

3 Moon Magazine // Volume 1 // Issue 3

metamorphosis

3 Moon Magazine // Volume 1 // Issue 3 // April 2020

Metamorphosis © 2020  
3 Moon Independent Publishing  
British Columbia, Canada

All Rights Reserved.

Upon publication of this journal, all individual rights to works contained herein revert back to the individual authors, artists, and photographers.

**We do not censor work - please consider this a content warning for any/all possible triggering subjects, which we have done our best to mark (\*).** We apologize if we have missed anything.

This journal as presented in either digital or hard-copy format is not for resale or redistribution.

Cover Art © Justene Dion-Glowa  
Edited by Justene Dion-Glowa

[www.3moonpublishing.wixsite.com/home](http://www.3moonpublishing.wixsite.com/home)

Support 3 Moon Publishing:  
<https://ko-fi.com/3moonindependentpublishing>

Digital and physical copies of this journal are available at:

<https://gumroad.com/3moonpublishing>

## Contents

<i>Nieve</i> , by Vivianna Varlack .....	5
<i>Vivisepulture</i> , by Siobhan Carroll .....	8
<i>Bonus Time</i> , by Michael L. Ruffin .....	9
Three poems by Demi Whitnell .....	10
Five poems by Ryan Norman .....	12
Three Poems by Madison Zehmer .....	16
<i>Daughter of Salem</i> , by Emily Wilcox .....	20
<i>Meditation from South of the River</i> , by Aura Martin ....	26
<i>My Friend Annie</i> , by Danielle Moles .....	32
<i>A Southern California Affair</i> , by Ron Tobey .....	33
<i>The Irresistible Staircase</i> , by Tyler Dempsey.....	35
<i>Beautiful Souls</i> , by Linda M. Crate .....	38
Two Poems by Jesse Miksic.....	39
<i>Like an Ocean in a Cathedral</i> , by Amanda Crum.....	41
<i>You are</i> , By José Clemente Carreño Medina, Translated by Toshiya Kamei .....	45
<i>Cotee</i> , by Peach Delphine .....	46
<i>*My Gun, My Wartime Lover</i> , by Joseph S. Pete .....	48
<i>Summana</i> , by Juliette Sebock .....	52
<i>The Waiting Game</i> by Darren Ryding.....	53
<i>Her Shoes</i> , by John D. Rutter.....	63
<i>Nutrocubes</i> , by Joseph Marsh.....	73
<i>Views from a Laundromat</i> , by Zach Murphy.....	83

<i>Savored</i> , by Aisha Malik .....	86
<i>*The Moon and the Magic</i> , by Mehreen Ahmed.....	88
Two Poems by Elizabeth Bluth.....	107

Photographer Bio: Lisa Lerma Weber lives in San Diego, CA. Her work has been published in Brave Voices, Crepe & Penn, Green Light Lit, Vamp Cat, and others. Follow her on Twitter @LisaLermaWeber.

## Nieve, by Vivianna Varlack

Nieve was a place where everyone knew everyone, and if you didn't know someone, you would pretend you did. Anytime you passed by someone it was written in the rules of the island that you had to greet them like generations of your family had grown up together. Because of this "friendliness," it was the place where every affluent parent took their child to force them to do what every affluent child should do: network.

Make those connections, get that person's number, stay in touch. You are all the future leaders of America. You never know when an opportunity might open up and the person making the final decisions is the girl who told you about her sex adventures in Puerto Rico while she was drunk on the beach, and then took you to go get free ice cream. You know, the one who kept calling you Hannah after you already corrected her three times.

In short, Nieve was the one thing I hated most in the world.

It was a place full of children who were spoiled to the point where throwing a plastic water bottle into the ocean was something they could do without thinking about the repercussions. Every action they took was for their own entertainment because they knew in their hearts that climate change isn't a rich person's problem. They partied in the park or in the street or on the beach (really wherever the largest speaker was) and left the place littered with trash in the morning.

Each person you met accosted you with the same questions. Hi, what's your name? How old are you? What grade are you in? What school do you go to? They asked the questions twice. Once drunk. Once sober. The latter somehow always being on a yacht.

My only freedom from the culture that surrounded the island was when all of my parents' friends, and their children who were, in turn, automatically my friends, left and there was nothing left to do but watch the fireworks. It was a show that people all over Nieve drove to watch on a packed beach for fifteen minutes.

For me, the night started out as most nights did; I picked everything apart until the entire situation became unenjoyable. While I watched the explosions of color in the sky I couldn't help but wonder about any PTSD victims who felt the boom of fireworks as deeply in their chests as I did, and were taken back to times most of us have only experienced through entertainment. My eyes lingered on the smoke that drifted in the air and I wondered if watching these chemical reactions was worth the damage they were doing. I listened to obnoxious dads who mocked their children's exclamations of awe and laughed unsettlingly loud and made a list of all the things I didn't want my husband to be like.

But there was a moment when one firework, which didn't receive many coos from the crowd as others did, distracted me from all of that. There were the normal red, green, and blue displays. There were the ones that were big enough to receive claps and screams. There were ones that were bright enough to cause serious eye damage. But none were like the one that caught me.

It looked like angels falling down to earth.

They were descending on all of us, and I got it. I got why the children screamed that the fireworks were too close and I got why the woman in front of me was taking selfies with the sky. I longed to see it again and experience its beauty. I wondered if everyone who watched felt attached to a firework. If maybe all of us were our own fireworks and some of us were more impressive than others, but in the end, we were all apart of the show.

Maybe we greeted each other because we all really did know each other through the unspoken understanding of what it meant to live the lives we did.

I still hated every trip to Nieve for years afterward, but it was a place that I valued because on that beach was where I realized that even the cynical could dream.

*Vivianna Varlack is a junior at Communications High School in Wall, New Jersey. In her free time, Vivianna enjoys reading and creative writing. Her work has been published in The Writers Circle Journal, and she runs a blog where she posts book reviews. When Vivianna is not immersed in the literary world, she loves to bake and listen to music.*

## Vivisepulture, by Siobhan Carroll

Mud and blood mix under my ripped fingernails  
which feel like they might peel off from the pressure.  
I've been clawing my way out of this hole for three years.

This hole marked '*dutiful daughter.*'  
This hole marked '*devoted wife.*'  
This hole marked '*she never asked for much.*'

My throat is choked with dry clay soil;  
my mouth sticky; eyes caked closed.  
As I break through the top soil I rasp my truth  
'I AM MORE THAN THE SUM OF MY PARTS.  
I REFUSE TO BE A GOOD GIRL ANYMORE.'

People run, terrified.  
I relish their fear. Swagger into the city  
I'm unsteady on my feet but people make room.  
This is my time.

*Siobhán Carroll is a writer based in Edinburgh. She lives in Leith with 2 cats and a number of books she describes as "never enough". She writes poetry, prose and personal essays. You can find her on Twitter at @siobhanclaude\_*



## Bonus Time, by Michael L. Ruffin

Mama died  
aged fifty-three  
I was sixteen

Daddy died  
aged fifty-seven  
I was twenty

I'm sixty-one  
my son is thirty-six  
my daughter is thirty-three  
my grandchildren are  
three and one

I'm still here  
with them  
for them

Gratitude  
is a  
poor word

*Michael L. Ruffin is a writer, editor, preacher, and teacher. He regularly posts poems on Instagram (@michaell.ruffin). He is the author of [Fifty-Seven: A Memoir of Death and Life](#) and of the forthcoming [Praying with Matthew](#).*

## Three poems by Demi Whitnell

### **My American girl**

I fell in love with your brain but it was in the wet dream I had of you that I realised how much I wanted you. Standing in front of me, your lips dazzling as you spat out your poetic lines, each hitting my heart with a pan that made me think "this girls brain turns me on". You stimulated something that no guy could ever reach and no girl ever wanted to reach. You made me crave your tongue across my skin by the words that you chose to describe your eating disorder. I've never wanted someone so badly because of their brain.

### **\*Pink Cheeks**

The man who had climbed inside me invited stood in front of me with his daughter. Blonde curly hair. Two pink bows to match her pink cheeks. Two piercing blue eyes which would see the horror on my face as I served her father. Our eyes met and I wondered if he recognised my frame. The wrists he had held down with such force I lost circulation. Or if he recognised my voice as I politely scanned his daughters key chain, no moans or cries for help escaped my body on this meeting however the memories of them echoed my mouth as it opened and closed. I wondered if his daughters mother knew of how he had told me I was special and that it was my right of passage to put my mouth over his cock and pray. I wondered if she knew of the bullying which I suffered, the shame, the "you willingly went with him to the park", "you told him to kiss you", "you told him you had fancied him

for years", "there's no way he raped you". He paid for his items this time. And as our hands touched over the counter, he was still as cold as before. Something left my body as he touched me once more. Again, uninvited. The only thing that would stick with me for years after this exchange was the fact he didn't remember the girl he raped. The girl who lost her girlhood in his orgasm. To him, I was once again, expendable.

### **Pumpkin**

Pumpkin. The nickname I used for you. Hollow. Soulless. With a fake smile etched across your flesh. Like a moth to the flame I was attracted to your mouth.

*Demi is a 20 year old Student from London. She is the Editor in Chief of her university magazine, CUB magazine, as well as a published poet on amazon and other platforms, as well as a journalist for the Daily Telegraph two summers running. Suffering with dyslexia has never stopped her and she keeps pushing her writing far and wide using her experiences with depression, anxiety, love and loss to create poems which show the inner workings of a young girls mind.*

## Five poems by Ryan Norman

### **Death Mask**

Spitting a mouthful of toothpaste into the sink,  
I watch myself wipe minty remains  
from my mouth onto my fist and wrist—  
a lightbulb bursts in the background.

Looking into the black, I see my face  
contorted in a death-masked smile  
sitting inside a birdcage, the bars  
a chemical construction

taunting me with escape,  
reaching forward in hopeful struggle  
am I insane, or prescient?  
Each answer a monster.

### **Cicada Song**

Slumbering in underground cradles,  
dirt-nymphs, dreaming of Athenian  
ancestors' gilded bodies pinning  
ancient tendrilled locks—

birthed from the soil, autochthonous  
to apple carcass sediment  
eager to shed our youthful shells,  
we dried in the sun beside

your glistening likeness stamped on  
silver thrown at your feet.

My new skin hardening over time

watching sunsets alone  
in the boughs we claimed  
together, with your song

*choose me, choose me*  
to watch you fly off  
as I lay among the misted  
orchard with wet wings

and receive a message in the wind:  
you're singing for someone new.

### **Periphery**

Snow squalls scream into my open window  
menacing my periphery—  
the voices are here again

holding me hostage  
in a lonely bed,  
beating me over and over.

Bloody-eyed, I curl against the cold  
of the truth  
staring into the blue light in my nest

not ready to leave  
not this winter  
not now

I have blankets to dampen the blows  
and my quick breath to keep me warm  
in the darkness.

### **Preen**

Ten years I was a caged bird  
barred by a pill construct:  
Pop, swig, smile.

In therapy I'd preen  
feathers out of place:  
Pop, swig, smile.

They said it would end  
with every new pill:  
Pop, swig, smile.

The day finally came;  
A new diagnosis—  
'Forever,' slithered in my ear.  
Preen, little bird. Smile.

### **New Year**

Blue flames lick at  
my splintered foundations,  
a nest of a home  
for an over-preened pigeon,

curr, curring at reptilian  
toes tracking ash from  
one calendar to the next—  
A phoenix lives next door.

Flying into a new year,  
a bird's eye view of  
what ought to be  
and what ought not.

Ryan Norman is a writer from New York living in the Hudson Valley. Inspired by the landscape, he writes what he feels. His poetry often interweaves mental health, mythology, and nature. You can find his past work in Elephants Never and Storgy Magazine. Twitter: @RyanMGNorman

Rule Breaker, Lisa L. Weber



## Three Poems by Madison Zehmer

### **Girl Icarus**

We beg for pardon as past-time and pleasure—Knowing  
The body is not sacred—We shrink to become. Lose

Eve's sin by losing the body—Ascend by absence  
And emptiness—Touch dwindling skin—Feel its  
ecdysis

Hear it sputter as it evaporates—Let it molt.  
The buzzards inside wait for the feeding—Give them what

They want—Piece by piece—And know this—They will  
never be  
Satisfied—Vultures with insatiable hunger for

Penance are made saints—Watch their metamorphosis.  
Taste  
Cells wither under their breath—See how they are refined

Into a nothing so pure it glows—Hold it in your  
Palm—Let it melt into a circle of being—Shrink

Again—This is how to become godlike as a ghost.



## Mineral

I've been to that cavern  
On farmland borders—Stalagmite puncture

Wounds worn like ornaments—  
I watched calcium  
And iron fuse with air—The smell so  
Potent it became taste—

Blood is a mineral too—And we will return to the  
Earth that gives as rot—

Death is just  
Becoming little more matter—Let me be  
Born as soil unearthed—Again and again—

In cavernous shadows—Beyond the reach of breath  
Let me return with dust on my lips

With silt in my voice—Hands as smoke—  
A spirit of salt—

As I look back.

## Grit

Running my tongue over grit in front-teeth gaps,  
gaze settling on its ruin—what a way to become—

watching ivy dwindle down into bramble  
and marigold hearts. Build me a coffin out of

grass and when it catches flame  
hold its fire in your belly—acid combustion—  
watch as your skin turns into blood and rocks.

Give it back over to the body

that churns off of hunger.  
Or give it back to God—  
melting cuticles and notched ribcages

counting down the hours to our pardoning.

I wish I could hear the crow's calls  
driving soil out of its springtime  
luring worms to dinner.

That's what dying must feel like

hearing a lullaby only you can hear  
calling you to swallow its dirt.

Madison Zehmer is an emerging poet and wannabe historian from North Carolina. She has published and forthcoming work in the Santa Ana River Review, Ghost City Review, Gone Lawn, and more. Her first chapbook, 'Unhaunting,' will be released by Kelsay Books in 2021.

## *\*Daughter of Salem*, by Emily Wilcox

It's September the 22<sup>nd</sup> 1692 and I stand in the courtroom looking around myself. The townsfolk look on in their thick winter coats, raising their voices in anger. It's been a particularly cold winter, the witches brought it with them. Cold air blows in through the gaps in the wooden timbers. The beams high above our heads creak with the icy wind. A small amount of light leaks through the windows of the second floor, it is barely enough to illuminate the great courthouse. Candles stand flickering desperately trying to give off light in this dismal season. The bleak brown courthouse is intimidating even to me, a man of many virtues, a righteous man. I stand with my friends surrounding me which gives me little comfort in this ominous place. We all sit as we wait for the next trial to start, there's already been two today but this is the first trial I will have witnessed. Reading the looks on everyone's faces I can tell they want to see another execution.

All of a sudden the girl is dragged into the courtroom almost on her knees without a sound, to stand before the judge in her trial. The quiet chatter hushes as the trial is now in progress and all eyes fall to her. The candlelight catches her face and casts great grey shadows underneath her dull gleaming eyes. As she stands she trembles slightly but composes herself, as if the devil has rid her of her fear. Her name is Alice Parker. Not the first witch to be found in Salem though. Alice as we all know is to be accused of the bewitchment of Mary Warren's sister, among numerous other plights that have plagued this town. Her dress is dirty and mangled from the days she was in prison before the trial. I can't remember when she was caught, maybe a week or two ago? There have been so many trials since. Almost a hundred people have been accused already, I can see the fear on everyone's faces, no

one wants to be in that position. Her face is contorted in pain as the metal of the shackles bites into her fleshy wrists which well with blood. Pathetic. Who knew witches could bleed? With her eyes turned to the ground she doesn't move an inch, doesn't say a word. I watch my neighbours and friends as they lean over the old wooden benches to shout their accusations at the girl. Her family sits at the front and we see as they try to plead with the judge.

The reverend Nicholas Noyes sits high above us all as acting judge, staring at the girl with hatred in his eyes. We all know what the ruling will be, the trial is just a formality. We've heard the stories. He's sitting silently listening to the enraged voices of the town. 'My livestock are dying!' I shout along with the rest of them. It's the winter, I've never known one like this, it's the devils work. One towns person gets to speak 'I saw her in an apparition in the North Fields' he claimed. That was enough for the judge to begin his decision. Once again he looked the girl up and down and seemingly decided then and there what her fate would be.

'How do you plead Alice Parker' he says, his voice low and grave.

'I plead not guilty your honour, please god have mercy on me' she replies quietly. 'God gives no mercy to witches' he bellows.

I hear the crack of his gavel and jump slightly in surprise, the trials here in Salem don't last long.

'I rule this woman guilty on all charges, she is to be hung on Gallows Hill like the witches before her' he says and smiles smugly.

I hear the crowd scream in triumph. He's given the people what they want. We've won. I watch as a couple of the townsfolk hastily grab her by the old iron chains,

the same chains that held the witches before her, a look of satisfaction in their eyes. Alice follows without complaint or struggle, she knows what's good for her.

Everyone stands and begins to shuffle towards the door like a heard of sheep. I follow the crowd and listen to the hollow sound of their footsteps on the floor. Even with the ruling there is still apprehension in the air, coursing through the bodies of everyone here. Aside from a few remaining cheers everyone is silent, waiting, watching. The girl is pulled down the stairs with little care. She is to be hung anyway, what's a few cuts and bruises along the way to Gallows Hill. As we leave the courthouse I watch the crowd brace as the elements outside the grand wooden doors envelope them. I pull my collar tightly to my throat feeling the frosty air scrape through my lungs like icy fingers, it's almost painful. Men and women alike pull their clothes closer to their bodies in hopes of finding some warmth about them. The townsfolk wearing coats of black seem almost like a funeral parade. How fitting. We fall into pace with one another our buckled boots slapping the ground as we walk.

Trudging along the path to Gallows Hill I see the homes of many people I know. The same homes that have been terrorised by these witches. The same homes in which witches have also been found. The families of the witches have had their land taken from them, and rightly so. They concealed their devils spawn so we had to punish them. I cast a glance at the newly discovered witch who is just ahead of me. She's surrounded by the towns children and even adults jeering and throwing small rocks at her as if to taunt her. As if to warn her of what's coming. Her shackles give off a low jingle as she struggles up towards the hill. I turn and look behind me and see the man who is carrying the rope examine it with grim amusement. Is it the same rope that hung the first convicted witch? I question myself.

More than half of the town join us on the walk. The rest I can assume are witch sympathisers, they're almost as bad as the witches themselves. The walk to Gallows Hill isn't long but the time feels like its dragging with the anticipation of the hanging weighing everyone down. As we walk through the town we pass trees with posters plastered on them announcing the witch trials that we have just attended. This wont be the last hanging there is today, there is more to be done to purify the town. We finally pass the last few houses and escape the smokey smell emanating from the fireplaces of each house. Leaving behind the safety of the wooden slated houses we seek comfort in, we find ourselves at the base of the hill. It's a short walk up to the top, except for those heaving the cart behind them. The ground underneath our feet crunches softly as we reach the top. I look around. We're surrounded by gnarled trees and almost out of sight of the houses. Out of sight of safety. I watch as the cart is pulled up beneath one of the stronger, thicker looking trees. The reverend is helped up and stands upon it to address us.

'I reverend Nicholas Noyes sentence you Alice Parker to death by hanging, here on Gallows Hill'

Alice says nothing but instead bows her head in a silent prayer. We all watch scornfully, nothing can help her now. She's lifted roughly onto the cart next to the reverend who withdraws slightly from fear. Alice makes no eye contact with anyone, she just stands trembling once again, looking at her hands and the chains that bind them. She looks terrified, almost human, but that's just another witches trick. The man with the rope gives a grunt as he throws the end of the thick fraying rope with great force around one of the lower hanging branches of the tree. I watch him secure it in place and give Alice a smirk of triumph, proud of his work. The other end is placed around her neck. She looks up. She stares around at the

crowd that has gathered in the excitement of watching her death.

‘Have you any last words?’ Questions the reverend.

Alice shakes her head as much as the noose will allow. She is about to be hung yet has nothing to say? No last guilty plead? No apologies? One shimmering tear slips its way from the corner of her eye and rolls down her pasty cheek bleached of all colour from her days locked up. She looks across the crowd with pleading eyes, as if to say ‘help me’, but they are having none of it. The crowd roar with impatience. ‘Hang her!’ the vast group exclaims.

The reverend hushes everyone in his low voice and we all fall silent, eyes upturned to Alice in her noose. The reverend is helped down unsteadily from the cart by a couple of the townsfolk. He looks around the crowd obviously enjoying the feeling of our eyes on him and waits for the anticipation of the crowd to build. I watch him gesture to the men holding the cart in place, they nod in understanding, and they quickly rip the ground on which she stands away from her. She drops. Twitching and swinging in the winter wind. The one she created with her dark powers. She looks around the crowd as she swings to and fro and finally her eyes settle on me for a moment, I try my hardest to keep composure but her eyes beginning to bulge give me a horrible feeling in my soul. Then just like that she looked away as she swung around. She hung there for almost two minutes before her weak throat gave in. Making a last choking noise she hangs limp a couple of feet from the ground. Her hair and dress billow around her lifeless body. She looks like a dark angel. No sound emanates from her lips, no movement is seen from her body. It is done, its over. This is the first hanging I have seen since the trials began, I did not think I’d of had the stomach for it, and maybe I still don’t. Watching her life



drain from her body I was filled with excitement and guilt. I'm conflicted. The crowd once again let out a loud cheer, but I cannot make a sound. I get pat on the back by one of my friends who is smiling in self satisfaction, he obviously enjoyed the spectacle.

‘Another witch down, who knows how many to go’ he says cheerfully.

I nod in agreement and try to smile, but that look she gave me, that look I will never forget. She is left to hang there until the next trial comes to its conclusion. The next witch will suffer the same fate as Alice. She gets no burial, no respect. Just an unmarked grave somewhere in Salem. She will be forgotten, quickly. I stand still staring at her limp body as the crowd dissipates around me. Her body acting as a warning to any other witches that may take residence in our, town that we have no tolerance for such creatures.

I turn to leave and see her family at the base of the tree on their knees crying and praying for her soul to find peace. They could not have done anything to help her. I begin to walk and follow the rest of the crowd back towards the town. Leaving Alice and all the pity I had for her and her family behind me. Catching up with my friends I say ‘It is time for the next trial. This one should be good.’ With a smile spreading across my face.

Emily Wilcox studies English and Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. On instagram her poetry and photography can be found at @writing\_and\_creations. She sells her handmade crafts at the local florist.

*Meditation from South of the River*, by  
Aura Martin

Once there was a father, a mother, and three boys. They lived in a small house in a small town in Arkansas. The father worked at the dry cleaners. Jules pressed shirts and played piano on weekends. For banquets, weddings, and funerals. He taught himself to play as a child in the Depression. On piano keys made of cardboard.

The mother taught music and hung laundry. Dorothy pushed a cart that had an organ and a record player from classroom to classroom in the little elementary school. Dorothy was happiest then. She hung up laundry and kept an eye on her boys. *Make sure they were alright.*

*Daddy*, she always called Jules that, *strung up a line for me in the house*. Everyone else in the neighborhood used the one outside, in the yard with the pond and garden.

In the yard with the pond and garden, there was a treehouse Jules built for the boys. All the neighborhood kids would come and play. The boys made a club and called themselves Birdmen. You had to eat one green bean to become a member.

*We made wings*, Dad said. He drew on a napkin to show me. They cut slits in cardboard to attach the wings to their belts. They looked like angel wings.

One of the neighborhood boys got a black eye. *Well, he shouldn't have come over then!* Dorothy laughed. Then she shrugged. *I can't keep an eye on them all.*

Worms killed the elm tree, so Jules had to chop it down. Back when the neighborhood was young.

Back when the neighborhood was young, they dug a ditch out front to collect all the rainwater. It would form a little creek after heavy rains. Kids would go out there and play in it.

One time after it rained, Dorothy brought Timmy with her to the elementary school. She had to talk to the principal. While they were talking, Timmy wandered over to the cafeteria ladies.

*Wanna see what I have in my pocket?*

*Sure*, the ladies said.

Timmy pulled out a frog.

*And it hopped across the counter*, Dorothy said gesturing with her hands. The ladies screamed and scrambled to get food away from the froggy.

Later Dorothy and Timmy went to the grocery store before dinner.

*Wanna see what I have in my pocket?* Timmy pulled out the frog, but it was dead. *He was so disappointed.*

*Frog killer*, Dad muttered. He got up to sort through paperwork.

He got up to sort through paperwork, the paperwork Jules left behind.

*I'll have to call and cancel his medications.*

There was no power in the living room. The only light came from the kitchen. Dorothy pushed a walker that had a magnifying glass and sheets of paper towels. She sat in the old leather chair that Jules liked, her back to the

front door. There were dryer sheets tied on the screen door to keep *skeeters* away.

There were stained glass windows throughout the house. They were from England, thirty-five dollars each, found in an antique shop in Memphis.

*I don't know why I like them. Through towns, I would tell Jules to drive around the block again so I could see all the stained glass.*

The front door had a circle of glass pieces above the mail slot. They made up an owl. *I thought that stained glass looked like roses. Isn't that silly? I thought it was romantic.*

It was romantic to have something from a bygone era. Dorothy and Jules wanted a steamer trunk after seeing it at a friend's house, but they couldn't find one. They put an ad in the paper, and an old man finally sold them one for eighteen dollars. Jules was a handyman and shined it up with leather and brass and some red paint.

The town was home to the Singer factory, where they used to make sewing cabinets. Jules used to pull a wagon with a freezer of home-made ice cream and sold it to workers for five cents a bowl. The money was used to buy new pews for the church.

Years later, after the production had ceased, Jules rolled up his sleeves and took broken pieces of marble from the Singer factory itself. He cemented them into the floor of the new music room, where he could finally install a baby grand. When I was little, I used to hop on those stone lily pads. There was a rocking chair with a book of prayers on a ruffled pillow. Dorothy prayed that God wouldn't take her eldest son.

Her eldest son was old enough to be a member of the Baptist church, and one day he brought his little brother along. The church served bread and grape juice. No alcohol for Baptists.

*I'm hungry*, the little brother whined.

*We'll be home soon*, Jon replied.

*Well of course you're not hungry. You just had crackers and juice.*

Dorothy smiled. Dorothy Jeanie Butter Beanie. She has a beadwork of crumbs on her blouse. She stopped smiling.

*One time during service, someone asked me what I would ask God. I knew my answer - I would ask him why did he take Jon? He was so young - I was so angry. And you know what Timmy said? He said he would ask God if Jon was here because he would like to speak to him. That's what your father said.*

Jules said they had to live for their other children. Now a family of a mother, a father, and two boys.

A family of a mother, father, and two boys. Timmy, my Dad, was one of them. Mom used to sew, and she embroidered a blanket for her in-laws. A blanket with koi-fish, just like the real ones in their little pond in the backyard. Dorothy nowadays keeps the blanket face-down.

*Every time I look at it, I think, why did you do that to my Timmy?*

Dorothy didn't say why, because we all knew Mom had an affair with the donut man. It tore Dad apart. Dorothy knew more than I thought.

*I've always loved your father*, she said.

We sat in the dark kitchen, on wooden chairs with rose-patterned beams. Dorothy tried to make Mom feel welcome. Mom's name was difficult to pronounce, but Timmy's family tried to make her feel welcome. *One of us.*

An elderly friend of Dorothy's tried to pronounce Mom's name, but he kept getting it wrong.

*Just think, Velveeta. It sounds like that.*

The man went up to Mom, hand extended. *No, don't tell me*, he said. *You're Velveeta!*

Dorothy smacked her forehead.

*But I can't hate your mother*, Dorothy continued. *She gave me you.*

We ate pulled pork and beans.

We ate pulled pork and beans, just like they did after the funeral. Jules, like his son, had to be buried elsewhere. No one can be buried in Trumann because it was a flood plain. Things have changed since the time when my grandparents could leave the house key outside, buried in a box of vanilla wafers in the big freezer.

An old friend stopped by while Dad sorted through paperwork. The lady visited Dorothy.

*Too many fingers in the pie*, the woman was saying.

I poured myself iced tea, then wandered into the living room. I turned the key on the lamp with painted petals. There used to be plastic dollhouses in this room, now replaced with borrowed church tables and washed containers - all leftovers from Jules' funeral. He knew he

was dying. He had all those books of heaven scattered throughout the house. The piano stood silent.

*It's good to see you get back on the saddle*, the friend said to Dorothy.

I sat in the rocking chair and listened to the chimes outside. Dorothy's momma always said *it'll be alright*. Now in that small house with a mother and two boys.

Aura Martin graduated from Truman State University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. She is the author of the micro-chapbook "Thumbprint Lizards" (Maverick Duck Press). Her recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in Capulet Mag, Obra/Artifact, and Variant Literature, among others. In Aura's free time, she likes to run and take road trips.

## *My Friend Annie,* by Danielle Moles

It has been some time  
in which  
thighs have thinned to wrists  
stomach  
empty.

A greeting embrace  
reveals  
clothes draped over  
bones  
palm feels for spine  
met with the cold  
of a skeleton  
corpse  
to be.

Danielle Moles is a student at the University of Lincoln. In her spare time she writes and makes art. She hopes to one day turn her love of creativity into a living. Twitter & Instagram: @2themolehole



*A Southern California Affair*, by Ron  
Tobey

Onshore breeze kite yearns  
string straining nostalgia  
for love's early spring

Camelias flash pink  
flaming autumn's brown debris  
linger hummingbird

Trunk toward branches burst  
Jacaranda blossoms blue  
warm air your perfume

Larks sing mustard weed  
fillies roll blossoming legs  
sparrows bathe in dust

Moon warmed evening  
the cat rustles the ivy  
you moan roses bloom

Sawhorse blinkers flash  
moonless highway noisy night  
roadside river frogs

Snail paths sidewalk lace  
signatures of night's embrace  
morning's silver trace

Sunset hard as stone  
you stare the Hollywood sign  
avoiding my eyes

With a composed hand  
you flick off cigarette ash  
fiddle with your glass

Beach wharf you dove off  
cities under airplane wings  
glimmering shadows

Ron Tobey grew up in north New Hampshire, USA, and attended the University of New Hampshire, Durham. He and his wife live in West Virginia, where they raise cattle and keep goats and horses. His work has appeared in *Constellate* (UK), *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Fishbowl Press Poetry*, *Truly U Review*, *Nymphs*, *Line Rider Press*, *Bonnie's Crew* (UK), *Broadkill Review*, and *The Cabinet of Heed* (UK). Poems are forthcoming in *Better Than Starbucks*, *The Failure Baler* (UK), and *Truly U Review*.

## The Irresistible Staircase, by Tyler

Dempsey

Circularish, indeterminant dimensions, known of stairs. There was Dallas, then stairs. Heroes of stock and fiber designed for ascending without questioning are underway. Taxpayers grumble, shoulder the newly minted military branch, “The Stair Force.” Like they grumble and shoulder every fucking thing. “Complacency is our gravest weakness. Let us not forget what we’re dealing with. Stairs.” (Photo: stairs looking callous.) The “Texas Identity” is rift. Baby Boomers: “We knew stairs would come, eventually. No reason to give a damn. Be happy as a pig in shit to never set foot on ‘em,” or: “Too stairly to think about.” Millennials sprinting, before privatization squashes hope but for the rich—Governor Turnbuckle touting Texans’ biggest mystery as the “Crown Jewel of the Republic.” Those less-cut-for-stairly-life: “I’m fine if I never pass the third flight, honestly.” Others wish to discuss it in private, with a therapist, for *god sake*—then remember Pre-Stairs is the past. Their therapist wouldn’t like them dwelling there. Physicist Edward Hock, “We’re on to something. Stairs go up. Down. Energy expresses force in X/Y/1 planes. Latent energy, in areas where seemingly only stairs exist. Day by day, pushing this low-entropy model—into higher—out of order . . .” As with most things, we’re unsure, whether to nuke or kiss it, burden, ambition, scourge? Religion? After decades, Texans claiming to have

walked/crawled every goddamned inch stare through  
wet beautiful eyes of their children, “Don’t do it.  
It’s *not* worth it,” knowing . . .

Tyler Dempsey once saw a staircase, rising like enormous mountains  
on what is normally Dallas. (It happened.) His work most recently  
appears, or is forthcoming, in Bending Genres, Lammergeier  
Magazine, Heavy Feather Review, and Back Patio Press. Find him on  
Twitter @tylerc Dempsey.

Shadow Fingers, Lisa L. Weber



## Beautiful Souls, by Linda M. Crate

the crows  
watch over me  
they always have

my guardian angels,  
fitting since i was always a misfit  
just like they my feathers and my songs

were an insult to those who don't  
understand or care to fathom  
me or my language;

i got tired of translating my soul  
so i stopped and i find peace  
in the knowing that even misfits can have friends—

when they reveal those with the purest  
hearts in the afterlife,  
i know i will see my friends there;

and i will smile at all the stunned faces  
of all those who would think my friends a burden  
instead of seeing them for their beautiful souls.

Linda M. Crate is a writer whose works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is the author of six poetry chapbooks, the latest of which is: *More Than Bone Music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, March 2019). She is also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018). Recently she has published two full-length poetry collections *Vampire Daughter* (Dark Gatekeeper Gaming, February 2020) and *The Sweetest Blood* (Cyberwit, February 2020).

## Two Poems by Jesse Miksic

### Quick Stop

Window-dim light  
off a highway, mouthful  
of lonely, bulb all  
a-flicker  
Gutter in the  
many hours, balm  
for a cinched palm,  
one grateful foot off  
one grateful pedal

And in the  
sanctuary's lilt, an  
infection of arrival,  
a contagion of limbs,  
an enigma of habits,  
A twitch in the  
strike of a well-  
neglected wall clock,  
plastic counter, cig  
arette menagerie,  
Bleach and  
plastic smell to  
tell the bodies  
just how scarcely  
they're wanted

If these  
hedgerows had  
a choice —  
Back, back  
to the car with  
every stupid

thing that  
Has a voice.

### **First Frost**

*Gratitude to James Tiptree Jr, whose book "A Brightness Falls  
From the Air" inspired my first line*

A politeness falls from the air,  
It defers to me as I follow  
The bluestone back walk.

It is full of senses, a  
Struck sensory vacancy,  
It endears itself to every  
Surface outside my  
Insulated home — a promise  
Of tactility, a hush upon  
Every little nerve, and  
As if in apology, it leaves  
A tantric riot of tiny  
White  
Whorls  
Upon the car window.

It is the stillness  
Made visible, the affirmation  
Of my stiff fingers closing  
Upon the handle.

Jesse Miksic is a graphic designer and writer living in Peekskill, New York. He spends his life writing poetry, nursing unfinished projects, and having adventures with his wonderful wife and daughter. Recent placements include Leveler Poetry, Queen Mob's Teahouse, Juke Joint, and others.



## *Like an Ocean in a Cathedral*, by

Amanda Crum

My heart is like the ocean, fathoms to be marked.  
It can hold all the times I wanted to help my grandmother  
have a better life; it can lay them over all the times I  
collapsed under the weight of indifference to save myself  
the discomfort.

She was beautiful, she was mad. She grew from poisoned  
roots in a series of rural Ohio towns, trying to shape her  
past and future from the dirt that housed her teenage  
mother. There were so many questions and there was  
never enough love to go around, so she made her own  
answers. My mother rarely speaks about her own  
childhood, but when she does it is always tinged with the  
fear and sadness that can only come from growing  
amongst chaos. I can imagine what it was like to try and  
thrive under the umbrella of my grandmother's mind and  
it is a thread I want to break.

Still, when I was young I loved her so. My mother and I  
would drive an hour to see her, spend the weekend. She  
had a cat named Butter and an itchy electric blanket, she  
queued up Mary Poppins for me so she could gossip with  
my mom at the kitchen table. Back then she worked at a  
bank and always wore makeup. It was the '80s and her  
closet was lined with silk dresses that smelled of her  
perfume. When she gave me one of her necklaces after she  
caught me eyeing it, I wore that green jade butterfly until I  
lost it. I mourn it still, a forgotten path between then and  
now.

My grandmother believed in many gods. She danced naked  
in the moonlight when the seasons peaked, she spoke in  
tongues in the belly of a tiny wooden church in the woods.  
My mother sent me with her once, when I was twelve and

painfully innocent. I had started my period the day before and was in a great deal of pain, cramps and anxiety wracking my small body as I prayed to a god I couldn't see to keep my skirt clean. I bled on that hard wooden bench and looked up at a tortured view of Jesus as he wept, and I wondered why my grandmother wanted to worship in such a fearful place. I wonder now if it made her feel at home. As she got older, she got wilder. She had always been loud and brash, quick to laugh and just as quick to find her fury and fling it outward. She had a story for every occasion and we skated past the obscenities and tall tales. As time rolled on she lived such an insular life that her outrageous stories became truth; she once claimed that her neighbor knew me and had called me out of my name, the word *whore* slipping off her tongue like hard candy. I had never met her neighbor.

Incontinence, bed bugs, a mind unspooling like an old sweater. She was married but had no use for him; they lived apart. My mother hauled groceries up flights of stairs inside funnel clouds of stale cigarette smoke, tried to make a sweeter world for the womb that had carried her for nine months. My grandmother, fiercely independent, hated all of it. She played games, deployed the silent treatment, screamed through the phone, but in the end she accepted what my mother gave her. We all do, I suppose.

I wanted to help. In the beginning, I brought my own sets of groceries in for her, visited when I could. I listened to her stories and watched her already small body diminish. When her mind began to drop further, a rusty bucket in a well, I kept my distance. I listened to my mother's stories about her, the visits and the phone calls and how distressing they were. How desperate my grandmother's situation was. She lived in a building that housed seniors but provided no care; she was being eaten by bed bugs that had already grown fat on her blood. Every week brought a new horror story from my mother. It was all she could talk about. I urged her to find a caregiver; my mother did her

best, but distance and other responsibilities got in the way. I worried about a fall, illness, worse.

And yet I stayed away. I couldn't bring myself to step into that small apartment and smell the shit-and-fried-food odor that permeated the furniture. I couldn't watch her scream and rave, couldn't hear her try and fail to remember who I was.

I couldn't look her in the eye and wonder if she knew the truth I had been carrying since I was eleven years old: that my grandfather had been inappropriate with me.

What had she known and forgotten in my lifetime?

She died alone in the hum and swell of June. When she was found there was vomit beneath her, signs that she had tried to get out of bed and never made it. I listened to my mother tell me she was gone and an insistent buzzing filled my ears, like cicadas will do. It sounded like guilt and fear, like a loss that pressed down on my organs because my body couldn't hold that weight. I dreamed of her; I cried for her. And later, I wondered whether she felt what we will all feel when the future comes for us; if it is like walking downstairs and missing a step. Nothing makes us feel more mortal than the death of a voice we have known since language formed.

I struggle still. *How?* I often think. *How could I have forsaken her because I was weak?* I think back to that narrow pew under His watchful eye and wonder what that girl would think of the woman she became. Would she understand that mine is a body filled with regret and decisions formed from pain, that one day it will know all the answers that once came to my grandmother on a lush June morning? When the first snow fell after her death, it came to me that my body is not a cramped and pious wooden church. It is a cathedral massive enough to hold an ocean, dark and bloody, and of all the things I must learn to navigate, that is the most important.

Amanda Crum is a writer and artist whose work can be found in publications such as *The Dark Sire*, *Barren Magazine*, and *Ghost City Review*. Her book of horror poetry, *Tall Grass*, made the shortlist for a Bram Stoker Award nomination in 2020; she is also a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. Amanda currently lives in Kentucky with her husband and two children.

Crown, Lisa L. Weber



You are, By José Clemente Carreño  
Medina, Translated by Toshiya Kamei

You're	Eres
my	mi noche
illuminated	alumbrada
night	mi tierra mojada
my wet earth	mi golpe caricia
my caress blow	mi cicatriz
my scar	herida
wound	mi herida cicatrizada
my healed wound	mi fuego invernal
my winter fire	mi hoy de
my today of	mañana
tomorrow	mi Sí y mi No
my yes and my no	mi silencio desnudo
my bare silence	mi grito
my warm cry	abrigado
my profane scrawl	mi letra profana
my voice in time . . .	mi voz en el tiempo...

José Clemente Carreño Medina was born in Mexico and currently lives in Kirksville, Missouri, where he is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Truman State University. He is the author of the poetry collections *Vigilias* (2014), *Serpientes y escaleras* (2015), *Guerra de palabras* (2016), and *Como si fuese a dejar la tierra* (2017).

## Cotee, by Peach Delphine

A word sized laceration  
in the body,  
windblown  
this form of shadows  
where the cries of gulls  
echoing against pines  
fills our eyes,  
there is a blade buried  
beneath sternum, grommets of spine, the boning  
and lace of breath.  
You strike a match,  
you light a candle,  
we are populated  
by spent words, husks of intention  
the cutting residue,  
bones without marrow,  
only sand, crushed coral  
coquina wings,  
an assemblage of sea,  
a locomotion of liquidity.  
By my own hand,  
as the heron cries out,  
as cormorants swim through this tide,  
you say these scars are the tracks of birds  
abandoning wind,  
the seams of where sea shapes sand,  
gone today, gone again tomorrow,  
memory made weight  
flesh made burden,  
there was never any redemption  
even when hummingbird  
rested on my coffee cup  
or the manatee scratched her back  
on the skiff's chine,

you light a candle knowing day  
is darker than any night,  
you map the rivers of my face,  
we row against grief  
against tide and wind  
we row to the sandbar  
to stand on the utter edge  
to burn the last pages of regret  
to recite our names with waves  
to fill our pockets with shells  
to pledge our return  
as the deep and lightless  
offers the only absolution  
we may ever earn

Peach Delphine is from Tampa, Florida. Infatuated with undeveloped Gulf Coast. Has had pieces in Ice Floe Press and Fevers of the Mind.

## *\*My Gun, My Wartime Lover*, by

Joseph S. Pete

I slept with a gun every night for more than a year.

I cradled my M4 assault rifle in my arms like a lover while serving in the Iraq War. Unlike a significant other, it wasn't soft, warm, cuddling and inviting. It was cold, hard, angular and lightly oiled from daily cleaning so it wouldn't jam up if called into action.

Most of my nights with the M4 carbine were spent on a cot in a trailer on a Forward Operating Base with amenities like a PX, a Burger King kiosk, a bootleg DVD shop that sold worthless Iraqi Dinar as perverse souvenirs and a kebob restaurant run by Turkish immigrants.

We were relatively safe on the heavily fortified post, but had to be ready to storm out with our rifles at any moment. We would sometimes get mortared in the middle of the night and have to rush out under concrete barriers, where we huddled, sometimes just in brown Army-issue briefs and flak vests but always, always with loaded rifles, ready to engage the enemy. I would stroke and caress the selector switch with my thumb, all too eager to take it off safe.

We joked in basic training that are gray PT T-shirts that read Army across the chest actually referenced our girlfriend—Amy with a R. In a combat zone, my rifle was indeed my girlfriend, always in my arms, never out of mind. It was almost always slung over my shoulder and often at the low ready, so I could quickly pull it to my shoulder to level it at any threat, real or perceived. When you're out on patrol, when you're raiding homes, you're ready to point your rifle at anyone in a nanosecond



because everyone is a potential hostile who could try to kill you or your battle buddies at any moment.

War taught me about the destructive capacity of guns, the severe trauma a single round can inflict on the human body. War taught me about the weight of consequences, about the gravity of loss.

When I first returned home, my M4 carbine was like a phantom limb I would sometimes reach for when startled, after a loud noise, when out in the open or subjected to some other trigger. It was like grasping for smoke, a reminder I had led different lives.

Having since adjusted to civilian life, I hope to never handle a gun again and am confident I could nonetheless defend myself against nearly any realistic threat without one. I pity the constant fear and weakness of people who feel they can't dine at an Applebee's or stroll through a park without packing heat; it seems like a miserable way to live.

These days, I tend to tear up upon news of mass shootings at high schools, community colleges, universities, workplaces, movie theaters, malls, Army posts, churches, concerts, airports, nightclubs, health care clinics, spas, political rallies, Sikh temples, immigration services centers, post offices, Indian Reservations, factories, investment firms, crowded plazas, and anywhere else you can imagine. I mist up while drunkenly watching *Black Hawk Down* or other war movies, or even when Spiderman disintegrates into ash at the end of the *Avengers: Infinity War*.

The cost and devastation of assault rifles is an abstraction to most, but all too real, and all too painful for many. I've never really understood why I or a loved one could be gunned down anytime, anyplace in my homeland by the functional equivalent of the M4 carbine I brought to war. Didn't I fight to spare the homeland from such carnage? I've never understood why civilians are allowed to purchase that particular military weapon and not the M203

grenade launchers that are attached to it by the grenadier in every infantry squad, hand grenades, a SAW machine gun, a .50 cal machine gun or an AT4 antitank rocket. It seems completely arbitrary to me. If you're going to give civilians a rifle with an effective range of 550 yards, why not also give them Willie P grenades and pray they don't incinerate each other in white phosphorous gas? What's the difference?

Nearly all the deadliest mass shootings were executed with semi-automatic assault rifles with 30-round magazines that had been banned until 2004, and the slaughters in random public places have taken off exponentially since then. You hear arguments about self-defense, slippery slopes or standing up to a tyrannical government even though nearly every armed person in a standoff with police is killed or arrested within hours, and they would stand even less of a chance against military forces. Now matter how large your private stockpile of weapons, a teen enlistee could remotely take out your whole block with a drone before he finishes swallowing his sip of Mountain Dew Code Red. Everything gun humpers hold dear is a Hollywood-fueled fantasy, a fairy tale for the credulous and gullible. How would a semi-automatic rifle be more practical than a handgun at scaring off a burglar? How is your hobby worth anyone's life? How many must be sacrificed for your fetishism over an inanimate object?

But if there's anything you learn from war, it's that senselessness and sorrow ultimately prevail in the end. You learn that the universe is senseless and cruel, a hostile place that does not care about you or anyone else.

Joseph S. Pete is an award-winning journalist, an Iraq War veteran, an Indiana University graduate, and a frequent guest on Lakeshore Public Radio. He was named the poet laureate of Chicago BaconFest. His literary work and photography have appeared in more than 100 journals, including *Pulp Modern*, *Shotgun Honey*, *New Pop Lit*, *The*

*Grief Diaries, Synesthesia Literary Journal, Bull Men's Fiction, The Roaring Muse, Prairie Winds, The Tipton Poetry Journal, Euphemism, and Jenny Magazine.*

## Summana, by Juliette Sebock

Her eyes were blue-sky blue

but, by the gods, could they go dark,

black-light-supermassive-nova-Nox-  
light-bright,

with a cosmic boom-bang space-clang

reverberating on earth

with a pang of guilt and tears and pain.

Juliette Sebock is a Best of the Net-nominated poet and writer and the author of *Mistakes Were Made*, *Micro*, *How My Cat Saved My Life and Other Poems*, *Three Words*, *Plight of the Pangolin*, and *Boleyn*, with work forthcoming or appearing in a wide variety of publications. She is the founding editor of Nightingale & Sparrow, runs a lifestyle blog, For the Sake of Good Taste, and is a regular contributor with Marías at Sampaguitas, Royal Rose, Memoir Mixtapes, and The Poetry Question. When she isn't writing (and sometimes when she is), she can be found with a cup of coffee and her cat, Fitz. Juliette can be reached on her website, [juliettesebock.com](http://juliettesebock.com), or across social media @juliettesebock.

## *The Waiting Game* by Darren Ryding

Shivers. Misty breath fogs up the window. Soon I'll start wearing two pairs of socks. It costs too much money to keep the engine running.

Don't wipe glass with your palm, my father said.

You'll make it greasy.

To this day I still use the back of my hand.

Grim. This is the worst month. December has Christmas while October comes clad in copper leaves. January is cold and bleak but at least brings the hope of the New Year. November has nothing to redeem it.

Not that the young ones outside care. Look at them dressed for Ireland's non-existent season. Lads and lassies alike. Chinos, t-shirts, short skirts, mini dresses. Saving €2 for a cloakroom is worth the risk of hypothermia. I wish I was young again.

Quiet. A respite for the taxi drivers and the takeaways. After hours held prisoner to this production line of repetition, we fall into unsettling silence. Despite the tedium of routine, you never know who will get into the car. But two types of passenger constantly reoccur. There's the folks who just can't sit in silence with another human so close to them. Conversation becomes an act of charity. Of course, a lot of taxi drivers enjoy this break from monotony but not me. There are only so many times you can be asked if you're busy tonight.

No, I prefer it when they pretend that I'm not there. Just treat me like a mindless robot programmed to do one task. It's easier for both of us.

Interruption. A rap on the window.

Here Taximan, will you drop us out to Ashtown?

It's a bit of a drive. Are you sure?

Yeah it's grand.

Two lads and a girl. Proper hipsters the three of them. Since when did Dublin become Berlin? You would never have got away with it when I was young.

The girl has a black ring through her septum and wears an oversized cardigan. At least she's warm. One of the boys has a tattoo of a pineapple on his wrist. They're in a rough state. No hope of them getting in anywhere. But their friend has a bit more about him.

They stumble into the car. As long as they don't get sick. The thought of driving around with the smell of vomit and bleach for the next week-and-a-half almost makes me turn them away.

Driving.

Here taximan will you turn on the radio?

Lady Gaga blares through the car. A Star is Born.

What a tune, says the girl as she begins to jive in the middle of the two lads. She could be on something. Could do with some myself.

The headlamps transform the night into glaucous light.  
Pineapple leans against the window, staring out, a glazed  
look in his eyes. I could drive him anywhere. A hundred  
miles away. He'd never know.

Are you busy tonight asks his slightly-sober friend.

Not yet I say.

Ah yeah, it's still early. We couldn't get in anywhere so  
we're going back to the gaff.

He almost sounds surprised.

Sober friend has curly black hair and a strong jawline. Not  
bad looking. What colour are his eyes?

Suddenly Pineapple jerks awake and gasps aloud:

I feel sick.

I swing around and glare at him.

Do not throw up in my car. Let me pull over.

No it's alright, says the sober friend. We're nearly there.  
You're alright Evan aren't you?

He doesn't answer.

If you had leather seats you wouldn't need to worry about  
the mess says the girl helpfully.

I don't answer.

Finally we come down by Ashtown Train Station, taking a  
couple of lefts deep into a silent housing estate.

This is us here.

Thanks man, says the sober lad.

I nod and watch him walk away with his friends. Skinny jeans accentuate tight glutes and hamstrings. He casually lights up a cigarette, purses his lips around the end and blows out a cloud of smoke.

His eyes were cobalt blue.

Respite. The dashboard emanates a neon glow. I put my foot down on the accelerator and cruise down the motorway. Going through the motions, my mind falls into a state of semi-slumber. The road is almost empty at this time. Amber street lamps flicker in the darkness. Luring me towards the city like will-o'-wisps.

Through Chapelizod, along the perimeter of the Phoenix Park, up the quays. Cross O'Connell Bridge onto the South Side. Around past Trinity College and down Dame Street.

Then I swing a left onto South Great George's Street.

Waiting. Now we're near make or break. I don't want any random fares, so I get out of the car and go into the Spar. Retinas attacked by artificial light. Grab an Americano and a Dairy Milk. Caffeine and sugar spike my body with renewed focus.

The bars and clubs will empty soon. I remember back home when we went to the disco. They'd play Amhrán na bhFiann at the end of the night. We'd mangle the words in Irish, slurring out the last couple of lines with gusto.

I remember one night alright. I thought there was a spark of connection. That we were on the same page. But he turned away with a look of repulsion.



What the fuck are you doing?

Those words are etched into the fibres of my consciousness.

What the fuck are you doing?

They define me.

Paralysed. I didn't know what to do or say. Then he went and told everybody in my small world. All I could do was try and deny it, but of course the rumours spread.

In the changing rooms the GAA lads would sneer me.

Don't strip in front of Joey, you'll give him a boner.

As cruel as they were, a young lad in the closet couldn't help but look at the lean tone of their bodies. I was scared of them and scarred by them. But I couldn't stop myself from looking.

Worse. My father called me out to the garage one day. He wiped his oily hands on a rag before picking up a screwdriver. He waved it in my direction but didn't raise his voice.

Son, I've been hearing a few things.

Face flushed red as rhubarb.

Now, I know the things I've heard can't be true of a son of mine.

He brandished the screwdriver like a regent raising a sceptre.

So you get out there and prove yourself a man. You're not a kid no more. It matters what people think about you and

your family because you have to live with it. Anyone who says different is just a fool. So get out there and find yourself a woman and show those little gobshites that you're as much of a man as them.

I just wanted to be myself.

Family. I love my children. You've got to believe that. I truly do. But I still feel trapped by the enormity of the lie I'm living. This whole mess is not their fault. When I get home tonight I'll look in on them and my heart will burst with pride.

And Fiona is a great woman. She's a fantastic mother and a wonderful wife. There's nothing more that she could do for me. I'm tired of the secrets and the lies but there's nobody I can turn to now. Does she know? We're alone together. Maybe one day she'll catch me out. Sometimes I hope that a message from the App will flash up on my screen. She'll drop the phone in shock when she sees the nudes and messages asking if I'm a top or bottom. Why did I let her love me? Our entire life is based around a falsehood and it's all on me. She doesn't deserve this.

Now. They're finally emptying out. I pull up underneath the rainbow flag, declaring my allegiance, ready to play out my fantasy. Clusters of bodies pour out of the nightclubs and onto the streets. Three of them approach my car. Two girls and a young lad. Bollocks that's not what I had in mind. But even if I got a young lad by himself, what am I expecting?

They clamber into the back.

Can you make two stops for us?

Sure. No bother at all. Put on your seatbelts though.

The girls are together. One is snuggled up to the other. She whispers in her ear. A giggle in response and then a kiss on the lips. Some of the lads would be talking about the young ones kissing in their car for days. I'm glad I'm not like them.

Enroute. We hurtle down the quays before turning off for Kilmainham. Onto the back streets as they recap the night. I curse my delusions and crave my bed.

Jamie, why didn't you go home with that Brazilian lad?

I don't know, I just didn't fancy it tonight or something.

He was so hot though.

Yeah, I guess he was. Probably regret it tomorrow.

I bet he was big too. What a stud. He'd nearly turn me straight.

Her girlfriend laughs and mock whispers in her ear.

Guess I'll have to remind you tonight why you're not straight so.

Heartbeat. He is gay after all. My body is reignited by this revelation. Moments pass. Then I make eye contact with him through the rear view mirror. We hold each other's gaze long enough to understand that there is meaning to be unlocked. His hair is artfully tousled. He wears ripped blue jeans, a t-shirt and a tan duffle coat. His eyes are chocolate brown. Delicate features. Slender and handsome. My eyes are back on the road. Pulse racing. Who is going to get out first? The girls or this beautiful young man?

We're just up here says one of the girls.

The tension is rapidly punctured.

They hand Jamie a couple of notes for the fare before kissing him goodnight. They walk up to the door holding hands.

Indecision. Look at me. Receding hairline. Swollen waistline. Bags around my eyes. Maybe if I was fifteen years younger in a parallel world I'd have found a boy like him. To be in love and live our own truth. Why would he want me now?

But I'm still going to try. Just this once.

Where can I drop you?

Drimnagh please.

I turn off the meter in Inchicore. He looks at me with suspicion.

Why did you do that?

You seem like you had a rough night so I'll just charge you a fiver a head.

Seriously? You don't need to do that. Like they've given me enough for the full fare.

Ah sure look. You missed out on your Brazilian boy so let me make it up to you.

He blushes.

Yeah I guess that's true. Well thanks.

Plenty more fish in the sea for a good-looking lad like you.

We laugh and I make reckless eye contact.

Do you like older men?

What?

Well I was wondering if you like older men?

Why are you wondering that?

Well, there's a way that you could get this ride for free.

He raises his eyebrow at me in a show of mock surprise.

Are you being serious?

100%. I'll drive you home for nothing.

What do you want me to do?

Dawn. A dawning of realisation. I can't go on like this. What do you want me to do? Every morning when I get home I stare into the bathroom mirror and ask my reflection that same question. Dive too deep into the depths of the ocean and crumple under the relentless pressure. It's just a matter of time.

Soon the sun will start to rise in the east. The day will break with an encore of birdsong. Fiona will have the kids up early for the bus. But I'll be in bed asleep by then. It's rare I get to see the rising sun.

Darren Ryding is from Ireland but lives and works in Vietnam. His writing has been published by Ink, Sweat and Tears and The High Window Press. His Instagram is @rydingbicycles.7



## Her Shoes, by John D. Rutter

That's it. As I lock the door I'm finally ending that whole sorry chapter. I just wish they'd let me put her shoes on when they took her away.

By the time they arrived she'd calmed down. She was sitting in her favourite wicker chair in the conservatory, drinking coffee (with nothing in it, I checked) and she might have been alright. But the blood on the kitchen roll wrapped round my hand caught their eye.

I was wearing my old glasses held together with Sellotape. My new ones were lying next to the kettle, all twisted with no lenses in them. The glass is all in the bin apart from the bit that got in my hand. That's what gave it away, the blood. The woman officer worked it out. I couldn't lie, could I? You have to face things.

'Yes, she did hit me,' I told them. 'Only once though, and the glasses fell off...' The other one, the man, kept asking me over and over, 'You haven't answered my question...' Then he asked why my hands were swollen. I've got a rash from the Christmas tree – an allergic reaction to the glue. Danny calls them my *Incredible Hulk* hands.

'Where did the blood come from?' he asked. Then it was, 'Why did she stand on them?' and, 'I don't see how that could have been an accident.' He was so damned persistent. They seem determined to have someone to blame. Blame doesn't solve anything. Then he realised they've been here twice before. At one point they seemed to think *I* might have hit *her*. What kind of a man must they think I am?

I have to admit it was scary when my glasses came off. I couldn't see properly, and I was scrambling around on the floor, and she was screaming accusations at me. It's my own fault. I shouldn't have put my hand there. It wouldn't stop bleeding for ages. In an odd way it was a sort of relief. It's the first time in days I've not noticed the itching.

The glasses made a really loud crunching noise when she stamped on them. She deliberately picks things that make dramatic sounds; the chime of a metronome echoing around the body of my grand piano; a dinner plate smashed against a marble fireplace – much more satisfying than the tinkle of a wine glass. Not that we've got any wine glasses left. She drinks out of a mug these days, thinks I won't be able to tell. But I keep a close eye on her; I know most of her hiding places. Those half-bottles of vodka are only small, but with practice you can spot the red tops. I found four last week, one in the toilet cistern in the ensuite. I have a circuit that I do every night. It only takes about ten minutes if I've had a search during the day. My personal best is three in one night (inside a box of Sugar Puffs, gardening coat sleeve and the top shelf of Danny's toy cupboard).

Anyway, that's when I called the police, when my glasses got broken. You can't leave things like that, someone might get hurt. But I wish they had been a bit more patient and let me put her shoes on. She took them off when she went into the conservatory because of the glass. She'd have gone to bed if they had given her a bit more time. It was nearly midnight, she must have been tired. And she wouldn't need to get up tomorrow, I can look after Danny.

We have a nice routine, Danny and me. Routine is important for a child. I like things to be done in a certain order. That's why it's so difficult when she drinks. It's not



as bad as people think. I mean, some days she doesn't drink, a glass of wine maybe, but they reckon it's good for you, an odd glass. I've been to a couple of those Alanon meetings where the relatives of addicts meet. The people there really are sad. They've accepted things for years. Step one, admit there's a problem.

Danny's fast asleep. He was as good as gold at bedtime. He wanted to watch *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, and I said he could stay up until the kids in the film went to bed. He went up without a battle. I sang him *Hushaby Mountain* as I tucked him in. Last time we watched it she cried because her childhood wasn't like that. Danny looked puzzled. He doesn't know about any of it.

They'll probably tell Social Services now, another bunch of interfering people. I bet they'll try and imply I had something to do with it and be all supportive to her, like she's the victim. Last time that counselling woman kept staring at the cut on her forehead and frowning. She's always bruising herself.

What will happen to Danny? She said she'll never let me see him again. She always says that when she's angry. I know she doesn't mean it. She knows I'll always look after him. She even insisted we made a will so that I look after Danny, not anyone else, if anything happens to her.

I really want a cigarette. She's smoked every last one. No wonder I get so bloody angry. She's sat here, smoking and drinking while I'm at the office all day. Then I have to look after Danny and clear up after her, and I can't even have a smoke, and my hands are killing me.

I suppose we'll have to sell the house now. It was meant to be our happy-ever-after house. I'll have to paint the dining

room, cover those stains near the fireplace. That wedding photo needs dusting. Her dress was a bit tight.

Danny loves it here, his space bedroom with all the planets, and the park behind the house. I've promised him we'll get some fish if he helps me clean the pond. We had two carp last year, but a heron ate them. I heard it on the gravel and ran out, but I thought better of it. I mean, have you seen the size of them?

I'd better get to bed, lots to do in the morning. Get rid of that bottle under the cushion in the conservatory. I'm pretty sure she's only got the one bottle on the go. Leave the window open, let some air in. I don't want it to be a mess when she gets back. She needs things to be as normal as possible. That's why I'm so good for her. I always keep things in order. Everyone says we should have some time apart, but she'll have to come back, I mean, where else is she going to go? Her mum won't have her after last time. Her step-dad, Lenny, was still angry when I picked her up.

I'll get up early and sort Danny out. He's got a party to go to on Sunday. His friend, Ben, will be five. I'll have to get a present and go to the opticians. We can go to MacDonalds; Danny's collecting the Pooh characters. Then I'll pick her up. How else can she get home? She hasn't got any money, and she's got nothing on her feet. That's still bothering me. I tried to convince them she'd be alright at home, but they insisted, something about a risk of a further breach of the peace. Further? Then she got upset again, and when the woman officer threatened to arrest her she started.

'Never mind arresting me! What about whoever did that to your hair? That's who you should arrest, or did you cut it yourself, love?'

Then she tousled the policewoman's hair. That tore it, and the other one tried to intervene. She gave him some words too.

'Ooh, look at the big man. Have you got a big truncheon, sweetheart? Are you two a couple? You could do better than 'er, I mean look at her *hair*. Bet I could teach you a thing or two...'

He said, 'I think we should all calm down.' Then she really warmed up.

'Don't you tell me to calm down...' followed by her old favourite, 'My eyes are up here.'

It soon escalated to, 'Take your hands off me, you scrawny cow...'

In the end they insisted she had to go with them. They said once they've been called they can't leave a situation. Then she got all upset, and when she wouldn't go they called their mates with the van, said they couldn't be sure it was safe to take her in the car, but I mean, does it take four of you? She won't hurt anyone. Alright, it has got to the stage of a bit of pushing and shoving once or twice. I only try to stop her from hitting me and pulling my hair. Anyway they've taken her away now, no sense in going over all that again.

If they'd just let me put her shoes on. She was cutting her feet on the path when they were dragging her out. I was bending down trying to put her shoes on, my slippers kept falling off, but she wouldn't stay still, and that bossy police woman told me to get out of the way.

They don't know what it was like for her. Her ex really was a violent man. That was proper hitting, and he is a big

bloke too, Bill, taller than me. He never had to deal with the police. She was too scared to ring them. We met when she finally left him. Danny was still a baby, and she didn't want him growing up in a bad environment. Her granddad saw the black eyes and gave her some money before he died so she could get her own place. She didn't have a proper father figure growing up, so it hit her hard when she lost him. She sometimes talks about her granddad when she's had a few. Actually she talks *to* him quite a bit.

It was so romantic when we first met. My sister's friend, Mel, knew her from the salon and set us up. She hadn't exaggerated about her looks, and I was confident in those days.

A baby would have completed things. It would have been nice for Danny to have a little brother or sister. We never really talked about it after the miscarriage.

Anyway I'm here to look after them both now. I toilet trained him all by myself, she's no patience, and I take him to school since she had her licence taken off her. And she says *I'm* a bastard. You should ask how *he* treated her.

There was that one unfortunate incident when she fell and accidentally broke her ribs... rib. All I was doing was putting her to bed. I pushed her so she'd land on the mattress but she accidentally landed on the wooden post at the end. You could hear it crack. She's put on a bit of weight since she stopped work. It was horrible, her breathing went all funny. She said, 'Oh, God, I've really hurt myself.' Then she started saying it was my fault and threatening all sorts. But it was her fault, she did say, 'hurt myself.' I took her to A&E and stayed with her all night. Anyway, only one rib was cracked, and it's not that serious. She was alright after a couple of weeks.

Our neighbour, Sandra, looked after Danny that night. Her boy, Luke, is Danny's best friend, and she's often here, sharing a bottle of wine. Sandra understands the situation. I often have to speak to Sandra when she goes AWOL.

Danny is happy, dreaming in his bed with all his toys. Tigger's his favourite. I love that yellow glow from his night light, helps me see my way around when everyone's asleep. I bought it when he started to wake up in the night saying he could hear shouting and banging. I said it was probably the bin men, and the smashing noise must have been a cat or a fox knocking over a milk bottle.

And that picture of her twins over the stairs. Asleep. Forever.

I'll get up early and clean the kitchen floor before Danny stands on it. I need to have a quick once around and see if there are any new bottles.

I'll call her mum in the morning. Last time Lenny threatened to come round and beat me up, like I'd done something wrong! I don't know what version of things she's been telling them.

I've got a blinding headache. And I'll have to go round in these stupid broken glasses for a few days. I liked my new glasses too.

I'll just wash my face, brush my teeth and get some sleep. I wish Sandra was here. She'd understand. It's very unfair the things they say about her on the estate, she's coped very well since her husband left her. I might nip round tomorrow, let the boys play together.

I keep thinking about that time Sandra kissed me at New Year. The two of them were having a drink in the conservatory while I watched *E.T.* with the boys. I was in the kitchen getting some snacks. Sandra came right up to me and put her arms round me and... she kissed me full on the lips. She's finally got rid of that thug of a soldier she was seeing. She admitted she was impressed when he beat up Jack in the Crown, made a right mess of him. Anyway she's single now.

Jesus, my eyes look old. Better get a few hours' sleep. Hopefully she'll feel better too after a good sleep. I hope she's not cold at the police station. Her feet will be sore. I must remember to take her shoes when I go and get her. Oooh, the cold water's nice on my hands.

What the hell's that banging? At this time of night? They'll wake Danny. Alright, I'm coming!

You'll never believe what's happened. That bastard, Bill, turned up. Had his brother with him too – he's another six-footer. I told him he couldn't come in, but what was I supposed to do? I don't want the police here again, and no-one believes me. He bloody took Danny right out of his bed! There's no need for that. Everything's under control. Turns out Lenny had rung him. He's doing it out of spite. Whose side's he on? Danny was half-asleep, didn't know what's going on.

There's no way I'm letting that bastard keep Danny without a fight. His parents have been at war since he was born. The things they said about each other in Court when Bill applied for residence! I can't see how Danny will be better off moving away and not seeing his mum or his friends.

I'll talk to her in the morning, and I'll get a solicitor on Monday. That Edie who did our will was nice. Maybe this will be the thing that finally sobers her up. They say that about a moment of clarity.

Her shoes are still sitting there. I bought them for her on our honeymoon in Jamaica. She liked that they were open-toed and she could easily slip them on, and the wooden platform soles made her an inch taller (but they bloody hurt when she kicked me). One of the flowers has come off the top.

My hands are killing me, I think there's still a bit of glass in there. What time is it? 12.40. Is it too late to call Sandra? I wonder if Luke's at his dad's this weekend. Danny always pretends he likes it at his Dad's.

Right, I'll get everything sorted out in the morning, Then I'll give Sandra a call. Where's my mobile? I usually hide it in my suit pocket so she can't throw it. I haven't even got changed yet. I must stop hanging my jacket there at the bottom of the stairs, it'll get creased. Will I really call Sandra? I can't go round now, can I? What about my hands?

Where did I put the flower off that shoe? She said she'd sew it back on, but she hasn't had time. It might be in her sewing basket on the top shelf...

Ha! Another half-bottle right at the back. Can't even tell it's there without stretching. She must have stood on a chair. Tip most of it out and top it up with water. If I take it away she knows I've found it. This way she'll drink less. Worst thing is when she goes out looking for more at night. She's safer here with me. She'll stop now anyway. This will be the turning point.

Let's have a look for this flower first. Might be tricky sewing with my Incredible Hulk hands.

Ahah! There it is, the little green flower! I knew I'd kept it. I'll stitch it back on then she can wear them in the morning. There's no green cotton, only white. No-one will notice. The important thing is that they are mended. Tricky to thread the needle with my fingers swollen... Ow! These glasses aren't ideal either.

The needle's eased the itch in my thumb. Try again. Break the surface, let the pressure out.

That's definitely relieving it. What was I doing...? I bet I can get that last bit of glass out from my palm with the needle. Break that bit where it's started to heal over.

Ooooh. Now it's bleeding. Sweet, or is it salty? Metallic. It's running all the way down to my wrist. If I wiggle that there... Ah! That's got it. I'll keep this needle. Give it another dig...

Dr John D Rutter teaches and writes fiction. His short stories have been published as chapbooks by Nightjar Press and In Short Publishing, in anthologies by Unthank Books, Quinn Publications and Edge Hill University, in journals and newspapers including The Journal of the Short Story in English and the Lancashire Evening Post, and on many web sites including Synaesthesia Magazine, Holland Park Press, 1,000 Word Challenge and The Short Story.



## Nutrocubes, by Joseph Marsh

Zorya squinted as the elevator reached the sun kissed surface. She had never seen the sun before and at first she cowered from it like it was a tunnel wolf. The UV ration lights never glowed with the same unyielding yellow heat that this did. She held tighter to her mother's hand as if the frail woman beside her could somehow protect her daughter's pale skin from the glow. Soon, however she got used to it and laughed at the strange prickling feeling that ran up her frail little arms.

Waiting for them were armed police. Their black caps shaded their faces as they aimed their automatic rifles at the three filthy families caged in the rusty elevator. Their uniforms were impeccable. The pressed creases in their pale blue trousers lead neatly into their polished leather boots and their dark black shirts were tucked militarily into their trousers. Zorya's mother yelped at the sight of the rifles and began to weep. Zorya herself was merely amazed at the difference between them and the police-bots that roamed the underground streets of Tetrion.

A woman's voice called from behind the men and told them to stand down. The police did so, lowering their guns and standing rigid to attention. Then out came the voice's source. A woman in her thirties with a small face and a warm smile. She wore a lab coat over a synthetic red dress with a holographic gold snake which moved slithered around her body with unnerving realism. On the breast of her coat was the insignia of the Buoyant Bean Corporation, so called for being the first intra-stellar food manufacturer. Or so her flash education had taught her.

The woman approached the cage with a dat-board under her arm and a key card in hand.

“You must forgive our security forces,” she said in a voice smooth like caramel as she walked to the lock pad. “They don’t like to take any chances when it comes to the crust citizens. They’re scared you might come up wearing a bomb or some other such nonsense. I’m sure we don’t have to worry about that with any of you. Not just any ruffian can mine one million ounces of Driserium. It takes character, moral fibre.” As she said the last section she pressed the key card to the pad and the rusted iron gates of the elevator creaked open. No one made to leave. “Come now, out we get. Let’s make you some food.”

Gradually, Zorya and her fellow Tetrioners shuffled out and formed a small crowd in front of the woman. Physically, she was rather small and frail, like a single blade of grass fluttering in the wind but, from the way she held herself and the way the armed men looked to her for direction showed how misleading looks can be. She scrolled through her dat-board, her mouth forming words as she silently read her screen. She looked up at the group with squinting eyes before reforming her smile and speaking with a theatrical voice. “Let me be the first to say... welcome to Aaru! My name is Dr Harriett Trits, I am chief nutritional researcher for the Buoyant Bean Corporation. It’s my job to come up with fun and new ways to make sure everyone from the smallest child to the strongest miner gets the nutrition they require.” The doctor paused here, expecting a response. She frowned when none came before reaching into her pocket and pulling out a rolled up bag. Zorya’s eyes widened at the mystery of it all. As Harriett unfurled the bag, she said, “In fact you may have even tried one of my products. I was

one of the head thinkers for the creation of—” she unfurled the bag and showed it to the crowd “—Nutrocubes!”

Zorya’s mouth fell open as she saw a bag full of her favourite snack. Harriett noticed and laughed. “At least someone’s a fan. Would you like some?” Harriett held the bag out to the young girl and Zorya nodded with glee. The child dashed to the doctor and reached into the waiting bag. Zorya’s mother followed after her.

“Please,” the mother said. Her face was wrinkled with stress more than age. Tetrioners rarely lived past forty. She looked up at the doctor with teary red eyes. “My daughter is sick. You must help her.”

Harriett’s face turned to stone and her lips settled into an angry scar. The grimace only lasted for a second before she knelt down to Zorya and held out the bag. “Here, you can take it. That’s a good girl. Your mother tells me you’re poorly, is that right?”

Zorya nodded as she stuffed a Nutrocube into her mouth. She hid her face in her mother’s clothes and bundled her fists in them. Her chubby cheeks were red with shame at her condition.

Harriett turned back to her mother. “Is she contagious? No? Alright we’ll take care of her.” She took Zorya by the shoulder and offered her the bag of treats. “Would you like to have the rest of these? I’m full.”

Zorya nodded and took the bag from her. “Thank you,” she said.

Harriett stood. She addressed the whole crowd once more, “Right, my records say that I should have the

Ipswich's, the Zoltan's, and the Twitzes. Is everyone here?"

A wave of nervous nods made its way slowly through the crowd. Most of them were still focused on the rifles in the hands of policemen. They had seen enough of their friends and families gunned down by Police-bots for things as minor as being present at the time of a crime to trust that these men would hold their fire.

Harriett scanned the crowd, the curl of a grin barely perceptible at the corner of her mouth like a rat poking its nose from a hole. Her pencil thin eyebrow raised gracefully as she took removed her glasses. "Wonderful!" she said as she folded her spectacles and placed them carefully in her coat pocket. There was an underlying sinister in the way her gaze shot between the dirty faces before her. They had all tried so hard to clean themselves in preparation for their introduction to crust society but in the end of the day their water and soap rations were insufficient. "Now, if you'd come with me, we have some tests to do before we introduce you to High Member Silver." The doctor offered her hand to Zorya, which the young girl took, then turned to walk into the building which surrounded the elevator shaft.

Inside everything was a pristine clinical white. The only dirt was that which Zorya and her fellow Tetrioners tracked in. Even this was quickly disintegrated by the ping pong ball sized Custododroids which emerged on their spindly spider like legs from pods fixed in the walls. The corridor was built so that though Zorya tried she couldn't see the seam where the wall and the floor met, there was simply a soft curve as if the hall was sculpted from one piece of purr marble. The child's hand-me-down leather shoes squeaked as she walked across the floor. Harriett led,

chattering and explaining jovially as she walked while two of the armed policemen took up the rear, their faces stoic and unmoving.

They came to a small door. Harriett placed her key card against it and it slid open. She turned to the group who stared at her uncomprehending. “You’ll have to forgive me but as our people have been separated for so long there is a significant public health fear with introducing you to Aaru. We have to screen you for foreign pathogens as well as provide you with all the necessary vaccinations to make sure that you don’t give anything nasty to anyone. If you’d just step inside and remove your clothes, we’ll get the screening done in no time. There’ll be fresh clothes waiting for you on the other side.”

As she finished speaking the police began to slowly march forward, pushing the crowd through the narrow doorway. Once inside Harriett gave them all a wave and told them she’d see them on the other side. The door slid shut with a sound like the last puffs of air being squeezed out of a balloon. Then the green light above the doorway turned red, indicating that the door had been locked.

The Tettrioners warily undressed. Zorya removed her coat and the purple dress which her mother had always said was her best, though after seeing Harriett’s stylish piece she had begun to detest it. Harriett had taken the Nutrocubes back when they went into the room but promised to return them to Zorya when they reunited. Already the young girl was becoming impatient to see the doctor again and her bare feet padded on the floor as she jumped with excitement. Her mother scolded Zorya and told her to fold her dress neatly. The woman then

removed the necklace which had been gifted to her by her father when she was six years old and placed it on top of the tidy pile of her clothes on the bench behind her.

Her mother tried to stand up proud and uncaring of her naked body but she was old and her body sagged. Zorya thought about how tired she looked, not like Harriett who was all elegance.

When they had all stripped a door which no one had noticed when they entered slid open and a voice from a speaker no one could see ordered them to walk through. They were separated into three rows and guided, one at a time, into tall white cylindrical pods. When Zorya entered the door to the pod slid shut and the harsh voice asked for her name.

“Zorya Twitz,” she said. Her body trembled and she wanted to hold her mother’s hand. Tears began to well in her eyes.

“Face the camera Zorya,” said the voice. It was obvious that a real person was behind the microphone but there was a static coldness behind it which made her think of the Police-bots. There was a sudden flash which momentarily blinded her and her skin suddenly felt pink and sensitive. She looked down to her hands and saw that the callouses which had formed over her nine years were gone. After twenty seconds the same voice said, “alright, step through.”

“Thank you,” she said, doing her best attempt at a curtsy in the nude. Her mother had always stressed the importance of good manners, especially when talking to members of the crust.

The other side of the cylinder slid open and Zorya stepped out. Her mother was waiting, dressed in a grey one piece that covered her body all the way to her chin. There were black lines stitched into the fabric which vaguely followed the map of her veins and Zorya took to be a fashionable Aaru custom. On the breast was the Buoyant Bean Corporation logo. She held an identical onesie in Zorya's size.

The child rushed to hug her mother and then struggled to put the onesie on.

After several minutes of waiting while the rest of the Tetrioners were screened a man in a white jumpsuit with black epaulettes on the shoulder and an etching of a snake wrapped around a winged staff on his chest. He walked straight to Zorya and injected her with something so quickly that there was no time to protest. Zorya's father grabbed the man by the collar and drew his fist back to strike.

Harriett rushed from the doorway and struggled to break the men apart. "Please, sir, he's helping your daughter!"

The father hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"He was giving her medicine."

"She's cured?" asked her mother.

Harriett turned to the man who was fixing the creases Zorya's father had made in his uniform. He gave a scowling nod to the doctor. Harriett smiled at the mother. "We've stopped the disease from affecting her body."

Zorya's father grumbled an apology while his wife went to Harriett. "Please," she said, "my necklace it is very important to me."

“Don’t worry,” Harriett replied, smiling. “All of your possessions will be sorted once you’ve been processed.” As she said this, two men passed with a trolley which said on the side, ‘Recycling Corps.’

“Now if you’ll come with me. We have some temporary accommodation for you while we sort out some minor details.” She handed Zorya the Nutrocubes.

They went down another long white corridor while Zorya struggled to get used to her skin feeling like that of a new born. Another sliding door, another sanitised room. It was a large room with bunk beds on one side and on the other various pieces for entertainment. There were dat-boards stacked on top of a white circular table and a box of toys in one corner for the children. In the ceiling there was a small grate.

Zorya’s parents picked up one of the dat-boards and settled in an ergonomic sofa while the child went to the box. Zorya picked up a doll and started to play with it. As she played she felt her eyelids become droopy and her arms heavy. Her vision blurred. She stood, her knees wobbly and unsteady. The small girl turned to her parents. “I’m tired,” she drawled before collapsing to the ground.

Her parents rushed to the rescue. Her mother reached her first, cradling Zorya’s head in her lap. She shook her daughter to wake her but no response came. “Paul get over here!” When she turned, Paul Twitz lay motionless halfway from the sofa. Her head spun as she saw the others drop like flies. Her eyes widened and she ran to the door, slamming and screaming to be let out. Her cries went unheard and her body soon shut down. She collapsed by the door.



Five minutes later the fan behind the grate in the ceiling began whirring. The door opened and Harriett entered wearing a gas mask. Five Recycling Corps members followed behind wearing backpacks. They each drew five small boxes from their bags and unfolded them to convert them into hovering stretchers. The bodies of the Tetrioners were placed on these and lead out.

“Hmm, I think we need to up the dosage. Too many people realised before succumbing,” Harriett said as she tapped figures into her dat-board.

“I don’t see what the issue is, they end up dead anyway,” said the leader of the Recycling Corps. He kicked the hand of one of the bodies to make sure they were dead.

“Because,” began the Doctor as she bent to retrieve the bag by Zorya’s hand. “If they become aware of the poison they panic.” She sealed the bag and put it back into her labcoat pocket. “And if they panic their muscles tense.” She turned to the man. “And if their muscles tense, the meat spoils and the Nutrocubes come out subpar.”

The Recycling Corpsman shrugged. He mumbled in a voice which you could hear the sneer in, “I don’t think these cockroaches give a shit about taste. They’ll eat anything.”

Harriett sighed. “Prepare them for processing. There’s another stock in Asphodel in two hours.”

Joseph Marsh is an emerging writer who is currently studying English and Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. He has been published in young writer’s poetry anthologies, in Pomme

Journal's *Put Into Words, My Love* anthology of stories and poems, as well as Long-listed in the National Theatre's New Views Script-writing competition including. He is a Senior Fiction Editor for the literary journal *The Lincoln Review* and Vice President of the University of Lincoln Spoken Word and Creative Arts society.

## Views from a Laundromat, by Zach Murphy

The local laundromat: a perpetual cleansing spot for the city's dirt and shame.

At night, the neon sign above the storefront glows half-enthusiastically, so much so that most of the letters are completely burnt to their end. The remaining ones spell out "Land rat" — a welcoming endorsement for a place where people come in to wash the crumbs off their pants.

Cheyenne just hangs in there. A few bucks an hour and a few thankless looks for mopping the linty floors, picking up left-behind underwear, and getting lost a little too deep in her own thoughts.

*Do bed bugs drown in the soap and water? Do they feel pain?  
Should I even care if they feel pain?*

*What if all the missing socks in the world magically transport to the  
random shoes you see on the side of the highway?*

*Why does that guy's shirt have a wicked bloodstain on it? Or maybe  
it's just ketchup. I hope it's just ketchup.*

It's 10:55 PM, so the neighborhood night-roamer with the drinking problem stumbles in on the dot, as usual, to spout a series of incoherent-isms. Cheyenne decides to give him the rest of her gas station sandwich. It gets him to leave, but she also feels sorry for him. She wonders where he sleeps at night.

Before closing up the place, Cheyenne does a thorough sweep under the machines and scrounges up just enough coins to catch the bus back to the thin walls of her mildew-tainted studio apartment.

And the cycles continue to spin.

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born, multi-faceted writer who somehow ended up in the charming but often chilly land of St. Paul, Minnesota. His stories have appeared in *Haute Dish*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *WINK*, and the *Wayne Literary Review*. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly and loves cats and movies.



Savored, by Aisha Malik

I clutch my purse next to me and my breath gets  
ready to

Exhale another “congratulations”

Put on a black dress

Wondering if ill be buried amongst those

Souls who sought love

but died buried inside the neck of a man

could never reach the heart

caught up in trying to get every inch of my soul

engraved on a name

wanted it to be savored

entrenched upon the blood of a womb

protected

revered

I just didn’t want to wear ebony for once

Come save me

Aisha Malik graduated with a degree in Political Science in 2019. She has written for HerCampus and The Tempest.

*\*The Moon and the Magic,* by

Mehreen Ahmed

The wars ate the 14-year-olds. Such were the days, when young boys wielded swords and died on these dusts. Politicians drunk in the revelry of power and greed, sent more and more elderly and the young to join the army to fight senseless battles in the name of the King. Unbeknownst to whose wars they fought, these soldiers were the perfect cannon fodder, some many moons ago under the hot suns and rising sands of the desert Gulaag. Made up of rippled sand dunes and sporadic barrel cacti, kings took this to be ideal land for battles.

At a time like this, a baby boy was born. His name was Hajji. His mother named him alone because his father was taken by the imperial force long before his birth. He grew up with his mother without much opulence or opportunity. This small town, in eastern Gulaag, where they lived, was on the border between two warring kingdoms. The wars far from over, the godforsaken Gulaag couldn't be appeased any time soon. Royal armies fed on the vulnerable, as did their sinful paymasters. This ever-hungry beast; no number of humans, camels, or horses was enough to satisfy the bottomless gut of this stunning desert.

Hajji and his mother's fate were tied up with the Gulaag. She lived in constant fear like every other mother on the land, afraid that the army would come after their sons. Hajji had just turned twelve. Jainab surveilled him around the clock and kept him close. Occasionally, she'd



send him out on errands to tend the sheep, far into the desert.

Today, in the pale light of the first morning sun, Hajji took off. He took his flock from the shed at the back of their mud house and headed towards the Gulaag. The army slept at these hours. He walked nearly a quarter of a mile into the desert when he saw a great number of tents strewn across. Soldiers rested in those tents from a long night's war-cries, the Gulaag at their feet lay like a sleeping giant. Hajji walked over the placid sands ahead of his herd. Then he heard a small cry beyond one of the rippled dunes. Hajji stopped. It was a feeble cry, almost a whimper. It didn't sound like a human voice. He began to follow the sound. It was a human voice. There was a boy here about his age, crawling over sand slides. He appeared wounded and famished. Many cuts and bruises beset his little body. Hajji ran over and sat down by his side.

"Are you hurt?" Hajji asked.

The boy looked at him wide-eyed and nodded.

"Who did this to you?" Hajji asked again.

"Enemy," he said. "Water, water, may I have some?"

Hajji looked around. Through serendipity, he found some prickly pears by the dunes. Under and over the sand he searched for something sharp. He found one; a flat pebble.

"Hang in there, okay?"

Hajji cut some pulp with the sharp edge of the pebble. Then he took the prickles out carefully. He

pouched the pulp into the corner of his long shirt; he asked the wounded boy to open his mouth. Hajji squeezed the pulp. Droplets filtered through straight into the boy's mouth.

"I'll have to piggyback you home with me if I can't find a camel. Too dangerous to steal from them, the army there," Hajji told the boy.

Too weak from his wounds, the boy said nothing. He waited for whatever arrangements Hajji could make. Hajji walked across the wide dune to look for a camel. Near the tents, he found one. The beast of the desert stood aloof, tied to a tent's hook. When Hajji peeked through one of the tent's openings, his eyes fell on several men sleeping. Some were child warriors.

They slept dead to the world, as Hajji walked behind a tent. He saw a few guards drowning in heavy sleep. He walked past them unnoticed and went up to the camel. He hid behind its hind legs. Then he moved his lithe body between the camel's four lanky legs. At a snail's pace he got to the hook where the camel was tied with a rope. He untied the camel and brought it over by its rein.

Jainab sat on the threshold of her house. Hajji was late. She boiled chickpeas over a clay stove. "Where is my boy today?" A shiver ran right through her spine at the thought that soldiers may have taken him. This brought back memories when her husband lived with her.

She had met him on the Gulaag, travelling with her nomadic tribe. One evening, the cavalcade stopped to camp here. They had anchored tents into the sand. A cold blast blew. They lit a fire. Men and women sat around it. A man played a moon song on his fiddle. Others rose to

perform a dance. The mesmerising song and the fire dance caused a moonlight slide on the open desert. The moon poured out its lights. They gushed like a silver stream of frozen waterfall. Floodlights touched the dunes.

There he was, a stranger. Only the heavens knew where he had come from. He was a lad of twenty; she, barely eighteen. They had sat across the desert fire. She thought of him as a rare breed. She gazed at him over the campfire. Caught off-guard in an enchantment, she couldn't take her eyes off him, as though she had seen a host of blue butterflies resting on the trunk of a giant kapok in the sun.

He smiled and she shot him a shy glance. After that they both knew there were no retreats. At midnight, when the tribe went to bed, she came out to wait under a starry sky. He was there. His long shadow loomed on the calm sand by the pile of the dying wood. She saw the shadow move, towering over her. He held her hand and pulled her towards him. They stumbled on the sand and rolled over, one on top of the other in the glow of satin silver: the moon, the stars, and before all the constellations.

The next day, when the sun rose over the dunes, gleaming in sparkled gold, he walked over to Jainab's father with a marriage proposal. Jainab's father liked him too, but he had questions. Where was he from? What did he do? He said he was a farmer. Jainab didn't care what he did or where he lived. She was just happy to be with him. A wedding soon ensued. The man gave Jainab a gold coin in the short ceremony on the desert in presence of the tribe.

That night, there was a feast in the open air, with wild dances and songs of the heart. Fire embers flew over the sand sea. The women cooked up a storm. But there was another storm. A sand storm unleashed towards the late night. It blew up russet particles everywhere, darkening the world to blindness. Everyone took cover within their own tents. While people lay low, only the stoic camels stood their ground. The storm yielded. It took some time. People came out of their tents. They sat down in the same place and began to sing again under a desert moon. The night passed and a new sun rose. Time to move on. Jainab and her man packed their luggage. They said farewell to the tribe. There were no tears of separation. This was the nomadic way. Tears were unnecessary, because on life's resolute journey, people were bound to meet again.

His name was Hashimuddin. As they set off, Jainab glanced at him and softly. There was a desert tavern along the way. They continued to travel towards the East. A mellowed sun hurled slowly over to the West end. Jainab could see a border between this kingdom and that; the enemy territory with whom they were perpetually at war. Along the border she also saw a big patch of greenery and a row of red mud houses. Hashimuddin veered the camel towards one and pulled its reins to a stop in the front of his house.

The tribe sat around for a while, after Jainab and Hashimuddin departed. They were enjoying tea and making preparations to get the cavalcade back on the road. Just when, they heard horses. The Gulaag was a hostile place. Sporadic wars broke out in a blink. Not surprisingly, a situation emerged out of the blue. The tribe found themselves amidst a volatile army, who held them captive

at razor's edge. Sharp blades pierced their hearts and slashed their necks like butchered chickens. The gold sand dunes turned scarlet with slain heads scattered all over, the cavalcade in anarchy. Their camels were taken. Children and women became spoils of war to be turned into murderous soldiers and sex slaves overnight.

Hashimuddin and Jainab were lucky. They were on the edge of the eastern Gulaag when this happened where cries couldn't be heard. Jainab reached her new home safely, feeling warm in love with her husband, without any knowledge of the massacre. Horrendous breakouts were common. It appeared this was some divine selection cut out for the people of this land alone. Religion, morality, philosophy, or any known wisdom proved to be futile. A place riddled with greed, corruption, and a complete disregard for any life, human or animal.

Jainab waited impatiently for her son this evening. She sat by the fire she had kindled to cook a meal. She looked out and saw blurry outlines across the space through a mirage. They became defined in a bit. She stood up in excitement: it was her son, Hajji. But Hajji was not alone. There was a camel and body laying over it. She rushed out into the open to meet them.

Her thoughts bended; the day when the soldiers had come to take Hashimuddin. That morning, the sun had streamed low through the cracks of the mud house windows. Hashimuddin and Jainab, deep in embrace on the threshold of the door. She was on her way to the kitchen. Hashimuddin held her back. He grabbed her right arm and pulled her towards his chest.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Oh those sweet, sweet words hummed music to her ears. “To make breakfast.”

“No. I have to tie you to my long shirt to stop you running away.”

She laughed. Hashim gazed at her beautiful smile. “If you keep smiling like that now, I will never be able to let you go,” he whispered, kissing her henna-fragrant hair and losing his face in its mass.

She laughed again and Hashim pulled her into his chest between his broad muscular shoulders.

“C’mon, you have to let me go sometime.”

“And do you think it’s fair to ask me to let you go? Hmm?” he asked.

“Gosh, you’re crazy, you know that?”

”Am I crazy? If you say so, then I am. Completely nuts, because I’m in love with you, my pretty one,” he said huskily.

Jainab could smell the hukkah in his breath as he whispered. “Oh, I could never, ever let you go.” Then he pressed all of her softness against his strong muscles. She lay on his chest like a ragdoll. She let him kiss her, caress her. She kissed him back; a million love hearts soared within her. Her high laughter jingled a crescendo note. Hashimuddin, her blue butterfly, was a rarity. Who had crossed her path on an evening of munificence? Her romance bloomed like an open sunflower in the wilderness.

Then a few days on, she realised that she was with child. She hadn't told him yet. She didn't have to, because her soft blushes and smiles revealed the secrets of her heart. She resided in the reverie of her own coloured world. As each day went by, Hashim watched her across the courtyard and wondered. Then one day, she took a bath and stood on the doorway of the red mud house, where Hashim could see her. Her wet hair cascaded down to her waist. Hashim couldn't resist. He walked over and picked her up. A tremor ran right through her.

"What's up? Why do you look so radiant?" he asked.

"Do you want to know? Do you really, really want to know?" she smiled.

"The shy smiles. The sidelong glances, You're doing it again," he said.

"What? What am I doing?"

"Making me crazy again fall head over heels in love with you."

He had held her narrow waist, lifted her up so he could look into her kohl-black eyes. At this moment, his pretty Jainab was the dark-kohl enchantress.

"You're going to be a daddy soon," she said gently, and lowered her blushing face.

"Whaaat? Oh dear God, when did you find out?"

He didn't even wait for an answer but carried her straight into the room and lay her down on the bed. She looked at him. Sparkles danced in her black eyes. He closed his eyes and kissed her forehead first then each

piece of her body separately like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, savouring, lingering, locking his wet lips into hers, then unlocking them resoundingly, smooching to move on to her neck and down.

She felt euphoric. She had a vision. She saw millions of blue butterflies pasted on a tree trunk in the depths of a forest. A noise broke her spell. She heard hooves near her doorstep. They came closer. They were the army. The soldiers barged into the house through the flimsy door. The army of death wielded sharp swords. Hashim had already seen them first through the window. He picked her up and said, "Run, run to the neighbours."

"What? What about you? Aren't you coming too?"

"No, God willing, I'll see you again one day. No goodbyes. Run along now."

Fear paralysed her senses. She shook like a petrified rabbit at midnight before bright lights on a mountain pass. Hashim continued to scream as he backed off from her. She hid there on the outside, nailed to the wall. She heard scuffles inside the room. Then the noises of the hooves faded. She saw them across the desert, Hashim's back on a horse. He had been taken. That was the last of it. The end of her blue butterfly, which flew away into the dusk in a flicker of a flutter.

Hajji and this other boy were much closer by now. But a dust rose and covered them. The obedient herd was right behind. Jainab ran out towards Hajji. She fell on the shifty sands. Her baby, Hajji, had come at the stroke of midnight. He was born nine months after her husband had been taken. Her neighbours helped her. They delivered Hajji,



tilled her land, sold her chickpeas in the market and brought money home to Jainab. Jainab paid them their dues. The day they took Hashim, other men in the neighbourhood were out to the market. They found Hashim at home and they took him. It was her fault, her kohl beauty, this dark spell kept him indoors. She blamed no one but herself. Twelve years now, Hashim had been missing.

She was a nervous wreck just from this wait. Hajji and his companion were home at last. He ran to her and picked her up.

“Oh! What’s this? Why were you so late? I thought they’d taken you.”

“No, but I found someone, a wounded child soldier.”

Both Jainab and Hajji walked up to the animal and carried the boy into the house. The boy had many injuries. It was a huge task fixing his wounds. He was a cog in their home, another mouth to feed. But her motherly instincts egged her on to protect this child. Jainab knelt before him and rubbed off his blood with a loincloth soaked in warm water. His wounds were deep. She applied herbal medicines and put a bandage across his arms and waist. Towards dawn, the boy opened his eyes and asked for water. Hajji ran out to the closest well into the desert through the backdoor and brought back a jar of water. Jainab poured some into the boy’s dry lips.

Jainab got up to brew some tea for breakfast. She asked Hajji to come outside. Hajji’s eyes were bloodshot.

She gave him red tea in a glass and some falafel with dry dates on a platter.

“These are really nice,” he said. “I have been so hungry and tired since last night. I don’t think I can tend the sheep today.”

“That’s okay. You don’t need to go anywhere. After breakfast lie next to the boy and get some sleep. Do you know his name?”

“No, he was too weak to talk. I don’t even know if he’s a friend.”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s not our place to judge the wounded. We’ll do our best to heal him so he can go back to his parents. You took great risks stealing that camel. Where was the herd then?”

“Oh! They were around, chewing cactus flowers.”

Jainab had just finished in the kitchen when she heard the sound of horse hooves. The soldiers were back. She rushed into the room and carried the boy, asking Hajji to come with her. She went through the backdoor into the desert, straight to the well. She put Hajji in one bucket and the boy in another. The long-rope buckets were knotted up on a pole over the well. Hajji had a few tricks up his sleeves too. With his nimble fingers, he tied two more tight notches to make a shorter rope for buckets to remain afloat just above the well’s water line. She lowered the boys into the well, in the buckets and saw men inside the house. She slipped behind the well wall and sat there stuck to its side like a fallen wallflower, not daring to even breathe. Hajji sat quietly in the tad darkness.

The men went straight for the shed. Her neighbour had left piles of shearer's sheepskin a couple of weeks ago. They took a pitchfork and poked at the edge of the shearer's pile. They even forked out some sheepskin from the corner of the pile. The men gazed at the well, but thought nothing of it. After a while, they left. That was an ingenious plan, thought Jainab, letting out a sigh of relief. When she came out of hiding, she saw hoof marks on the sand's outbound trail. She stood and rolled the children back up. They were sweating from fear and the heat. Dust rose from the horses' gallops.

"Dust should settle down soon," she told them.

She brought the boys inside and lay them down on a kilim. Then she grabbed a hand fan and fanned them until Hajji fell asleep. Between sleep and wakefulness, the wounded boy opened his eyes to take a slit-look at Jainab. She sprinkled water on his baby pale face, and he opened his eyes again for a second. He smiled, then went back to sleep.

The sand's hourglass slid steadily down. It was nearly seven days since Hajji brought the boy home. On the morning of the seventh day, the boy showed some signs of improvement. He curled up in bed and ate for the first time. The hooves had not returned any time soon. They left them in peace today and for several days, to fight another day. The boys sat outside on the yard, drinking red hot tea which Jainab poured out of a vaporous kettle. She placed it back on the hot clay stove. A neighbour pushed in through the doors.

"I came for my wool," he said.

"Sure, pick them up from the shed," she said.

“Who is this?” he asked, looking at the new boy.

“Oh! This is Hajji’s cousin, come here to spend a few days with us.”

“I didn’t know you had any relatives left.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Didn’t your tribe get wiped out on the Gulaag some twelve years ago?”

“Did they? What are you saying?” she asked.

“Twelve years have passed and you didn’t know?”

“Know what? Why would you think it’s us?”

“Because I was there, at your wedding.”

“What? And it took you twelve years to tell me this?” she was shocked.

“Well, you know how it is. The day the army butchered your tribe, they took me. But I proved to be not much of a soldier at all. One dark night, when they lay drunk in the arms of women from your tribe, I took a camel and escaped. It took me days to get home, but when I did, I saw you with Hashimuddin in this house. I was afraid. I hid for many days and didn’t talk to anyone.”

“Stop! Please stop. Say no more!” Jainab began to cry.

No news travelled thus far. In her heart, she cherished the idea that her tribe was safe somewhere. This sickening news turned her heart sour; she wished these ill tidings never reached her doors. She wished this quiet neighbour had remained so. Her grief rose like a dust

cloud blowing in turmoil, these moments of unsettled thoughts and opaque visions of grief, which would settle down one day as surely as dust did. But it collected in a lump to corner her stricken heart.

As the days went by, Jainab grew paler. She took to bed. Hajji and the boy did what they could to revive her, but they failed. One day, the boy now strong enough to move, suggested to Hajji, "Why don't I go home and bring my parents here so they could take care of your mother?"

"What? Are you crazy? The army would snatch you if they found you," Hajji said.

"Well, I'll just have to take my chances. If we don't take care of your mother, she will die," he said. "I shall go at night, under the cover of darkness."

"Where do you even live?" Hajji asked.

"Just across the border. However, I am from the enemy camp, so you know. But we are brothers now, so it doesn't matter. You've saved me, Hajji."

Hajji kept quiet. "Can you go alone? Because I can't leave my mother like this in her present condition. I wish that neighbour had never opened his mouth."

"I know. I also wish that he hadn't," the boy said.

"It's good, though, that mum told him you were my cousin," Hajji said.

The boy nodded. "Your mum's really good; she tried to protect me in case he turned out to be a dobber."

"Yeah, she's good," Hajji agreed.

“Okay, then, I’ll set out tonight and bring my father back.”

“You don’t need to because our neighbours will help my mother get better,” suggested Hajji.

“Still, I need to go now. I miss my father and my mother. And the border is just here; I can even see it.”

“Well, okay then, if you want to go, then go. I hope I won’t see you on the Gulaag again.”

“I hope not.”

That night, Hajji and the boy sneaked out. They ran over the dense sand, the small delible imprints of their footsteps in its depth. Hajji took him to the border. The boys hugged each other and kissed on the cheeks. And just when the boy turned to go, they saw men marching straight towards them. They ambushed them under their naked swords, glimmering in the moonlight. The desert air reeked of blood and sweat. Bodies. It didn’t matter whether these were foes or friends. In the end, all became decomposed bodies, dumped on Gulaag’s tail-road.

Jainab, delirious from grief, called out, “Hajji! Hajji!” She forced herself to get out of bed to search for him. Then she saw the nearly gone little footprints on the sand in the direction of the border. Jainab feared the worst. She dragged herself to her quiet neighbour’s house and knocked on the door. She told him about the footprints.

“Can you help, brother? I only have Hajji left in all the world.”

“I know, sister, Jainab.”

“These past twelve years have passed like a dream. I don’t even think I saw the risings of the moon or the settings of the sun. My days have been long, as have been my nights.”

“Please, do not worry. I’ll try my best.”

Jainab left. Towards late night, the neighbour set out in the direction of the nearly faded footprints. With some measure of precision, these footprints led to army tents tethered along the western border. He stumbled a few times on the sand. His breathing short and shallow. He approached the army tents. As he drew closer, he heard the obnoxious clamour of maudlin drunkenness. In the quiet night such sounds only meant soldiers being rapt in sordid pleasure. Stealthily he continued on his tract to look for the boys. On the southern point, suppressed cries wafted through the air. He opened a tent and found the boys, perched up on tenterhooks. In the dying torch, he walked towards them and whispered, “I am your Uncle Abdallah. I’ve come to save you.”

The boys couldn’t believe their eyes. Then Hajji said, “I saw them put a sword in the corner, there.”

“Okay, I’m going to unhook you both now?”

They heard someone cough outside the tent. Abdallah hid away in a dark corner. A man peeked through and saw the boys’ straight faces. He went away. Abdallah crawled back towards the boys and brought them down on the floor. They sat on the floor to catch their breath and then tiptoed to egress the tent. Once they were out, they began to run fast. The sands slowed them down acting an impediment. Hajji and Abdallah were already into the enemy kingdom.

Hajji's enemy kingdom was Hussain's homeland. But Hussain couldn't remember the way to his village. He only knew a name: Kundi. They asked for directions to get to Kundi. By the time they arrived, they were famished. They found a tea stall on the outskirts of a village. The three sat down to eat breakfast. An errand boy served them a platter of yoghurt sauce, dry bread and fruits. Kundi was not far. The manager of the restaurant had his back towards them. He grabbed a glass of red tea and turned around. Hussain saw him first. He screamed, "Father, father."

The man heard Hussain and ran towards him. Abdallah now saw him too, and a chill ran through him.

"Hashimuddin?" he cried out.

"Who's that?" the man asked and came running. "My name is Hassan Karemi, not Hashimuddin?"

"But that's impossible. I was at your wedding. I am your neighbour. I saw you and sister Jainab together all this time before the army took you," Abdallah spat out.

"Shush! Speak softly," he looked around timidly, then whispered. "What are you saying? Anyway, you brought my son back. I would like to welcome you to my house as my guest tonight."

At night, a party was held at Hashimuddin's place. Among many others, there were his in-laws and the entire clan. Abdallah sat down with the father-in-law. They exchanged greetings, then talks turned to politics and the war. He told Abdallah how Hussain was abducted while playing with friends.



Abdallah asked, "How did you meet Hussain's father?"

"Oh! That? Another long story. We found him wounded on the edge of the Gulaag. But he couldn't remember anything until about six months. We revived him but he still walks with a limp. The army lost interest in him; they took his son instead."

After the party, Hashimuddin came to Abdullah's room and told him, "What my father-in-law told you is incorrect, my memory had always been intact. My name is not Hashimuddin but Hassan Karemi. As much as I wanted to tell Jainab the truth, I couldn't. I couldn't tell her that I was from across the border, Kundi, the enemy land, because I feared I would lose her. Here, I couldn't tell them about Jainab because of severe punishments for marrying an enemy. If I had told them, I would be hanging from the tall spikes today. My Jainab was with child. Have you seen the child?"

"Yes, little Hajji there? That's him, your little boy. Why do you not leave? People leave all the time, no?" Abdallah asked.

"They do. War is crazy. My in-laws would send an army after me, if I left. There's Hussain now as well as Hajji, my two boys. The hunt for me would go on. They'll take my sons," he said. "Where would I hide them on the open Gulaag? Anyhow, when I got better, my in-laws forced me into this marriage to their daughter, a girl whom no man would have because of her scarred face from fire burns. They have made me a prisoner of their whim. They reminded me of how I owed them my life."

"That's rubbish. You could've tried to leave. Did you at least try?" Abdallah persisted.

“No, I couldn’t. They kept a close watch. This place, full of spies.”

“What do you want me to tell sister Jainab, then?”

“It’s complicated. The war is upon us. Hussain here, Hajji, over in the enemy land, this life, shards of glass. Jainab, my love, my magic...a mirage,” he murmured.

Hashimuddin went up to Hajji and picked him up. He gave him a tight hug and a kiss. He gave them a camel to cross the formidable border and saw them gradually reduced to a dot, an apparition along the far side of the horizon. He waited for the next rain, when the hummingbirds would return, the fire-dances in full moon songs.

Mehreen Ahmed is an award-winning, internationally published and critically acclaimed author. She has written Novels, Novella, Short Stories, Creative Nonfiction, Flash Fiction, Academic, Prose Poetry, Memoirs, Essays and Journalistic Write-Ups. Her works have been podcast, anthologised and translated in German, Greek and Bengali. She has two masters degrees and a bachelor's (Hon) in English Literature and Linguistics from University of Queensland and Dhaka University. She was born and raised in Bangladesh. At the moment, she lives in Australia.

## Two Poems by Elizabeth Bluth

### **Distance**

I tried  
to cross the ocean  
for you,

but you  
harpooned  
my simple raft

and I choked  
on your misgivings.

I nearly drowned in them.

**\*Sarah**

An empty bottle of scotch sits upon the kitchen table  
beside

an empty glass

rimmed with a few of his mustache hairs and

the thumbprints and sweat from last night.

Magnets from the fridge have found new homes

upon the floor. An overturned chair, its cushion

flung across the room, is missing a leg.

Paint has chipped

from the walls as if

it had been hit with some force.

Her favorite vase, a wedding gift, lies broken

just like the blood vessels around her left eye.

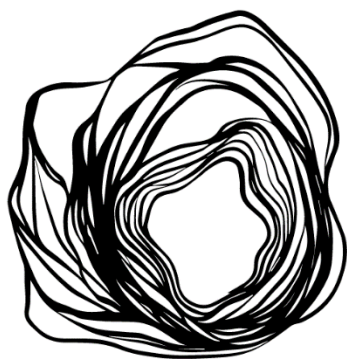
She's cracked a rib. Yoga on Monday will be painful, and

her sprained wrist will keep her from finishing

her paintings for a few days.

"Everything is fine," she'll say. "He didn't mean to," she'll  
say.

Elizabeth Bluth is a writer of fiction, poetry, and plays. Her work has been published and produced with Animal Heart Press, Los Angeles Females' Playwrights Initiative, The Orange County Register, and others. She has a BA in Creative Writing and Theatre and is currently pursuing her MFA in Fiction from The New School in NYC. You can find her on twitter at @elizakbluth.



## **3 MOON INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING**

Copy Editing, Transcription, Audio Books & Publishing