroused, she jogs back behind the counter to get their meals to the cook.)*

SWITCH *(He grins at the incredulous look on Akinari’s face)*

 Did you see those pants of hers? I swear, they were so tight I could see her religion. My mama would’ve tanned my sissy’s hide if she ever wore somethin’ like that, swear to Christ.

(Switch pauses, eyes unfocused.)

AKINARI As I was saying... your services will be generously rewarded. Your living quarters and anything you deem necessary will all be taken care of for you-

SWITCH You must have a lotta enemies.

AKINARI Excuse me?

SWITCH I said, you must have a lotta enemies to come find some low-life gunslinger like myself.

(His playful attitude is gone.)

AKINARI If I offended you, I apologize–

SWITCH Nah, nah, just got lost in my head, that’s all.

(His grin has returned. His emotions seem to flip like a switch.)

AKINARI Perhaps we should wait for the food to arrive before we talk business.

SWITCH *(Switch finger guns him.)*

 Now you’re catchin’ on, pardner.

CANDY *(Candy sashays over with a skip in her step.)*

 Here ya are boys. Tamales for you and a big plate of fried chicken and collard greens for you. We even brewed a fresh pot of coffee just for you boys.

SWITCH Thanks, sugar.

(Switch doesn’t give her any more of his attention and Candy walks away, tears in her eyes.)

AKINARI Now do you wish to discuss details?

SWITCH *(Out of the blue)*

 How old are you?

AKINARI Why do you want to know?

SWITCH Just curious.

AKINARI *(Akinari considers telling him or not before he sighs heavily.)*

 I am forty-two.

SWITCH And your sister. How old is she?

AKINARI *(He freezes.)*

 How do you know about her?

SWITCH What? You think I wouldn’t look into my future boss? And I know you looked into me before you flew all the way from Japan to Arizona just to meet me face to face. You didn’t find much on me though, did you?

AKINARI Who are you, really?

SWITCH Well, hun, if I told you that, then I’d have to kill ya. Nice tattoo by the way.

AKINARI How–

SWITCH Your sleeve rode up, hun.

AKINARI *(He glances down and sees that his sleeve has indeed rolled up to show a glimpse of his tattoo. He quickly pulls it down and turns his glare on Switch.)*

Stop calling me that.

SWITCH Stop calling you what, hun?

AKINARI *(He narrows his eyes while Switch chuckles.)*

SWITCH Why, am I...

(He lights another cigarette and blows smoke through his nose. He leans forward into Akinari's space.)

... making you uncomfortable?

AKINARI I could kill you with my bare hands.

SWITCH Please, be my guest.

(Lightning flashes outside.)

AKINARI Your eyes!

SWITCH My eyes are quite striking.

AKINARI No! They...

SWITCH They what, hoss?

AKINARI *(He pauses. He had been sure Switch's eyes had gone completely black when the lightning had flashed, but perhaps it had been a trick of the light.)*

Nothing. It was nothing.

SWITCH *(He lets the silence linger as he digs into his meal. The start of a headache makes his forehead crease. He drops his fork on his plate with a clatter.)*

I'm gettin' real tired of this hippy dippy bullshit. Why don't we go somewhere a little more my style, yeah?

AKINARI We are in the middle of a desert-

(Switch doesn't let him finish. He grabs Akinari's hand and yanks him forward. Akinari tries to pull away, but suddenly his vision blurs and things get hazy. His whole world goes black.)

CUT TO:

SWITCH Hey, hoss, it ain't very nice of you to sleep through the lady's performance.

AKINARI *(When he opens his eyes, it takes him a moment to take in his surroundings. He is in a very old, wooden saloon. On stage, girls dance and sing in frilly dresses while men ogle from their tables. Across from him is Switch with his boots on the table, arms behind his head, a lazy grin stretched across his face*

while he watches the girls. Akinari looks down at the hand Switch had grabbed. An 'S' has been burned into his palm.)

SWITCH Might catch flies if you keep your mouth open like that, hoss.

(He leans across the table and snaps Akinari's jaw shut. He takes off his hat and begins fanning himself with it.)

Woo! It is hotter than a whore house on nickel night in here! You doin' alright over there, sugar?

AKINARI *(He runs his thumb along the fresh mark.)*

A demon.

SWITCH *(He snorts loudly.)*

Took ya long enough.

(He grabs his fresh glass of whisky and throws his head back to down it. He almost chokes when a bundle of cloth and makeup dives into his lap.)

LUCILLE HONEYBEE!

SWITCH Babydoll! It's been too long!

LUCILLE *(Pouting)*

It's been forever! You never visit me anymore!

SWITCH I had some business to take care of, angel.

LUCILLE *(Lucille turns a heated glare on Akinari.)*

You been stealing all o' my honey's time?

AKINARI *(He focuses on Lucille though his heart is beating rapidly.)*

No. I just met him.

LUCILLE You have been gone too long, Switch. I've been havin' to go to Casey of all people to get my fix.

SWITCH Casey? Why, honeybee, that boy ain't between hay and grass!

LUCILLE But he's so eager to please! And his daddy's a big sugar so you know he pays well.

SWITCH You sure are somethin', Lucy. I don't know what you is, but you's something!

LUCILLE *(She hits him on the chest.)*

Flatterer.

SWITCH *(He eyes Akinari for a moment before he leans into Lucille and whispers in her ear. Her delicate hand flies to her mouth as she giggles like a mad woman.)*

LUCILLE Well... I've never had one of his kind before, it could be fun. But only if you're there.

SWITCH I wouldn't wanna be nowhere else, angelface.
(He turns to Akinari.)

You ever seen a lady before, hoss?

AKINARI *(Anger and fear drags him out of his seat, gun in hand. But Switch beats him to it.)*

SWITCH *(He's on his feet, arm thrown out to protect a hissing Lucille. His gun is aimed at Akinari's chest.)*

One rule of the West is that you remove your gun before sitting at a table. It wasn't nice that you was hidin' your gun like that, hoss.

AKINARI *(He realizes he is cornered as all heads turn towards him. The eyes of the people in the saloon glow like Switch's, black and soulless. His hand is shaking around his pistol.)*

Take me back.

SWITCH I'm sorry. I don't think I heard a please in there. It pays to have manners, ya know.

AKINARI Please. I want to go home.

SWITCH Now that's more like it.

(He grabs Lucille around the waist and kisses her soundly.)

I gotta leave, baby.

LUCILLE No! Please, don't leave! You just got here!

SWITCH I promise I'll come back sooner next time. Take care of things while I'm gone.

(He kisses her one more time. Then grabs Akinari's hand and the world blurs.)

AKINARI *(This time, when he opens his eyes, he immediately recognizes his penthouse and almost cries in relief. The moon shines high and bright in the sky.)*

SWITCH Nice home ya got here.

AKINARI *(He glances down at his hand. The mark is still there.)*

I'm stuck with you, aren't I.

SWITCH *(Nodding with fake solemnness.)*

'fraid so.

AKINARI How did you die?

SWITCH Now that's a very personal question-

AKINARI You took me to Hell tonight. I deserve to ask any questions I please.

SWITCH *(He pulls his hat down over his eyes.*

My sister was murdered. I traded my soul to bring her back. Simple as that.

AKINARI And now you are stuck here forever?

SWITCH And ever.

AKINARI *(He stands on wobbly knees and plops down on the couch next to Switch. He stays silent for a few minutes before he speaks up.)*

Will I have to give up my soul for your service as my bodyguard?

SWITCH *(He barks a laugh and sinks lower into the couch.)*

Nah, nah, I don't want your tarnished soul. And I have no use for money or material things.

AKINARI Then what can I offer you for absolute protection?

SWITCH How 'bout a date?

AKINARI Excuse me?

SWITCH For lifelong protection, all I want –

(He holds up a finger.)

– is a date. Just one. Then I'm your loyal guard dog for eternity.

AKINARI No soul giving?

SWITCH *(Chuckling)*

No soul giving. Cross my heart and hope to die. Again.

AKINARI *(He sticks out his hand to shake.)*

SWITCH *(He grabs Akinari's hand and a circle burns its way around the 'S'.)*

You, sir, have got yourself a demon.

FADE OUT



Photo by Jamil Abbasy

Facsimile Haiku

by Marley Shelton

Your face looks empty,
your smile is astringent;
A ghost of what was

The lines of your eyes –
Invisible strings draw cheeks
into twisted joy

Such a brave woman:
returning to draw offense
from your stalker’s truth

You might fool young boys
and strangers who don’t know you;
watch and see clearly

Bear your coat of arms
but heed my words despite it,
and tremble with shame

Singing melodies,
I come to you in the night;
A truth you can’t bear

Praying for sorrow;
Consult your oracles and
write your destiny

i like the way you dress, valerie

by beige b

TO a girl who thought I defined my existence on hers.

I researched names that mean strength, I found Valarie, I thought of you and when I fell in love, two summers ago in the chaos of your trouble with yourself – the misery you mistook as curiosity – and me running away from the home that I had let foreclose. Your curiosity stunned me like when the lightning bolt leapt into the backyard swimming pool; risky, dangerous, JOLting – the same anarchistic virtues I thought my lifestyle and personality mirrored. That my life had become a B-film attractive adventure, not a series of actions that will not or cannot ever be taken back, as if Pandora when She opened up her box of wisdom, and sappy sticky pleasure, and IV heroin the beige dream, and the coincidences of true love, lust, and infatuation. I saw myself in your reflection while you saw the most handsome desirable version of me in mine. I knew I could ruin myself by falling in love with you, but there are fifty two cards in the rosy red deck of cards and disaster and funeral is not drawn on every. In the weeks of skipping flat bellied rocks against a fluid mirror, I imagined the following year of my life random as the choice of one card; rather than repeated twenty-four hour sweat from withdrawal I would need to lick off the prickled hairs under my nose – rinse, rise, repeat – I have the luxury of licking my sweat. There's no perspiration in a childhood cremation.

I have spent enough educated hours in mental “health” wards of hospitals to know my struggle is nothing less than a luxury. When I was nine years old I imagined what it felt like to die. On happy idyllic family vacations to our grandparent’s condo, I would hide from the sandy seventh story balcony with no safety screen, because I know that curiosity kills cats – and I’m no dog. I am too shy to be anything but the dead flattened mushed cat skeleton. I hid from the balcony because I knew my parents were wrong about heaven and hell, but that didn’t mean I knew the real ending. I hid from the balcony because I didn’t know the ending. I always read books too fast so I could slip the final page shut, then I knew the ending. Unexplained satisfaction knowing the

resolution. What if there is nothing in the ending except silence, darkness, stillness, yet a full working memory? What if death was torturous? What if death just meant I became a new set of hands and toes? What if suicide came when I was nine years old? I hid from the balcony because Pandora, She gave me wisdom and judgment, and I learned that I mistook my curiosity for misery. Then I turned twenty one and people around me – old friends, we had shared marijuana – and anyone else became dead. Heroin. Heroin. Heroin. I had too much wisdom and misery. I’ve played my charades with heroin. (Who am I now? A thief, a beggar, a liar? A fortunate boy that needs a borrowed dollar?) And I still want to play...

My soreness for survival is nothing but fucking luxury, even if it isolates me from crowds of laughter, taints of sour ether, triviality in twisted condoms. Young adulthood – I don’t want to make the mistake of replacing my misery for curiosity. Not if the ending is barren space forever. Recently, I met another phd, I’ve lost count of the purple chairs, and laps of clipboards sitting across from me, asking me about who what when where why and how much.... This recent doctor stood out to me. He asked me questions more than the Ws. I told him how I have felt like no longer breathing, and taking that messy swoon over the Florida balcony, on occasion.

Then he asked me *why not? Why not just do it?*

I said because I dream of a different future, my voice became soggy, my face dampened moldy, my surroundings dimmed, creeping tears. I had never been asked *why* NOT? I have never defended my hesitancy. Maybe it’s because I like the way you dress. (Why don't you come on over, Valerie.) But maybe its because I'm not sure if I love you as much as I want, dream, (plead, beg) to love myself. Maybe I've used you to define me, but maybe I'm lost and addicted and insecure and need not *just* you. It’s *my life* too. But you *too*, Valerie. ▽

Phone Sex

-----you come home **from** work
your close friend asked if u wanted some **heroin**
you slowly **consider** but leave instead of respond
you want today to finally be day **1** of truthful sobriety
you come **home** then shower then pee then shave your face
you **have** many missed calls from your girlfriend
you call and she wants to **dirty** talk and play with herself
you are spitefully sober and too **sick** to be a good boy
you live with your catholic parents that denounce **sex**
you did heroin **for** the first time last week
you just finished a weekend of reckless alcohol and cocaine
you just **wanted** today to be day 1 of sobriety
you have no **feelings** of sexiness or even health
you are not a good boy
you are **bad at phone sex**-----

by beige b

versailles

girl watch me when i yawn
then i wont look so dead
watch my red sea separate
but dont look inside my head

doc please tell me how to think
when to stare when to blink
foam my brain like soft drink
hypnotize me and hoodwink

help me stop writin rhymes
bout wantin to softly die
takin hotshots for byebye
muddy smack my versailles

girl give me some new rules
il give u pearly jewels
girl i love you, april fools
pussycats in swimming pools

had a dream was gonna drown
better than keepin u around
im bored when u dress down
a regret fuck in your hometown

by beige b

USING

my last hot shower
an excessive hour
the entire city's thirst

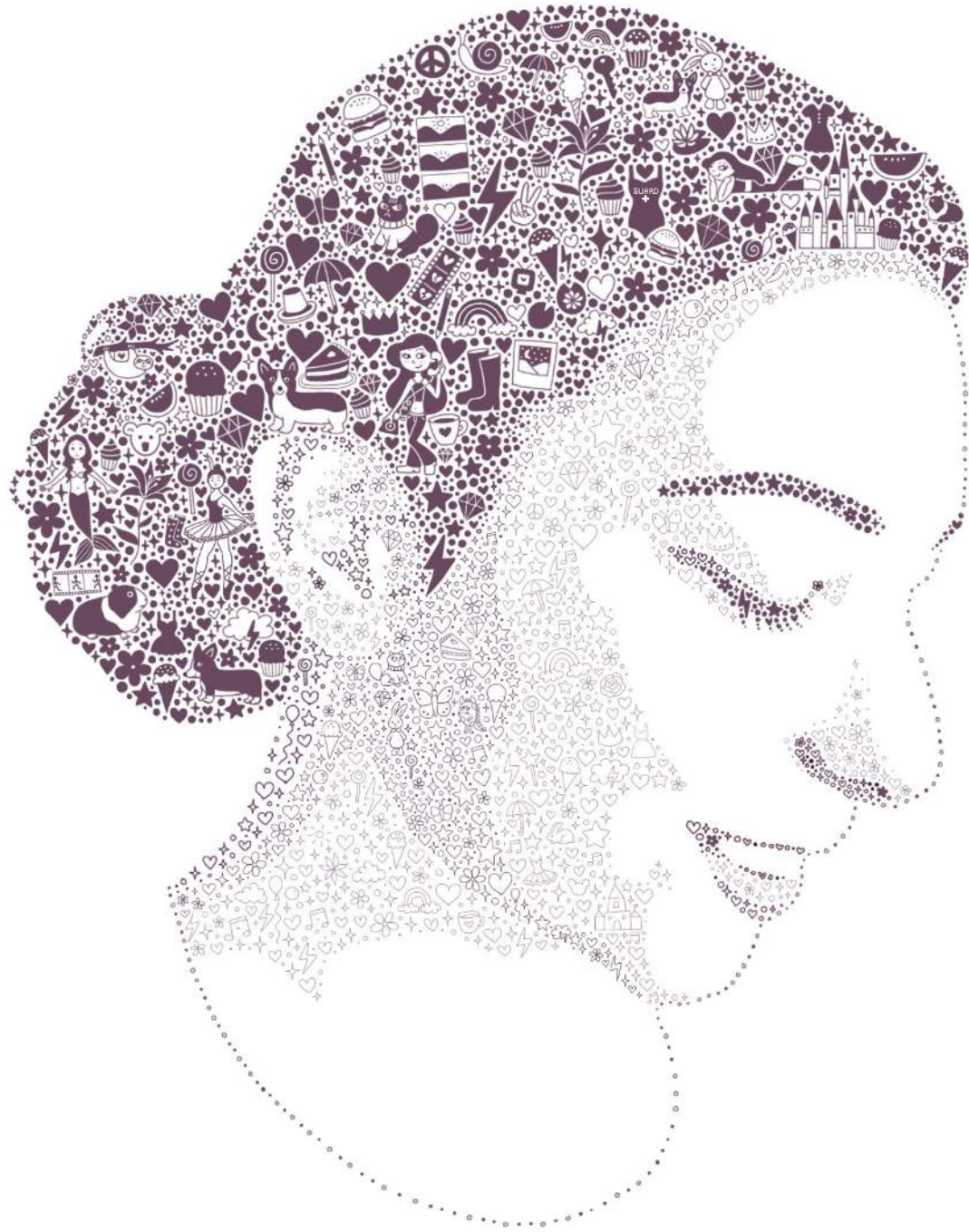
iSmoke coke smoke
in the shower
melts skinny steamy bones

i drain away
old calcium powder
and then you scrub the tub.

DIS-EASE

i steal ribbed quarters and my **disease-quartet** ba booms
leave the legal liquor house five tiny plastic pawns
bloated with dollar vodka tiny warning labels
stuffed into my pockets emptied into
my gagging throat tickling a vicious breath
tiny tiny plastic sacks of cut cocaine
several in my wallet credit cards frosted
sticky vomit trickles the garbage, im asphyxiating
in the front seat til i jump to the wet grass floor
almost gone alcohol out til the sun at 10 am
dopesick is punishment not torture its deserved
whats not is waiting for hours when sober
fingers to phone by the minute antsy mad sad
relapse is bad waiting for the dope is much worse.





Lilli by Sophie Shimazu



Matt by Sophie Shimazu

Saint Anthony

by Jayjay Conrad

I DON'T know why I can't tie my shoes. I *know how* to tie my shoes, I'm nine years old, I just can't. My fingers feel lumpy, thick and unable. They tingle through a numbness. This doesn't make sense, either, a multiplicity of contradictions where—my shoelaces, my shoelaces have fallen from my fingertips. Are they even mine? They don't feel like mine.

The children's ward, a locked unit screaming white with primer-not-paint. It is appropriate, but I doubt it's been conducted that way for the sake of wordplay. Primer; primary school; the age in which children are most receptive to grooming and preening and priming us for what-have-you. And the screaming white reflects the screams of patients — residents, rather; less pathologized—both the hoots and hollers of childhood as well as the shouts of anger, confusion, humanity chafed and raw: Why are we crazy? We don't want to be here. We want it to stop. We want our mom. No, we won't take our meds.

Outdoors, in the shadow of the building—literal shadow, yes, and the lurking, dense, wet, scarring, shouting, stain-stigma we'll carry like Atlas thin and bare upon release until eternity—covers the swaths of green, the statues of saints pocking the grounds. I sit. On the rock. The rock with Saint Anthony. Can feel its coolness on my skin, through my skin. But my skin does not feel like my own. If it was my own, I'd be able to execute basic muscle memory. My muscles don't remember; my hands won't grasp. Gingerly—hah, scoff, giggle—hands-that-aren't-my-hands pick up laces slowly, try again. Ball them in my fists so they can't be dropped. Again. Pull them tight. Again. But now I am shaking. A precursor to seizing. “Please help me tie my shoe! I don't feel well,” I call to a staff, any staff.

“You're a big girl, you know how to tie your shoes.” And I think: no, no, no. I wave my hands, and point and shake, and gruntgrunts slur my words. “Until you use your words, we can't help you with anything; you know that.” And I think: no, no no. I gesture, because my tongue is like my fingers, its intellect disappeared—abracadabra! Vocal osmosis, diffusing into swollen, sloppy stutters.

It hurts behind my eye; my brain, that rotted

thing. I don't know what it is. It steals every modicum of muscle memory; I go slack, I drool. I don't know what it is. It is gathering at the corners of my lips each time I open my mouth to call to the staff, again—her back is turned, moving seems insane—yes, I've said it, insane—an insane idea, seems like a fantasy; move, what even is that? I place my weight on my left leg, not trembling, not tremors, but it has me shaking, involuntarily, not like rocking back and forth to soothe; not twitching the way I always do. I don't know what it is.

On a shady rock, in a yard with pretty trees, swaths of grass, and other children at play. They giggle and laugh and protest when the staff calls directions. I hear them. They are far away. I am here, and I still haven't tied my shoe. They are not far away, they are close to me—or am I close to them? They don't *sound* close, they don't *seem* close, they are blurry sensory-based echoes shuffling back inside single file.

Tremors come in waves. I shake. Shakeshakeshake shakeshake. Quiver, tremble, drop my laces, other irrelevant but appropriate synonyms. Those synonyms are heady reality I breath in. Lifting myself shakeshake up from the shakeshake stone island of Saint Anthony. Try to. And *Dear Saint* shakeshake Anthony, shake *please come around* shake *something is lost* shake shakeshake shake *and cannot be* shakeshake—*cannot* shake *be* shake . . . *it cannot be—can't be, can't be, can't, it can't it can't, it. . . . can't be* shake *found*—stillness. Sudden. Not the work of the saint. It can't be. Karol—that's my mother, we don't get along well—sees me froth at the mouth—froth—visiting day-froth at the the the mouth frothing and she is seeing.

Loud. Loud nonsense. Syllables from so far away—“given Lithium instead of risperidone because of the reactions she—”

“No, ma'am, –part of why she's here is to get meds straightened out, to find a regimen that works for her, and—” loud. Loud loud loud.

“Some people—”

“—reaction or side-effect of the—”

“uncommon, but—” loud, loud loud. “Psy—” loud. Clutch my ears.

I flail. Arch my back. Howl, claw. And I think: *What on earth is that terrible sound? Ah, it's howl, wail, moanmoanmoan* coming out of me. It feels calm. I don't know what it is. Froth, howl, flail. Froth, howl, flail. Froth, howl.... struggle: “It'll be—” leave me alone, *I feel sick. I feel so soupy and solid and I do not feel like I am Here. But not There either.* Froth and howl and blur the world. Blur the world until a face I resent, the other children do as well, lurk from behind my peripheral vision, whatever is left of it. My eyes roll. The Phlebotomist. Capital P. The one we really, really hope never to get. And then I do struggle. I puke. From physical

exertion. Maybe.

“You need to—” curl yank roll, grab at anything “—stay still for me to” shakeshake puke.

“It'll take a few—”

“Days? Days? She's obviously—”

I roll on the gurney. I can't walk, remember? I already tried. And it's not safe to walk with shoelaces untied. I don't know why I can't tie my shoelaces.

“—Need to let me do my job.”

Poke, tape—“all done.” And I think: no no no. As the IV spreads what feels like anti-freeze through my tininess, it's like an engine failing to turn over. I try to turn over. Again, I try to—. ▽





Photo by Sergey Dushkin

Fluid

by Jayjay Conrad

You are
(I am)

a garden of scars still blooming,
breasts like pale roses grown
in between fence slats
(hedgetrimmers won't clip.
Rather, spiral outwards and back in tandem
with the days they are beauty
and the evenings they are pain.)

(S)he is
(I am)

deep in a betwixt that screams twilight
louder, growing, louder than a crowd’s eyes
chewing, like stale tobacco, a self-proclaimed self.
(Mind-teeth grind
identity into a fine powder,
tongues run, saliva a dismantling diction, smoothly
along cavities-turned-caverns that are not their own.)

We—me, us, together—are

seismic fault-lines inside earthquake;
dandelions having cracked the sidewalk to be seen;
dismembered, deconstructed, denied;
a light switch scotch-taped halfway
up nor down.

Roots and the Mighty Oak

by R.L. Grenier

In the deep and mossy woods
Not very far from me,
There lived a most splendiferous
And mighty oaken tree.

The oak had grown for many years,
One hundred ninety two,
And had become just recently
Disgusted with the view.

“I am the tallest of the trees,
And can see all their tops,
From pointed pines and flickering birch
To even willow mops.”

“I’m tired of the same old thing,
Each day after each day.
I think I’ll pull my roots right up
And then be on my way.”

The roots heard this and quickly were
So very ill at ease,
For moving roots is not a thing
As easy as you please.

Why, some roots had gone down so far
In search of waters deep
That of the mighty oak’s tirade
They hardly heard a peep.

The roots that heard had hollered up
“Why Oak, you can’t do that!
For without us roots down here
You’d end up lying flat.”

But heedless of the roots’ advice,
The oak began to strain,
To try and pull the roots away
And be off down the lane.

But still the roots refused to go
And prayed they would not slip,
But of their hold upon the earth
They slowly lost their grip.

And so the roots moved slowly up
To find another place
From which to watch the mighty oak
Fall flat upon its face.

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Photo by Cormac Walsh

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