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antae

A Journal of Creative Writing



About ANTAE

antae (ISSN: 2523-2126) is an internationally refereed creative writing journal. Our editorial team is open to publishing all kinds of work written in English, from poetry to prose fiction, creative nonfiction, drama, experimental writing, review articles and more.

We are committed to publishing original creative works of quality, whether these come to us in the form of the traditional Shakespearean sonnets or flarf poetry, whether these assume the character of genre fantasy writing or thoroughly researched nonfiction. We only flank the doorway: it is up to writers to step through.

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Futile Poem

by Paul Stephenson

When I lived alone everything was futile.
Trying to get up from my futon was futile.
I kept a tall banana plant and a small reptile,
but the climate was temperate not tropical
so trying to grow fruit was fruitless, futile.
The futility of filling the can and watering.

There were loud birthdays above and below.
People moved in, moved out, so getting to know
the neighbours was futile. A washing machine
above was always on spin, went *fut, fut, fut, fut...*
Shouting was my missile. Soon my vocal cords
were futile. I'd hold out for silence, futilely.

The view opposite wasn't completely futile.
The red pantiles on the rooftops looked intact,
like in a bad storm they'd keep the rain off,
but the long summer days were often grey
so the skylights were futile because the sky
was dull, devoid of sun, the daylight futile.

My utility bills were futility bills, heftily futile.
Gassing about not affording gas would be futile.
The damp wasn't futile though, it was furtive
and had growth spurts, grew bigger than me.
The red armchair I'd sit in had a high back.
It was comfortable but its arms were futile.

Dragonfly at Delphi

by Anita Howard

Watch her there!
She falls and rises surely
within this forge of air that tries us all -

beyond us, at long last.
A god's voice from the fissure,
a vision half-explained and never owned.

Cicada cries unite
in harmony all about
their broken troves of stone, as she flies free.

Acropolis

by Anita Howard

He rears there from the pediment,
the horse of the moon.
One flexing leg close by

on plundered ground, its heat
the blood and fire of ages
who could not win. Time was

they met their gods, and chose them
when trees and water rose out of the ground.
The trees alone remain, among the stones,

the scaffolding, the crowds. The bones of time
are yellow from the iron. Marble dust
ingrains into our soles, to throw us down.

A street that had a name

by Grant Shimmin

Christchurch, New Zealand

- in the residential red zone left by the quakes of 2010-11

It's a street that had a name
But it no longer needs one
No one is going home to it now
Gardens grow wildly
Their minders gone with the walls and ceilings and roofs
Shaken from settled suburban lives

It's a street of broken dreams, broken concrete
Strewn with steps to be watched lest they break bones
But just past the chill of an early spring dawn
It's a street of molten gold
A glowing trail to a river rising vaporously out of itself
Into a temporary tangled tryst with the day's first rays

It's a street where the gaunt, ghostly silhouettes
of winter flesh out spring green
But there are still ghosts here
Of lives once rooted in this flourishing meander
The trees age, their annual fruit returning
To be foraged by walkers passing
But gates and their number are forgotten
in a greening space that's freely traversed

It's a street with cracks in the pavements
Cracks in the tarmac, cracks in the souls
Of those whose ruptured lives
Forced them away to start anew
But there's green now in those cracks
In the fence lines' post impressions
And the street's a home to birds and bugs

and hope

Do I Practise Life?

by Grant Shimmin

Do I practise life?
Do I train for the trials yet to come

Like
the
Canada
geese
do?

Or do I just wing it?
Is it just a rolling reaction to whatever comes my way?

I walk into the autumn dawn
Cardboard-enclosed caffeine in hand
And the geese are already high
A hundred or more
And I think they're off
To the land of their name

As
one
wide,
sharp-pointed
formation
flaps
in
time
overhead

with a
smaller
looser
detachment
beside

Which way is Canada from here?
I wouldn't know; is that even where they go?
But then they swing across a paddock

and
the
swinging
keeps
on
going
as
they
circle

I see it's just a drill
Still early autumn so they're
Practising migration with the youngsters
So they'll know
Just what they're in for when they go

Do I practise life, like them?
Am I ready for the next big step?
Or am I pondering poems when I should be preparing
For reality? Is it easier when instinct
Sucks choice from the equation?
Or is that just an excuse not to look at the horizon?

St Nicholas Chapel, Ghargħur

by Maria Grech Ganado

how can I make of this vacant space
a place of rest?
it's just a room where stone must speak
of finitude

beyond it is the summons of the sea –

yet I chance upon this chapel,
sit alone and shut my eyes –
to fill them there's an intimate
infinity.

The Chapel was originally built in the 16th century

Pleading Guilty

by Maria Grech Ganado

I avoid you, Elsewhere!
I am not there and age can be a good excuse
for something one can't bear –
I listen to birds chirp
protest at trees chopped down
and stone erected here where you are not.

It's almost winter
but climate change ignores the months –
I worry how it will treat my children and their children
only eventually
I wonder only abstractly what they'll learn of history and of blood
while those of others are bombed.

Walking in sunshine or snug indoors
I avoid you
and relegate you to the safe box I can switch off,

Dispatch and Correspondence

by James JT Beatty

Bucharest, Romania

Bullets fly as vampiric menace attacks Romanian Orthodox church on the outskirts of Bucharest.

An old woman who identified herself as “Bunica” explained to on-site reporters “these things happen from time to time, it gets dealt with.”

The priest, armed with a revolver, is believed to have ultimately killed the vampire. Bucharest authorities have yet to comment on the situation, though they have historically attempted to ignore vampire-related incidents.

Houma, Louisiana

Locals panic as Rougarou repellent shortage continues in build-up to mating season. One store owner, John Broussard, believes it’s a result of the labor shortage as soldiers come home from the Great War.

Several home remedies have been seen among the Cajun population, including images of Roman Catholic saints kept in clothes pockets and children eating extra vegetables.

The governor has mobilized the National Guard to patrol the bayous, including the 39th Infantry Division, many of whom saw action in Europe.

Rougarou-related deaths have seen decline in recent years after Mama Carriere’s Rougarou Spray and similar products hit store shelves, and experts have not yet identified home remedies that are similarly effective.

Nanking, Republic of China

Churches and temples alike lock their doors after wave of attacks attributed to èguǐ (“hungry ghost”) spirits in South China.

The country has been generally spared from supernatural disasters, which local Daoists attribute to adherence to ancient traditions by the Chinese. However, the recent wars seem to have left the country vulnerable.

“We need to bring back the Ming. The Qing ruined everything, that’s why we’re having all these problems. The Qing let too many Westerners in, that’s what led to all this,” said one anonymous opium dealer.

September 25, 1920

My dearest Anastasia,

I arrived in Satu Mare last night. The bounty has been increased to one million lei, which would be enough for us to buy a house in the city. We’ll be able to marry then, if you’d still take my hand.

‘ I’m sorry I missed your birthday party, though a gift is on its way. The work of a vampire hunter can be hard, but with any luck retirement will come early, and you can open that coffeehouse you always dream of.

I still hold on to the lock of hair you gave me as a good luck charm. I keep it in my breast pocket next to my little icon of the Theotokos.

I love you,

Constantin Ionescu

Melbourne, South Australia

Legendary ANZAC sniper shoots hairy biped in Australian outback. A cattle station in the Outback had been terrorized for three months before none other than Billy Sing, hero of Gallipoli, arrived with his service rifle. He led a team of cattlemen for three days to spot, track, and successfully eliminate the beast. They brought the body back for scientific study

The biped, identified as a “yowie” by locals, is believed to be a relative of the Sasquatch Americanus, possibly having a common ancestor with the Sasquatch Himalayanus.

The yowie’s intelligence has not yet been determined, though one Andamooka resident claims to have seen the beast create and use stone tools. Aboriginal elders claim the yowie to be of equal intelligence to humans, and there is at least one confirmed instance of the beast knowing the dangers of a firearm.

Advertisement from *Pointe Coupee Banner*, September 29

Mama Carriere's Rougarou Repellant

Autumn's coming up, and you know what that means! Time to stock up on MAMA CARRIERE'S ROUGAROU REPELLANT for only 49¢ per container. We have a new-and-improved recipe, including thirteen varieties of beans, salt, pepper, ground-up mirrors, tobacco, and white butterfly wings. We have consulted with anti-rougarou experts, including a professor of biology from Harvard University, a direct descendant of Marie Laveau, and Mama Carriere herself. Simply rub it onto your skin and guarantee rougarou will stay away for up to eight hours!

With bulk purchases, while supplies last, we will also add a free anti-vampire manual written by the Romanian army and translated for the first time into English.

Mumbai, British Raj

Highly-decorated 1st Gurkha Rifles fend off flying fanged fiends in rural India. The demons, called "rakshasa" by locals, had occupied several villages in the northern regions of the country. They demanded offerings of human flesh while destroying sacred Hindu idols.

The British Raj was notably slow to answer these problems, which leads some critics to ask if the Empire takes supernatural threats seriously.

Local fears, however, were relieved when they saw the Terai hats and crossed kukri knives that are the pride of the Gurkha regiments. One villager, Jayant Ojha, explains "I had heard about the Gurkhas in Afghanistan and Iraq and even in France, but I thought they were just stories. Then I saw just one squad drive out eight demons and free my farm. If it weren't for them, I would have had to sacrifice myself to protect my daughters."

When asked for an interview, one Gurkha simply brandished his kukri, still covered in demon blood. "This says enough, I think." Our reporter did not press the matter further.

October 1st, 1920

My beloved Constantin,

I got your gift the day before your letter arrived! I, for one, appreciated the dress. My father smiled for once while he was talking about you, when he saw it was silk and velvet. I'm trying to get you on his good side, but he's stubborn like that. I hope you don't take it to heart; Papa doesn't think any man is good enough for me. My sister brought a man to meet him last week, he nearly shot the poor boy when he found out he worked in a shoe factory.

I'm sure you heard about the vampire attack on the church. Father Bogi shot him. Maybe you're not the only vampire hunter I know! Promise me you will be safe. You never leave my thoughts. I can't imagine what I'd do if I lost you.

I'll wear the dress every Sunday until you get back.

I love you,
Anastasia

Radio Transcript from *USS Vermont*, dated May 23, 1920

Brazilian ship located, found shipwrecked near Port-au-Prince. Detachment of Marines landed on shore to investigate. Evidence of the zombification of several Brazilian crewmen. Brazilian sailors and marines had established a fortified encampment to hold off attacks from zombies. First Lieutenant Michael Anders led a platoon of Marines to rendezvous with Brazilians. Language barriers proved difficult to surmount, but it appears that they both understood "zombie". Marines suffered four casualties, but the mission was successfully accomplished. Brazilians are now safely underway to their country. *USS Vermont* wants to launch expeditions to find the houngan responsible for these zombies, but awaits authorization from higher.

Advertisement found in *Houma Courier*, October 4, 1920

HUNTERS WANTED!

for Rougarou expedition, October 16th-November 20th

Are you tired of Rougarou attacks on your home and family? Would you like to strike back and get paid for it? Sign up at your local sheriff's office today! Receive a three-day training course paid for by Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, then receive a Rougarou Hunter's License authorizing you to handle automatic weapons. Pay is \$15 per day plus \$5 for each confirmed Rougarou kill!

Requirements: Catholic Men, Hunting Experience Preferred.

Sicilians need not apply.

May 26, 1920

Hey Dad,

We're heading back to the States, the ship is about to be scheduled to be scrapped. We're going to California!

Anyway, we stopped here for a while, there was some "SOS" signal off the coast of Haiti. Brazilian Navy ship, something like that. We sent our marines to handle it. Those crazy bastards, I was half-way afraid that when they got back they wouldn't be done killing and turn on us! HA!

They want to keep us here for a few extra days, and I'm not sure why. Scuttlebutt I heard from some of the jarheads was there was something spooky on the island, but everyone knows not to trust what they say.

Either way, I'm just a cook, they don't tell me anything important.
See you soon,
Joe.

PS: I think I might get some leave when we get to California, maybe I can come visit. Don't tell anyone though, I'd hate to disappoint.

Chicago, Illinois

Notorious vampire believed to be leaving Romania. Last spotted heading north into the Free Territory in Southern Ukraine.

The vampire, known only as Alin, is believed to be directly responsible for several deaths in three counties in Transylvania. He has confirmed ties to the Romanian mafia. He is wanted in eight countries for cattle rustling, murder, and illegal firearm sales.

The Romanian government has put a bounty on his head for 1 million in the local currency, and independent vampire hunters are currently swarming the country looking for him

Experts believe the Romanian approach to supernatural threats is cheaper, but more prone to reckless hunters. The U.S. philosophy, government agencies and military units dedicated to supernatural threats, is believed to be better at ensuring professionalism and competence when dealing with supernatural threats.

Ulan Bator, Mongolia

As the Bogd Khanate teeters on the verge of collapse, many-headed demons called "magyus" by locals wreak havoc among Mongol herdsmen.

The current situation is unclear as our reporters have evacuated the country after one of them was ripped apart and eaten by the demons.

Roswell, New Mexico

Navajo tribal elders travel via train to Roswell after U.S. Army is overwhelmed by gangs of malicious shamans with the ability to transform into ferocious wild animals.

One elder, Joseph Montoya, explained the gravity of the situation, and urged New Mexicans against acknowledging their existence. "Let us handle this. Go about your normal lives. Talking about them will only make them stronger."

The shamans have access to military equipment after overrunning the Army battalion sent to manage the situation.

At least fourteen missing persons have been blamed on the shamans, while no further crimes have occurred since the arrival of the Navajo elders.

December 15, 1920

Dad,

Great news! I'm getting assigned to a ship on the East Coast. Hopefully this one doesn't have any marines! HA!

I'm taking some leave. I'll be able to visit, either before or right after Christmas. I got presents for everyone. I found this rock on Hawaii before we left, they tried to warn me not to take it but I snuck it in my pocket. I bet Mama will like it.

You can tell everyone if you want, unless you think it'll be better as a surprise.
See you soon,
Joe

December 30th, 1920

My dearest Anastasia,

Unfortunately, I will be journeying into Ukraine. Alin has been sighted near Odessa.

I've been brushing up on my Ukrainian, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find him.

I dream of you every night. I have not forgotten you.

I love you,
Constantin

Radio Transcript of Unknown Origin, Ukraine

All units be on high alert. Notorious vampire is believed to be at large in and around Ukraine. Large bounty from the King of Romania.

Helena, Montana

The U.S. Navy will now be warning sailors and Marines not to take any souvenirs from the Hawaii Territory. This comes after the family of a sailor assigned to the USS Vermont was ripped apart by wolves as their house caught on fire in North Dakota. Investigators believe there was a rock taken from Hawaii in the house, possibly by the sailor. Steerage Cook Joseph Richardson was on shore leave after a long tour in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Hawaii native Michael Kahananui explained that it was unwise to take naturally-occurring items from the islands.

The Navy is currently in the process of finding an eligible next-of-kin for the sailor's death gratuity.

Award Records, U.S. Army, 1920

The Distinguished Service Cross is presented to Edouard Boudreux, Private, U.S. Army, for extraordinary heroism in action near Houma, Louisiana, October 12, 1920. After his pontoon boat was attacked by more than fifty Rougarou, he successfully manned his Lewis gun for nearly three hours while waiting for daylight, keeping the danger at bay while his immediate superiors were injured and attempting to signal for help via radio.

December 27, 1920

My beloved Constantin,

I think I've finally convinced Papa to let you marry me. He's learnt how to read well enough to see the reward money out for Alin. He keeps asking when you'll return. I think he's keeping a closer track of Alin than you are at this point. If he weren't so old, I think he'd be out looking himself!

Adrian had to leave town. He managed to escape when the soldiers put down the general strike back in October, but the police started sniffing around his workshop. We heard from him two weeks ago, and he mentioned he was living with the monks on Mount Athos now. Strange, given that he said he was an atheist when he started reading those philosophy books.

I read a newspaper article saying that there were battles in Ukraine now that the Russians got rid of the tsar. I urge you to be safe. Promise me, please. Come back to me.

I love you,
Anastasia.

Lagos, Nigeria

Worlds collide as Islamic djinni duke it out with local ogbanje spirits as locals convert en masse to Islam. One local Islamic scholar, Sheikh Uthman Abubakar, commented on the situation. "The converts are under the protection of Allah, and the evil djinn, the locals call them 'ogbanje', are angry that they can no longer torment them. The Muslim djinn have come to protect the believers, and through the grace of Allah we will be protected."

Troops from the Royal West African Frontier Force are believed to be mobilizing to keep a grip on the situation, but it is unclear if the fighting will last long enough for them to see action.

Dublin, Ireland

Clurichauns destroy famous Westmalle Abbey in recent attack. This comes after a string of brewery attacks are blamed on the spirits. It is believed the clurichauns have ties to Irish Mafia and attacks are a form of retaliation after monasteries refused to sell beer to New York smugglers. Irish and Italian criminal organizations have been known to attempt to buy alcohol from their home countries and smuggle it to the United States. This appears to be the result of an increase of alleged curses put on bootleggers and domestic alcohol producers.

Monastery attacks have also been blamed on the anti-British Irish Republican Army, although they deny any involvement.

Mexico City, Mexico

Ranchers in the north and Yankee cattlemen accused one another of stealing livestock until they found a pack of chupacabra migrating south from Nevada. Both the U.S. and Mexican Armies were unable to respond, leaving no choice but cooperation. Three Mexicans and four Americans lost their lives, but the chupacabras were all killed. Fifteen were sent to Mexican and American universities for research purposes, twenty were sent to museums, and the other sixty were divided among survivors for trophies. Taxidermists throughout the area have been busy stuffing and preserving the beasts for posterity. There's a tradition among Texans to keep stuffed chupacabra in or around their homes to keep the beasts out, although this is frowned upon in Mexico.

Scientists believe these attacks will decrease in both intensity and regularity now that the Revolution is over. They note that chupacabra attacks are usually associated with conflict and instability. Although several hypotheses exist, scientists have yet to come to a consensus.

January 12, 1921

My dearest Anastasia,

I found him! I'm bringing his head to collect the bounty soon. Start planning the wedding, Anastasia. I want us to get married in that big church near where you grew up. Soon, my dear, soon we'll be able to buy that house you've always wanted and open the coffeehouse like you've always dreamed of. And I'll be there with you forever and for always.

I love you,

Constantin

Radio Transcript of Unknown Origin, Ukraine

All units mobilize. Alin has been killed. Romanian named Constantin Ionescu believed to be responsible. Search everyone passing through our territory. Detain if found. Do not harm him unless he presents a danger to yourself and others.

Nanking, China

Supernatural attacks decline as efforts to appease spirits appear successful. Former Qing Emperor Puyi has written to several Hollywood studios to produce a Chinese-language film about the situation, apparently starring himself. It is unclear the extent to which Puyi is responsible for the decline, but experts have not outright said the emperor made matters worse.

The last eunuchs of China are furious at the emperor seeming to adopt so much of Western culture, but it is unlikely that their complaints will be heard.

Constantin Ionescu was killed by mortar fire from the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine last week as he tried to transport the severed head of a notorious vampire known only as Alin. He was an up-and-coming vampire hunter, who had successfully killed three other vampires and a notorious necromancer previously. Nestor Makhno, leader of the Free Territory, released a statement shortly afterwards.

“Comrades in Ukraine, Romania, and around the world, it is with the ultimate regret that we must announce the accidental death of Constantin Ionescu. We were engaged in a skirmish with Bolshevik forces and unaware of his location. We have historically been friendly to vampire hunters, as they are crucial in throwing off the shackles the vampires have long kept on the working class. His remains are being transported to Bucharest as I speak, along with a sum of money to help his family in these trying times. My duties at the front prevent me from attending his funeral and offering my condolences to his family in person. Comrades, though these tragedies continue, we must continue our struggle for the liberation of Ukraine and workers around the world. Power begets parasites, long live anarchy!”

Constantin is survived by his twelve brothers, three sisters, and his mother and father. His betrothed, Anastasia Botezatu, now intends to take vows as a nun at the Văratec monastery.

His funeral was attended by more than three hundred people, including his fellow vampire hunters and veterans of the Battle of Mărășești. There was even a group of anarchists present, who presented a red-and-black wreath to his mother.

He has been buried with honors from the Romanian Land Forces, and his burial site was given a special place of honor by Metropolitan-Primate Miron Cristea.

It is traditionally believed that vampires cannot attack the graves of vampire hunters. Since Constantin’s burial, there has been no vampiric activity in the entire city of Bucharest.

The Karnival of Seraphic Knights

by Marcon De Giorgio

A knight must be respectful, selfless, open, devoted, and, above all, they must exude excellence.

It was 1639, and Grandmaster Giovanni Paolo Lascaris was by far the most hated man in Malta. The locals had already disliked the man, but the carnival ban he imposed made them hate both him and the Jesuit Father Cassia, whom they blamed for Lascaris' change of heart. Nadette Abrignano could not go one moment without hearing someone curse one of the two men. Leader of the knights or not, the Grandmaster was neither respectful of the people's wishes, nor selfless in enacting the ban. At least, that was what was on everyone's mind.

The bells tolled atop St John's Cathedral. Nadette could hear it from her home in the heart of Valletta. Her friend, Elinora Blaauwgeers, had come to her home that morning holding a large chest full of clothing, which were their costumes for the evening. They were as marvellous as Nadette had expected. She was forever used to the red of her knight's frock, so the dress she wore, with its large circumference, was uncanny. She wore similar clothing during official meetings, where a lady was expected to attend as opposed to a knight, but this was a costume. Everything about the dress was exaggerated. As she examined herself in the mirror, she could feel the hoop skirt move with each turn she made. Her dress was a pearly shade with a slight pink hue, a nice contrast with the tanned sheen of her skin, courtesy of her Mediterranean mother. Elinora chose well.

When her dear friend had suggested they go to *karnival* despite the ban, Nadette was not at all surprised. Her newfound friend had, afterall, initially come to the island in search of *sirens*. The thought was ludicrous to her, that sirens roamed their waters,

but Elinora was convinced of the colony's existence. Seeing how her friend was so ready to leave home in search of something that may or may not exist, it did not seem too far-fetched that she would also suggest they ignore the ban and go to *karnival*. Nadette was against it. The rules forbidding participation mostly applied to women, and, seeing as they were both women, it seemed likely they would get in trouble for it. Nadette was also a knight, whose father served as an engineer to the same order she vowed to follow, she had much more to lose than Elinora the foreigner. Despite Nadette's protests, *Mademoiselle* Elinora was persuasive. That woman seemed to constantly run towards the serpent instead of avoiding it. *Karnival* was banned in her country as well, so this was her chance to finally experience it, especially after she had heard tales of the Venetian Carnivale. Nadette felt her chest constrict with the decision. She couldn't just break the law and shame her family, but Elinora was right, the other knights would be there too, so she should join them. It was eating at her. She didn't want to disappoint anyone.

Elinora cupped her cheeks, she assumed it was done in an attempt to hoist her out from the sea of internal thoughts she found herself in. She knew that the distress she had felt in her heart was as visible as a painting on her face.

"Nad," she said, so sweetly that Nadette's mind was swayed in that instant, "it will be fun."

It was only the eleventh hour of the night, yet she could already hear the crowd gather in the streets. Elinora had let her go and proceeded to hunch over her French heels to tie off the laces securely. Unlike Nadette, Elinora wore what she called the attire of a *Karnival Prince*. For someone who had never attended a *karnival* feast before, Elinora was very knowledgeable. She came from the Republic of Seven United Netherlands, a country too far from the quaint islands for Nadette to comprehend. She spoke in a language they both knew: French. It's one of the things Nadette liked about her. The Dutch girl was so well travelled that she didn't need to go to places to learn about them, she had enough friends to tell her about them. Meanwhile, Nadette had never left the confines of her father's villa and the protection of the sea that surrounded them.

Elinora straightened up and turned to face Nadette. They stared at each other in silence, which made Nadette nervous. Clutching her skirts, she waited for her to say something, but all Elinora did was smile and eye her like one would eye a seven course meal. Nadette felt her face heat up in response.

How embarrassing.

Elinora's coat was a dark and deep red, with gold embroidery all over it. The outfit was so absurd you could tell it was a costume. No one would dare walk out of their house in such a loud outfit. They weirdly matched and didn't at the same time.

"*Mademoiselle*," Nadette found herself saying. She secured the sword she had hidden under the layers, its vague form a comfort to her. She gathered her courage; a sword fight was much easier than this. "We should leave before my father returns from the palace."

Elinora nodded. She walked towards a wooden box, the one she brought in that morning with the costumes inside. She took out two masks: one pink and one red. She handed Nadette the red mask. The smile on her face was strange, and made Nadette's palms sweaty.

She put the mask on. It was an unusual feeling on her face, very different from a visor. She watched Elinora put on the pink mask, watching it frame her face beautifully. Her grey eyes stared at her from beneath it. The pink feathers attached to it sprung high in the air, complementing the woman's strawberry blonde hair.

The streets were as lively as they sounded. The Maltese had no care for Lascaris's ban. Women and men alike wore masks and large, extravagant costumes. Some even wore clothes and makeup that suspiciously made them look like the old Grandmaster himself. The smell of food was strong, specifically the sweets she could see being sold around by a couple of local vendors. Elinora dragged Nadette through the drunken crowd in Strada San Giorgio. The streets were lit up with the lively excitement of people. Nadette could hear a man sing drunkenly to a band of instruments in the distance. Everyone began to dance in the plaza, their movements were messy and chaotic, but they were having fun so the lack of rhythm didn't matter. The atmosphere was infectious, and Nadette found herself smiling along with them.

An odd odour lingered with the smell of food; the weird arid scent fought for dominance against the sweet smell of pastry. Nadette had noticed it for a while but she hadn't figured out what it was. She wanted to believe it was piss. A lot of drunk men tended to relieve themselves in the dark, yet it wasn't as tangy.

It was metallic.

It hung heavy in the air, and she felt a strange presence around them, something unexplainable.

Elinora let her hand go and turned to face her, distracting Nadette from the smell. She bowed low. “Madame,” her accent thick as she spoke. “Shall we dance?”

Nadette returned the gesture with her own low bow and then offered her hand. Elinora took it, and in that moment Nadette’s mind expunged any thought of the strangeness that had worried her a mere moments ago. They spun and jumped along to the music. Nadette knew how to dance properly, and so did Elinora, but there were no rules in *karnival*. What they were doing was a bastardised waltz. It didn’t matter though; that was what the moment was supposed to be. They held hands the entire time, and at one point the crowd was so thick, they had no choice but to dance with their chests flush against each other. They laughed and laughed, they sang along with the drunken man, they didn’t know the words, and Elinora didn’t know Maltese, but watching her try was fun.

By the twelfth hour Nadette’s chemise was stuck to her back from the sweat that coated her skin. She had to take a step back from the sea of people and press her back to the cold limestone of one of the buildings that lined Strada San Giorgio. Elinora was beside her, watching the people still go about their dancing.

“We should eat something,” she said.

“What do you want?” Nadette adjusted her mask, as it had slipped down a little from all the dancing.

“Mmm, I don’t know. Something sweet?”

Nadette took her hand and led her to the food stand. She pointed at a couple of pastries on display.

Elinora shook her head. “I’ve had those before, is there anything else?”

Nadette led her towards the next stall, where a lovely *prinjolata* was on display. The sweet was white and dome shaped; whoever made it had covered it in cherries and melted chocolate. Nadette felt herself salivating just by looking at it.

“How about this?” she said while pointing at the pastry.

Elinora hummed in response. “Yeah, I’ll try it.”

Nadette exchanged a few words with the seller and paid for a slice. The vendor handed it to them in a cloth napkin and they found a little corner where they huddled close together, taking turns to bite the dessert. The *prinjolata* tasted just how she had remembered it. Her grandmother often used to make it at home as a *karnival* treat. It was the one thing she looked forward to. She missed it. Her grandmother was long gone, and so was the taste of her *prinjolata*, of which the nutty flavour seemed to signal the very nature of home. The one they had bought was a close second at least, she just wished she could have had Elinora taste her nanna's version. She hastily swallowed the upcoming emotions down her throat. Nadette hadn't expected to get so nostalgic over a simple sweet.

"I'd like to go walk around. Care to join me?" Elinora asked once they had devoured it. She got up from the ground and pulled Nadette up with her.

They walked away from the crowds. The loud roar of the drunken sea of people got quieter and quieter. The lamplighter had not bothered to light the lanterns around them, and so the roads got dark.

That smell.

It was there again.

This time, it was more pungent. She could feel the sting in her nostrils. That definitely wasn't piss... but what could it be? Nadette looked around. She took deep breaths, trying to inhale as much of the smell as she could, hoping it would trigger something, anything in her mind.

Her friend suddenly stopped, interrupting her frantic thoughts. Elinora moved slowly. Nadette couldn't see, darkness obscured her sight. She could feel a strange presence around them. She groped for her sword.

Nadette heard something come out of Elinora's mouth, and from the way she said it, resembled a curse word.

Elinora pointed at the street, "Nad- it's blood."

Nadette didn't need to be told what the pool of dark red she saw was. There could be many explanations as to why there was a pool of blood in the middle of Valletta's roads, but all Nadette could think of was that it meant danger. She lifted her skirts

and grasped the sword at its hilt, ready to unsheathe it, when they suddenly heard loud screams. They both turned their heads in the direction the sound came from, which was back where the *karnival* was.

Elinora was the first to run. Sometimes it seemed like she was the one with the sword and not Nadette. She sighed and ran after her, heels be damned. She was ready for anything.

The crowd had gathered around a group of men. Nadette fought her way through their tentacle-like limbs, ready to break up whatever it was, until she saw what everyone was yelling about. She realised it wasn't screams that she had heard, but cheers. The man in the centre was dressed like a Jesuit of all things. He was covered in profanities and surrounded by men dressed as thieves. They pushed him around and pretended to beat him up. Everyone laughed and cheered in a drunken stupor at the scene. Nadette was enraged. It was neither at the people, nor at the stupid joke they were playing, but at the realisation that she was duped.

Was no one truly in danger?

Nadette looked around for her friend, but all she saw were masked strangers. Their voices were loud in her ear. She didn't understand.

Was the blood even real?

Did someone fall over and then get up before they had arrived?

It made no sense whatsoever. The blood puddle had been so large that... anyone who'd lost that much would have never been able to walk! She had to check again, to see if there was anyone near the scene. Nadette turned back, attempting to leave, but someone pushed her and she stepped on her skirt, causing her to fall over and land on someone's chest. Looking up she saw that it was Elinora.

"Are you all right?" She yelled over the crowd.

Nadette nodded. Was the blood just a false alarm?

Then they heard a hair-raising scream. This time, it was an actual scream. It was so loud in that moment that Nadette felt it pierce her ears like a sharp knife. No one

seemed to notice except for Nadette and Elinora, but they both gave each other a grave look and nodded in a silent agreement. Hands clasped firmly together, they pushed past the people and ran into the dark streets of Valletta.

The air was tense. Nadette could hear her breath come out in puffs to the accompaniment of her heels clicking against the stone.

“Maybe it’s another false alarm?” Elinora whispered, voicing Nadette’s recurring thoughts.

A young girl ran towards them. The mask on her face was broken. She was pale and trembling. Her dress was covered in *blood*. Upon further inspection, Nadette realised this was Genoveffa, a fisherman’s daughter from Marsaxlokk. She fell before them, speaking a mix of Italian and Maltese. Nadette couldn’t even understand her. She grabbed the woman’s arms and shook her back to sanity.

“*Calm down!*” She said firmly.

Genoveffa gave her a wide stare. She was still shaking, but at least her words were no longer frantic. She pointed behind her, in the direction she came running from.

“*M-mostru-!*” She said.

Recognition sparked on Elinora’s face. “Monster?” she said.

Nadette nodded. She took out her sword and proceeded to take a defensive stance.

Elinora took a deep breath. “Let’s go,” she said.

Nadette could tell this situation was unnerving for both of them, but she knew how to hold on to a sword even when her hands grew clammy and wet. Whoever it was, they were ready. They ran, in case some else had been with Genoveffa when she was attacked. Elinora was beside her, and Nadette noticed the rapid rise and fall of her bust. She was relieved that Elinora was able to keep up with her, even though it was clear the run was a strain on her. Her mind raced with an influx of thoughts. What was happening? Why was that woman covered in blood? She had said she’d seen a monster but... could she be referring to something else? It was dark, people were drunk, the woman must have been attacked by a man or a thief. Maybe even some drunken knight who had forgotten his virtues.

She immediately stopped to a halt when they noticed the hunched figure that blended into the darkness before them.

It stood over the dead body of a man.

It looked like it was... *eating* him.

It was no man.

The large and ugly creature cocked its body as if it had heard them. It turned its head towards them; blood dripped from its mouth. It was large and scrawny, its skin a pale sickly grey, with sunken eyes staring at them all large and black, like the endless bottom of a well. Nadette almost soiled her loins. Which circle of hell did this monster crawl out from? She braced herself. She was a knight and her duty was to protect the people. Creature or not she would not let this *thing* run free.

The creature puffed up its chest and hissed at them. The half eaten body of that poor man was forgotten beside it in favour of new prey.

Nadette raised her chest just the same. She gripped the sword but did not move. Was it going to attack? Would it run away? She knew she would be ready for anything. Elinora trembled beside her. Neither of them dared speak. At least the thought of sirens existing was much more believable now. Nadette resolved to apologise later; now, she needed to think. Was this a demon before them? Her grandmother used to tell her all sorts of tales about monsters to get her to sleep; could one of them have been based on fact? She stared at the creature's scrawny limbs. Its eyes were a cloudy white, like dead fish. They were soulless and yet bloodlust was written all over them.

It hit her then; the image as clear as the distance between her and the creature. She remembered what it was. Where she'd seen it, this exact creature. Her grandmother owned a book of beasts, which little Nadette had mistaken for a book of creepy stories. She had taken it to her grandmother, eager to listen to one of them, but the old woman had snatched the book from her hands and gave her a stern scolding. She was never allowed to touch that book. As her grandmother closed the book, her eyes had fallen on a singular page.

Gadajdu.

“Get behind me!” Nadette yelled. The creature prepared to lunge at them. Its hind legs were ready for the pounce. She held the sword before her and pulled Elinora

away. The gadajdu's speed was unlike anything she had ever seen. One moment it was beside the corpse, and the next its disgusting face was mere inches away from Nadette's face. It hunched over them, and she realised just how large this creature was when the back of her neck strained from looking up.

The creature swung its freakishly long arms at her throat and Nadette blocked with her sword as well as she could. She slashed her sword upwards, aiming for its neck, knowing that she had to be careful since she wasn't wearing any armour. One hit from that thing and she'd be joining La Valette under the Grandmaster's Palace.

Elinora had somehow snuck away from behind her, while she and the gadajdu were preoccupied with each other. She now stood on the other side of the monster.

“Over here!” She yelled.

Nadette wanted nothing more than to strangle her at that moment, not only for putting herself in danger, but also for being a genius. Elinora clapped her hands and made a copious amount of noise to get the monster's attention on her. She even bravely took off her mask and chucked it at the creature. That's when the gadajdu turned its head.

The creature took a deep haggard breath and screeched at Elinora, readying its hind legs, but before it could even pounce at her, Nadette slid under it and brought her sword up towards its neck. The blade came out the other end smoothly, and the gadajdu screamed in agony. Nadette removed her sword and plunged it into its heart, splattering black blood all over her. Her dress was no longer the hue it was before. Removing her sword and taking a step back, she watched the creature fall to its knees. Its eyes were still hollow and dead like a fish's as it stared at them. The girls watched as the creature's body contorted and disintegrated into ash, leaving a heap of black dust behind it. Sheer seconds of silence followed.

Elinora let out a tired laugh as she uttered that swear word again. “Of course it disappears!” She rested her hands on her hips as she looked down at the floor where the monster once was.

“At least it's gone.” Nadette's shoulders sagged. She was never fighting in a dress ever again. She looked around and listened to the quiet. The creature seemed to have acted on its own. Nadette's skin prickled like a cactus at the thought of encountering another.

“What was that abomination?” Elinora asked, “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“A *Gadajdu*,” she replied, staring at the poor boy’s mangled corpse. He was unrecognisable. She had no idea how they were going to explain this to the other knights. “They’re creatures that hide in dark corners and wait for unsuspecting bystanders to pounce on. They’re... things of legends... I never thought they’d be real.”

“I told you these things aren’t just old wives’ tales, Nadette.” Elinora took her hand, the one that wasn’t holding a bloody sword. “These things are as real as us standing right here.”

The words sent a shiver up her spine, feeling as though a spider was softly crawling up her back.

These things were real. There was no denying it. She had just killed one... and no one would ever know.

Nadette took a deep breath. “Let’s return to Genoveffa. We need to tell her that... he’s gone.” She didn’t know who he was to her but if he was someone important, the poor girl deserved to know.

Elinora nodded and they started heading back. Their hands remained clasped together. *They’re real.* She couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Genoveffa was where they had left her, but she seemed to have calmed down. Her face was dry and red from her previous teary exchange. She stared at them with large eyes. She didn’t need to speak, none of them did. The silence was enough to tell Genoveffa what had happened to the man. Her wail echoed through the streets of Valletta. She clutched her skirt and sobbed his name loudly. Nadette felt numb as she stared down at the poor woman.

The knight’s oath rang in her mind.

A knight must be respectful, selfless, open, devoted, and, they must exude excellence. But, above all... they must be able to slay monsters.

Sign

by Giles Goodland

Graphically little separates
short from snort.

A stem.

Archaic rain;
speaking of which
do you speak
sign?

Then put your hands out,

feel the clouds.

The Elders

by HR Harper

... smile insouciantly,
though they sweeten the day
when you walk by and mostly
ignore their slow movements.

You catch their eyes briefly
and you both nod as though
some recognition were possible.

They've tricked you.

You think their smile is a form of ignorance.

But behind your back they gather
to laugh at your own end,
at the destruction of ego
to come in the fire they fuel
quietly.

They move slowly
so you will not notice
this rebellion
in their disappearing bodies.

Before Winter

by HR Harper

A registered letter arrives. He tosses it on the laptop.
It's August, no need to open it yet, he reasons.
He wants to open the letter in time, with care.
He suspects seasons will fall out.
Spring, green and itchy.
Summer, sweaty and exhausting.
Fall, illuminating the body's sadness.
Winter, the deep unknowing skin.
He knows he's wrong about time --
now that the sunlight falls on its side.
He'll never make it to winter solstice,
but he pretends the days lengthen.
He rolls seasons up like sleeves,
and marches up his imaginary hill.
He thinks the lie we all will tell is hard work.
We say it's a letter opener, but it's a murder weapon.
Then the letter opens on its own
and the days he does not live spill out.

Flower Haiku

by Joshua St Claire

September comes
a gypsy moth
in the sweet clematis

toadflax
glittering by the highway underpass
syringes

goldenrod and pokeberry
a door opens
to the next world

aster
risk

first heat dancing in the scent of stolen lilacs

mariposa
I slip
into Erehwon

last St. John's flower
it begins
with putting on the mask

bowing
into the wave
spatterdock

Titawin
the last chrysanthemums
in the first frost

Tree Haiku

by Joshua St Claire

at the root of the red pine the absence of mountain

sowing
the wind
Bradford pear

hurricane remnants
the weeping willow
now a Van Gogh

mapleshadow
going where I cannot
the Susquehanna

a path I do not know the scent of falling leaves

tree whisper cloud panorama

night shifting
in the oaks
a fisher cat

the only remaining snow
spruceshadow

all day rain
at the foot of the elm
the remains of a cloud

the
hemlock's
roots
breaking
through
the
shale
age
of
consent

Stalking the Garden Sunbird

by Roger B. Rueda

In the gloss of morning's first breath,
a sunbird blurs through the bougainvillea,
a sudden thought in flight. Its wings
hum their luminous hymn, each stroke
an epiphany. It needles
the pink blooms with purpose,
an incandescent hunger so sharp,
so tender, it borders on the holy.
In its world, beauty and hunger
are one. It drinks deep, as if
from the veins of the divine,
its small body carrying
both the burden of light
and the ache of survival.
The garden holds its breath.
Leaves lean close, green ears
straining for the whisper of wings.
Even the sun, stilled by awe,
softens its blaze to watch
this fleeting fragment of itself.
And I, too, become the garden—
rooted, trembling, a vessel of want.
Oblivious to my quiet reverence,
the sunbird flits on. Its smallness
contains the weight of worlds. It is
a map of escape, a moving hymn
to boundlessness. And yet,
I cannot let it go.
I follow, breath held like a prayer,
my shadow swallowed in the vine-dark path.
I disturb nothing, not the rhythm

of its wings nor the ritual of its hunger.
Still, my presence stains the air.
I am no seeker of birds;
I am a thief of its freedom,
chasing the grace it carries,
the way it holds the sky as its own.
It pauses—an ember suspended
against the blue—and then disappears
into the labyrinth of green.
I am left with nothing but
the tremor of its flight, the afterglow
of its movement. My hands,
empty. My heart, a heavier thing.
The garden exhales. Silence returns,
steady as the turning earth.
I walk back, the sunbird now etched
into the margins of my story, though
I will never be etched into its.

Our Torchbearers

by *Abdullahi Buba*

They were humane, full of promises
When they came campaigning
Shedding crocodile tears to our plights
Of lacking this, lacking that
They promised to provide these and those lacks
They promised free:
Education
Healthcare delivery
Security to lives and properties
To boost agricultural sector
To provide millions of jobs
To train youth to be skilfully empowered
To provide enough petrol at affordable prices
To mend the gap between the haves and the haves-not
To house every citizen
To improve standards of living
But said our ballot would bail us

Yes! We succumb to their pledges
We gave them our votes
They climbed the stairs of power
Schools shut down
Teachers sacked
Healthcare services deteriorated
Vices multiplied
Agriculture abandoned
Youth neglected
Petrol scarce, expensive
Rich-poor margin widened
Masses camped on town outskirts
Standard of living deteriorated

Their riches multiply manifold
Their children school oversea
They travel abroad for medical checks
They siphoned security to their domain
They purchased farmlands and abandoned them
They built and purchased houses
They compete in buying the latest car
Their standard of living improved
Through our ballots

Ophelia Talketh Back

by Illiria Osum

after Shakespeare and Atwood

A likely madness: the boy-king unwed,
unfeeling but in his search for his father's
revenge. He thinks I do not know, but I
have never been so stupid as I feign.

*Rosemary for remembrance, rue in place
of sorrow.* Do remember, love, to come
again into my bed. Lament, my love,
and in your sorrow, become a king. Reign.
—Zounds, but the verse is narrow. Ten syllables
per line is all I'm granted? Thinking
iamb only is the limit. Am I
relegated then to sonnets and their
ilk? I can't. I won't. I ask, demand for
something else. Remember me. I'll rue no more.

Unpeel me from
the corset of my
language.

If Hamlet is mad,
then Gertrude is a murderous whore.

If Gertrude is a murderous whore,
then Ophelia is borderline.

If Ophelia is borderline,
she made the whole thing up because she's got attachment problems and
therapy won't be invented for another few hundred years, not to mention
Freud's a cuck, I mean, a cock, I mean, a crook.

If Ophelia made the whole thing up—
No, no, no.
That too is a form.
I won't have it

release me from my twice-womanned body |
deflowered by my own hand | *rue and rosemary hey nonny nonny | violets and*

pansies hey nonny nonny | my prince erected I mean elected to his position by the grace of God | I long at last to be formless | return me from the endless hysterical shriek of my backwards position | get thee to a nunnery you said | well get thee from missionary asshole | speaking of assholes I thought you were studying Greek at university | you'd think you and Horatio would have practiced | *fraternitas* | that's Latin isn't it | I never learned but my mother's tongue | instead you come fumbling into me at the witching hour | your mouth a prudish bud closed tight in refusal | in the hour that by hystorical right should be mine | only this need only this once you say each time | and each time I float from you in amniotic serenity | if a man's home is his castle then the castle is a woman's battlefield | if a woman's battlefield is the castle and the castle is a man's home then the woman's body is also a battlefield | QED | oh that's Latin too | a woman's body is ruled by Latin and Greek though we cannot speak them | FEMINA: how does the skin conform | γυναικός: how does the womb perform | my uniform embodied | ruled for all my life by tongues denied me | though you spoke five languages Hamlet you were no cunning linguist | *rue and rosemary* *hey nonny nonny* | madness is an armor granted to the tongueless and stolen by Freud

French Doll

by Jennifer Choi

On a *foggy night* at the film festival,
I walk on a *yellow carpet* of crisping ginkgo leaves,
slipping quietly from the *platform of night*.
A little tired, my voice barely a *whisper*.

Cradling a *torn paper bag*,
I wait for the *high-speed train* on the platform,
my life pressed into a *simple, crumpled bag*.
Ready to leave? *Luggage is nothing*, only a light, empty promise.

A garden with no flowers unfolds over my *knees*,
your ears, perfect and neat, but the *paper blanket* feels hollow,
its corners fraying like a *garden that has forgotten its bloom*.
A worn-out *British tabloid* drapes across my lap.

Charles and Diana's wedding—
I read it over and over,
but the *emblem on the white horse* never arrives.
Instead, cars at the *drive-thru* order hamburgers,

Twenty-four hours
of hamburger photos, crispy fries, a *paper cup* smudged with lipstick,
crumpled napkins, bent *plastic straws*—
I will miss them all.

When morning comes,
a young part-timer will find me,
a *paper doll* slouched in a *plastic chair*,
my life as light as paper,

Waiting for a train that never comes.
Wasting time,
proof that I've been here,
on this *dull star*.

My *McDonald's* is still unfinished.

Unfinished Exit

by Claudia Wysocky

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me

a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.

And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.

You haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
whom you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude

in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.
So even though you haven't
found the perfect ending yet,
you keep writing.
For Catherine, for yourself, for all the lost
souls
who never got their own
missing person's poster.
Because as long as there are words on a page,
there is still hope for an unfinished exit
to find its proper
ending.

Someone Call Security

by Susana H Case

This life I've lived is sheltered—no rope
around the neck, no gun, no burning.
No sudden knife to leave a gash

through those I love. I'm surrounded
by just the usual, heart attacks and strokes,
the way I'll probably go, too, the deaths

that come from bad diets, too much late-
night drinking. I've had no direct
experience of mass death, a special hell

for the living, details of each victim lost
when there's so much dying. A wall
of skulls built by those who remain

after an invasion. Virus-ridden corpses
abandoned on the street. Migrants'
bones picked clean by desert scavengers.

I mean by us. So many
deaths are heroic. The living plant seeds
in the earth, try to grow impossible gardens.

Sustenance

by Susana H Case

Because tattoos are associated
with gangsters, I'm not allowed
in the public *onsen*

of the hotel in Hakone, only the smaller
private one—for me and a woman
with a butterfly inked on her shoulder.

We are not family, nor close—
enough friends for nakedness in a thermal
pool, but we make small talk,

pretend not to stare, as if we do this
all the time. My knees, bruised
from a fall, welcome healing

among wet stones and dark wood,
the purification of sulfur.
It's work to clear my mind: I worry

about amoebic encephalitis in the water,
worry that I'm close to fainting from
the heat. I sneak looks at the pucker

from a pacemaker on the woman's chest.
And you, always more cautious,
have declined to soak, prefer to sip

at the bar instead. When I leave the bath,
wrapped in a hotel kimono, I see you
standing, relaxed, at the entrance,

your red in one hand. In the other, for me,
a glass of matcha, full of antioxidants, as if
I were a samurai returning from battle.

Be Purple

by Rory Doherty

The old cop enjoyed driving Turtle Pond Parkway in the fall but not today, not with traffic bunged up and the sun sparking a glare across his windshield that pained his eyes and worried him about an oncoming headache. Fall was the old cop's favorite season, and foliage along Turtle Pond Parkway, despite the sun's glare, was brilliant, stunning, arresting. Reds and oranges popped from maple trees beyond counting, yellows ribboned from a grove of river birch, dark reds and undulate purples, regal and rich, flowed from sugar maples. God's canvas, the old cop thought, infinite hues, perfect mix, inspired placement. "Damn, the glare," he cussed aloud. "And fuck the traffic!" The old cop braked his blue station wagon to a fast full stop for only God knew why. A sour mood began to take hold.

'...last half, detail one, home for nap, detail two, home by seven, sleep 'til eleven, rinse and repeat...' danced like a tired rhyme through the old cop's mind and escaped with his breath like a half-ass mantra as he drove home from detail one for his beloved afternoon nap along Turtle Pond Parkway, a sinuous, two-lane road that snaked through West Roxbury, Hyde Park and Dedham.

His station wagon, an old rusted and dented Ford Country Squire, sputtered and stalled at the intersection of Turtle Pond Parkway and High Street. He double pumped the gas, gave it a second, and on the third pump, restarted the wagon. A crowd was gathering ahead on the southeast corner of the intersection. Probably a traffic accident, he thought. In uniform but off duty, the old cop thought mostly of home and his afternoon nap. A traffic accident was no concern of his.

More people gathered. Some ran to the scene. An elderly woman spun from the crowd, hand to her mouth. Sunlight beamed through the wagon's windshield and changed the color of the old cop's eyes from blue-grey to light blue. He shaded his eyes to better see. The elderly woman wore a plastic cover, bright pink, over her headful of blue curlers. Several vehicles had pulled off both sides of the road.

Definitely an accident. No Siren. No concern of his. Another person, a female, a red head, about the same age as his middle daughter Kelli, also a red head, turned from the crowd with a look of horror.

“Mother-fucking-son-of-a-bitch,” the old cop yelled into his windshield as he slapped down hard on his blue steering wheel. He made an abrupt U-turn and pulled his station wagon off the road, driving fully up onto the sidewalk just east of the crowd and clear of the traffic still undulating along the tight curves of Turtle Pond Parkway.

The old cop’s knees groaned, his hips ached, and his feet burned as he unwound every bit of his six-four frame from the front seat of his station wagon to deal with whatever it was he must deal with. He put on his police hat and walked toward the crowd that parted as he approached.

“Has someone called for an ambulance?” he asked. He received no reply. Still no siren. “Did anyone call the police?” he asked again, and again, he was met with blank stares and silence. The old cop took in what he now must deal with and wished he had not stopped. He wished like holy hell he had just kept driving. Dear God, he thought. Ten fucking minutes from home, now fucking this. “Someone please call 911,” the old cop pleaded, pissed at himself for leaving his phone in the car.

Linda yelled from their back porch for the old cop to junk that ‘piece-of-shit-blue-beast’ every time she watched him labor away on the old station wagon. She took her Virginia Slims and a thermos of coffee onto their back porch whenever she heard him gathering tools. The old cop and his wife talked best while he powered bolts loose, tightened radiator clamps and patched exhaust-pipes with soup cans, him lying on his back in the driveway amidst tools, oil stains, fallen leaves and pine needles and her leaning over the railing of their back porch with coffee and cigarette in hand and the sun at her back, husband and wife shaded by a few mature oaks and a cluster of towering pines.

A motorcycle accident. High-speed, violent. A severed leg still wearing denim jeans cantered nonchalantly against the base of a weeping pine tree. Two victims. Both bad off.

Victim one was balled up onto both knees, arms angled out and back like airplane wings, or better still, like an angel cast down from heaven, cast down with vengeance. Both palms facing upward like a supplicant in reverence. The head, still sheathed in a cracked black helmet, unnaturally crooked between bent knees as if praying in secret. Broken Back. Broken neck. Broken Halo. Fatal.

The other body, victim two, was lying on his back surrounded by onlookers who did nothing other than gawk and gasp. One arm, the right arm, of victim two was severely broken, twisted, distorted, dislocated at the shoulder, wrenched in a pile, a ball, underneath and behind his back; the other arm draped over the forehead portion of a blue helmet as if holding a swoon pose. One leg upright, bent at the knee, seemingly unscathed, dressed in denim. The other leg gone, missing, shorn off high on the thigh, almost at the pelvis. No movement. No blood. No sound from the victim. No help from onlookers. No siren.

For reasons he did not understand, the old cop thought first about tending to the lone leg leaning against the weeping pine tree like nobody's business. He wondered if he should first secure the leg, keep it foot down and thigh up so as not to spill the living blood.

Sixty-two-year-old Sergeant Pete O'Malley had worked nights, the last half -- midnight to eight, on the Boston Police Force for thirty-seven years. He had originally signed on for nights to spend more time with his seven kids, now all adults piling up grandkids – 14 and counting. The old cop stayed on nights to keep his days free for working details. He was used to the good money details paid, and being a creature of habit, he thrived on routine. When the old cop kissed his wife goodbye before heading off to work, Linda always told him to 'be purple.' Careful was purple because years ago his oldest child David, still a toddler, gave him a kiss goodbye and said, "be purple, Daddy." Linda telling him to be purple after he kissed her goodbye was a staple in the old cop's routine whenever he left the house.

Victim two's eyes fluttered and opened.

"You've been in an accident," the old cop said, "You are badly hurt, but you are going to be fine," he said. "What is your name?"

Victim two moaned. His eyes widened in terror. His good arm, the left arm, reached for his injured leg, the missing leg. The old cop caught victim two's hand, cold and pale, before it discovered the stump. He folded victim two's cold hand and good arm against his chest. Victim two's eyes widened in terror and panic.

"Tell me your name?"

He tried to answer. His mouth opened. His lips smacked together. He moaned but could not manage words, as if the breath had been knocked out of him and had not returned. He tried to sit up but could not. He had no leverage. The old cop kept victim two flat on his back with nothing more than the weight of his left hand.

Victim two got out two words: "My brother."

"Your brother is getting help. Ambulances are on the way. Lie still and tell me your name?" The old cop looked at the severed leg. There was no blood. No blood from such a horrific and violent injury, the utter unnaturalness, made the old cop unsure of everything.

"David," victim two muttered. "My name is David."

"David, good. David. My son's name is David," the old cop said. David's eyes rolled back in his head.

"Keep your eyes open, David," the old cop used his dad voice, deep, sonorous, arresting, the voice he used whenever his son David needed to be rattled "Talk to me, David!" David eyes opened. His pupils were dilatated but even. No serious head injury, the old cop thought.

At that moment for its own reason a long thin arc of purple blood shot from David's leg wound, followed by another and then another. The old cop reached under his holster and fumbled with the buckle of the thin black belt that held up his pants. He took his left hand off David's chest and used both hands to pull his belt free. Dark purple spurted from David's leg. This was what the old cop expected, but the force and volume unnerved him. David's blood soaked the roadside sand surrounding them both. The old cop's head was down as he worked his belt into a loop. He noticed a rivulet of blood flowing as if drawn toward a clump of sooty grass that had found purchase in an asphalt crack. David thrashed. "Lie still," the old cop said. "Help is on the way." Still no siren. The old cop thought: How much living blood can one body spill, and where the fuck is the fucking ambulance? The burn of bile rose in his throat. He steeled himself by pulling a deep, long breath in through his nose.

Keeping the old blue station wagon on the road demanded a constant work. On his off days, rare days, the old cop welcomed the distraction of popping the wagon's expansive hood and leaning over the engine into the smell of boiling antifreeze, burnt oil and spent hoses. Family road trips flooded the old cop's memory when he worked on the station wagon – camping lakeside in New Hampshire, bonfires on the beach by the ocean down the Cape, and countless foliage trips, his favorite drives, along the Kancamagus Highway and Swift River through the White Mountains. Foliage in the White Mountains was spectacular, breathtaking, soul lifting. Singing with his wife and kids during foliage trips in the station wagon ranked high among the old cop's best memories.

With his belt looped loosely around his forearm, the old cop gathered up and squeezed together in his massive hand as much of David's stump as he could. He worked the loop of his belt down his forearm and over his fistful of bone, muscle and flesh. With his other hand, his right hand, the old cop cinched shut the loop on David's stump. Thankfully, miraculously, mercifully the makeshift tourniquet bit, and the violent spurts of blood stopped. More people had gathered at the scene of the accident, still no one offered help. The old cop's arms shook from the exertion. He wrapped the thin black belt several times around each hand for a better grip.

A man, a grungy street person, wearing a torn army fatigue jacket knifed through the crowd and squatted by David's head. He asked the old cop what he could do to help, his stare fixed on the old cop's hands. "I've got this," the old cop said. He could hear a siren off in the distance. "If you want to help, clear away some of these people so the EMTs can get through."

The man in the army fatigue jacket bounced in his squat. "They won't listen," he said. "They're here to see the show." He rapped tattooed knuckles on David's blue helmet. "It's a damn freak show, and you're the star, kid." His voice was high-pitched, nasally, excited, abrasive. A meth head, the old cop guessed.

David opened his eyes. "Is my brother okay," he asked.

The man in the army fatigue jacket leaned his skeletal head inversely over David's face. "He is spent, man. It is just you."

The old cop felt a slight give, a small slip, a slither of tightening in his makeshift tourniquet. He let his breath out after a few long seconds when no bleeding resumed. His arms shook. His cut-up knees stung. Sweat burned his eyes. His pants slipped on his rump.

The old cop still looked good, moved well. Every bit of hair on his head was a soft silver-grey, but his step was quick, sure-footed and his back did not want for pride. Knees that cracked, ached and did not flex so good pained him only when unwinding from his squad car. Hips weighted by holster, gun, cuffs, taser, flashlight and night stick hitched on occasion but did not hamper his gait. Feet that throbbed and burned by shift's end began the night with ample pad and spring and purpose. Three more years and he would be sixty-five years old with forty years on the force. Sixty-five/forty locked his pension at 80 percent of Sergeant's pay – the best retirement the city of Boston had to offer.

The old cop saw blue from keeping David's bleeding stopped. "Hey, fuck head," he yelled at the man in the army fatigue jacket. "Back the fuck off, now!"

The man stayed his ground. "Relax, blue. I am trying to help." He eased off David's helmet, unzipped David's jacket, loosened David's belt.

Sweat stung the old cop's eyes. He wiped them on his shoulders. The siren drew closer. The old cop wondered how far off the ambulance was, how soon it would arrive, and from which direction. He thought of his son David. He wondered where David was at that exact instant, if his son was okay. These thoughts went through the old cop's angry and uncertain mind as he maintained the cinch with everything he had left.

The army jacket guy popped up from his squat wiping his hands on his thighs. "Don't lose your grip, blue." He smirked a brown-toothed, wiseass smirk at the old cop. "You got this," he said. The old cop watched the man in the army fatigue jacket worm through the bystanders and out of sight. Two EMTs broke through the circle of onlookers with a backboard and gurney.

The old cop looked away as they fastened a tourniquet over the one he had fashioned with his belt. When the EMTs tapped his shoulder, and he could release tension on the thin belt wrapped around his purple hands, the old cop believed he would pass out. He shut his eyes and saw purple sparks. He could not catch his breath. His knees had locked. His arms were limp. His head hung to his chest where sweat and breath met. He felt sick. He felt alone. He felt old.

David back arched in a spasm of agony. He grabbed the old cop's hand as the EMTs lifted him onto the gurney.

"Easy, son," the old cop said, placing his hand on David's good shoulder, and then down onto David's chest, his madly pumping heart. "Everything will be okay." The old cop felt the depth and weight of his lie on every inch of exhausted flesh and spirit, his and David's.

"My wallet," David yelled, biting down and splitting his bottom lip, a blue lip, a split blue lip with edges of red that did not bleed.

The EMTs loaded David into the back of the ambulance. Before speeding off with its lights whirling and siren wailing and David sobbing, the ambulance spun its rear wheels, spraying sand and road grit at the old cop still on his knees in a river of David's blood.

The old cop summoned the strength and will to stand, one locked knee and quivering leg at a time. He limped to his station wagon holding up his pants and collapsed into the front seat. He rested his head on his folded arms for five, maybe ten minutes and then double pumped the gas, gave it a second, and on the third pump started the wagon. He pulled hard on the blue steering wheel, and the old station wagon, low on power steering fluid, squealed like a stuck pig. The old cop cut off two-way traffic and executed an illegal U-turn to blaring horns at the intersection of Turtle Pond Parkway and High Street. A ticket was no concern of his. He drove home without the wagon stalling, his pant legs soaked with David's blood.

The old cop found Linda in their kitchen. He told his wife in as few words as possible about the accident. The old cop desperately wanted a hug, but Linda knew better. Along with 'be purple', no hugging after work while he was still in uniform was an

inviolate rule, part of his routine. “I don’t want to get any of my ‘work-nasty’ on you” is what he told his two sons and five daughters when they were young and could jump into his arms for a lift-me-up hug. The phone rang on his way up the stairs, one of the kids. He heard Linda telling of the accident, hurrying the call, her voice full of concern.

After a short while Linda came into the bathroom and found the old cop hunkered naked in front of the commode, heaves wracking his body. She said nothing and drew him a bath. When the heaves subsided, the old cop stepped into the bath and lowered himself inch by inch, letting the line of hot water sting alive the hair on his legs follicle by follicle and wash away David’s blood drop by drop. Once fully in the bath, his scraped knees screaming like holy hell, he sat silently while Linda soaped his back. Linda said nothing until the old cop’s breathing came easier, deeper, slower. When she spoke, she spoke of their children and grandchildren and of it being high time to junk that piece-of-shit-blue-beast of a station wagon.

The old cop took hold of his wife’s soapy hand. “I cannot do this anymore,” he told her. “How many years left on the house?”

“I do not want the house without you.” The old cop’s color had improved. His strength was returning. She could still heal him. “I’ll fix you a toddy,” Linda said. “And you are banging in sick tonight,” she commanded.

The old cop lifted Linda’s hand and eased her wedding ring over a soapy knuckle. “Don’t skimp on the whiskey,” he told his wife of forty years as he pressed his lips to the purple indentation the thin gold band had made in the flesh of Linda’s finger.

The Queen in the Mirror

by Srinjay Chakravarti

Smash the mirror of your soul
with your hauteur;
the flawless beauty of your queen

with a metal cup.

Let the quadrants of history
shatter with your fury.
Herein lies the prolepsis of fable.

Lead your soldiers into battle,
where death and eternal glory
await the brave—

the reward for your braggadocio.

Break the anvil of destiny
with the hammer of your words.

How can a sultan of Delhi
be ever worthy of your trust?

Padmini, unveiled,
stands next to a lotus pool—
and the emperor's hand reaches out
for the image of your queen.

Listen, O Rana,
to the fatal whispers of time,
to the vocabulary of the sultan's lust.

Fire waits hungrily to consume your hubris,
a burning pyre awaits
your queen's honour.

A blazing funeral for the living,
legends of glory for the dead.

Remember:
this is the price you must pay,
 O Rana,
for your wife's timeless beauty,
and for the innocence of your pride.

There are several oral and written legends about Padmavati (or Padmini), the Hindu queen of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar (at the cusp of the 13th and 14th centuries). She was the wife of Rawal Ratan Singh (or Ratan Sen), the Rana of Mewar. The historical authenticity of these legends, however, cannot be easily verified.

Padmavati was famed all over India for her unparalleled beauty. According to a very popular narrative, rumours reached Alauddin Khilji (1267?–1316), the Sultan of Delhi, that Padmavati was the most beautiful woman in the world. As a guest of the Rajput king, Khilji expressed his wish to meet the queen about whom he had heard so much. Padmini agreed on condition that the sultan should see only her reflection, and, that, too, alone, and in the presence of her husband and her handmaidens.

Padmini sat in a palace room at the edge of a pond. Khilji caught only a fleeting glimpse of the queen from a distance in the mirror over the water—but this glimpse was sufficient to ignite a ferocious lust in him for her. Smitten, Khilji's hand involuntarily reached out for her image. The furious Rana smashed the mirror and threw out the sultan.

A vengeful Khilji returned to devastate the capital Chittor. The Rajput army was decimated. Yet, the sultan of Delhi could not lay his hands on Padmini: facing certain defeat, Padmavati and all the women of the royal household of Mewar committed suicide so as to evade capture and protect their honour. Rather than enter the harems of the Sultanate, they immolated themselves *en masse* in burning funeral pyres (a practice known as jauhar).

The victorious sultan won only an empty fortress; enraged, he razed all the buildings in Chittor (1303 CE). Though Khalji did succeed in conquering Chittor for the Islamic Sultanate, he could not fulfil his personal ambition.

Abacus

by Steven Fortune

Tidal flex and activation
of the ocean
pectoral:

water fingers scratching
in frictionless futility
at land's ledge of sand.

The living magnet
of the beach;
a nexus of dramatic irony
and scientific insanity,
summer-laced lungs
rattling in gasps
of robotic reverence
for the sky slashed
by a censored sun
bleeding green horizon,
in which soldiers of
the season bathe.

March of The Inveterate.
Addiction by subtraction.
A habit rented
from an angry planet
in a favorable mood.

Eager Leaders

by Steven Fortune

Heed the freedom fighter that has grown
too fond of paying forward;
irony must not be given authorization
to nullify creation in its own image.

They cancel out their co-conspirators
so tactfully until the process of elimination
sells its soul to flame wars
of fan club sponsorship.

A kind of natural selection harnesses
the vulnerable through the chain
of eager leaders, stealthily accentuating
comfort zones along the way;
soon the evidence accrues and the tools
of depreciated purpose are exhumed, found
balled up and bagged with the stumps
of vestigial morals,
jutting from their weight like potato vines.

In the end the winners
are the ones who find enlightenment
in the darkest truth of humans
with a choice: in the biggest boardrooms
or the little booths where their seating plans
are drawn, people vote, not for who they like –
or even tolerate amid the context –
but against the ones they don't.

The voices of a bellowing debate
are the sounds of fate obliterating faith.

Eyes Have Tired

by Steven Fortune

They have tried
but they have tired.
They are broken then repaired
then repeated by the grace of
gaudy guidelines;
sealed into some elastic vacuum,
bloated on the calories
of stimulus, recycled
into gorging immortality.

Tried and questionably
true eyes have me wondering
how much of me is longing
to be reborn, while the rest
of me is pushing for retirement:
siphoning the mutual exclusion
from the has-beens
and the never-weres.

On the very soul
an infantry of urban billboards –
shooting glue of thick mortality –
are bidding in hostility for papering
rights.

Chaya or Kids

by Roshni Marath Jairaj

Afternoon Chaya on the stove, Amma wearily sits at the table, her hand within reach to adjust the dial.

I want to be in my bedroom, listening to Virgin Radio's top 10 English Pop hits of the hour-- silence is uneasy to live in.

Amma's conviction fills the air, 'When will you have kids?', a frequent discussion point having entered my mid-twenties.

Chaya simmers, concerns develop.

'Motherhood completes a woman' -- Amma's slogan.

Chaya rises like fear in the world, never knowing Roshni, only as someone's Amma.

'Not willing to listen; like father, like daughter'

Amma's conviction boils me.

From two, I learn to live amidst the screams of Dad angrily throwing toys at my weeping Amma, dodging him behind the bed. I hide behind the crevice of the door frame whimpering to stop.

Five, my parents wear me down before the world can with scolds and pinches under my arm.

Nine, being an only child makes me a therapist listening to Amma's regrets on the sofa and Dad's nagging in the car.

From 18, I chug Pankacha Kasthuri like water to calm my heart palpitations, unable to bear the brunt of Amma's sacrifice.

I carry the weight of many burdens, burying more as they come. Am I willing to birth kids to do the same?

Froth on the brink of the pot, temper seconds away from slipping my concerns, Amma turns off the gas. It stops.

Chaya comes down, she strains the leaves, hands me a cup.

I sip it, let the warmth burn the words off my tongue.

My reasons will never be enough

An Extra Dose of Benadryl Never Hurt Anyone, and Other Stellar Parenting Advice

by Shannon Frost Greenstein

There is nothing as terrifying
and exquisite
as a brand-new baby.

Rivers of oxytocin course through my limbic system.
I feel nearly manic
with serenity and love.

I am scared all the time.

My older sister, however,
is a medical professional
and a mother
and she has the answer to any question
I might possibly have to ask.

So on the eve of a six-hour drive to our very first vacation,
I naturally inquire of my sister
any methods she employs
for calming bored children in distressing situations.

“An extra dose of Benadryl,” she says, “never hurt anyone.”

This is the woman
who will only shop at Whole Foods
and who adheres like a fanatic
to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Although I end up choosing
not to sedate my baby with diphenhydramine hydrochloride,
it gets me thinking about other stellar parenting advice
I have been gifted since I gave birth.

“They’ll eat if they get hungry enough,” everyone believes,
although that will not apply years in the future
when my baby will be diagnosed
with Autism Spectrum Disorder
and would rather starve
than eat food which irritates his senses.

“Spare the rod and spoil the child,”
wrote Samuel Butler back in 1663,
but hurt people hurt people
and intergenerational trauma always tends
to circle back around.

My German grandmother used to say
that children should be seen not heard,
but have you *been* around children?
They are fucking *loud*.

“Here’s how to get your pre-baby body back,”
advises every website and blog post ever,
but your body is the last thing you are worried about
when your intrusive thoughts are informing you
that you are about to break your baby.

And everyone knows to sleep when the baby sleeps,
but no one thinks to tell you
that babies usually don’t fucking sleep.
And then they say
to be sure to “ask for help;”
“it takes a village,” they say,
“to raise a child.”

But everyone in our village
has kids and jobs and stressors, too,
and there is very little bandwidth
for anyone but me
to keep the house clean
and keep the baby alive.

Mothers are always told
not to judge each other’s parenting; “not until you walk a mile in her shoes.”
But the world has always judged women,
without offering any support,
so is it any wonder we turn on each other?

There's a million different aphorisms
the world bestows upon new parents.
Occasionally they help; occasionally they actually apply.

But every child is different, no day is ever the same;
and it turns out the only necessary constant
is love.

So though it might seem
to run counter to popular option,
the fact is that the truth remains...
an extra dose of Benadryl never hurt anyone.

Oh, to be Gwen Verdon in a Towel in a Cole Porter Show...

by Shannon Frost Greenstein

When I think about the Garden of Eden –
that twisted origin story of a felled Utopia
with its sinuous tangle of serpents and sin –
I do not picture rapture; I do not feel any elation at all.

But I have never been Gwen Verdon in a towel in a Cole Porter show.

When I think about the Golden Age of Broadway –
that inimitable microcosm of time and space
which, *creatio ex nihilo*, birthed art without precedent –
I am struck dumb by the talent; I feel myself yearn to perform.

And then I wish I were Gwen Verdon in a towel in a Cole Porter show.

When I think about my past –
that shit-show of discipline and classical dance training
defined by pointe shoes and Bob Fosse and rehearsal till I bled –
I wish I didn't still suffer from an eating disorder; but I would still do it all over again.

Dancers know what it means to be Gwen Verdon in a towel in a Cole Porter show.

Because for seven solid minutes in 1953 –
that 420-second fever dream after the *Garden of Eden* Ballet
in the middle of the musical and the midst of a quick change –
the theater stood to applaud for a half-dressed Gwen Verdon; the theater demanded an encore,

That's why Gwen Verdon was in a towel in a Cole Porter show.

And for those seven minutes –
during each and every one of those 420 seconds
after an entire lifetime of sweat and toil and blood –
everything was suddenly exactly as it should be; everything was suddenly redeemed.

There must be nothing better than being Gwen Verdon in a towel in a Cole Porter show.

So when I say my greatest ambition in this world –
that image that serves to give me hope
wherein I might someday be Gwen Verdon in a towel in a Cole Porter show –
it is not at all about the towel.

It is about feeling *alive*.

Spine

by David McVey

Torquil reached out a hand towards the bookcase, to a book on the middle shelf, and slowly ran an index finger down its spine, pausing on the embossed shapes that were the letters of the author's name. It felt good to do this; his finger, his name.

The office door flew open and Danny Steel hurtled in. Torquil's publisher was portly, wore expensive yet ill-fitting suits, always seemed to be sweating, always hurried and was always late. Torquil pulled his arm back from the spine of the book and felt himself blushing guiltily, like a schoolboy caught smoking behind Maths Hut B.

'Sorry I'm late, Torky, got held up - meetings, eh? Marian look after you, offer you coffee and all that?'

'Er, no, she didn't, actually...'

'Good, good,' said Danny, avoiding eye contact and rummaging amongst the mess of paper on his desk, 'have to look after the talent, eh? Ah!' With a triumphant exhalation he picked up a piece of paper with a few paragraphs printed on one side.

'What's this, Danny?' said Torquil, 'Is it *Code Violation*?'

'Well, yeah, kinda,' said Danny, 'You know, you're some guy, Torky. I mean, you're one of our most, er, *prestigious* authors. All those challenging, uh, *literary* novels. You earn us a lot of, er, good reviews. And when we ask you to try something different, something popular, more *commercial*, you come up with the best thriller we've ever seen. It's gonna be huge! But...'

'There's a *but*?'

'No, nothing like that, Torky. We sorta decided you needed a new pen name for this, something to distinguish *Code Violation* from your, er, other work.'

‘So that it doesn’t harm the credibility of my serious novels?’

‘Absolutely. Yeah. Kinda,’ said Danny. ‘Well, no, not really. We just figured that if your real name went on it, it might put Joe Skybox off, make Hollywood less keen to film it. You know how people hate brainy stuff.’

‘Do they?’

Danny’s sweaty brow glistened in the sun streaming through the window. Torquil rested his chin in his hands and thought. Then he noticed that Danny was still clutching the sheet of paper and he asked, ‘What’s on the document, Danny?’

‘Ah, that,’ said Danny, ‘It’s a name; your *nom de plume* for the thriller. And, er, a little biography we’ve drafted.’

‘A biography?’

‘Yes. We felt - me and Solly - that it might be better to make up a new identity to go with the new name. You know, some entirely new guy who writes mystery thrillers with action and car chases and shooting and stuff.’

‘Solly.’ said Torquil, pensively. ‘One of these days I might switch to an agent who *consults* me about things. So tell me, who am I?’

‘You’re Chester Ridgeway - good name, huh? Strong. Masculine. Have a look.’

He took the paper, thinking that ‘Chester Ridgeway’ was, indeed, a long way from ‘Torquil Grant’. He read the brief passage, breathing more heavily as he got closer to the end.

Chester Ridgeway is an IT consultant from Surrey and *Code Violation* is his first book.

Chester is 35 and has always been interested in espionage and counter-espionage. He has worked as a cybersecurity consultant for the British Secret Service. As such, it is important to protect his identity. Chester Ridgeway is not his real name.

[Well, thought Torquil, that bit is true at least]

Chester lives near Chertsey with his long-term civil partner and is active in a number of gay causes.

‘I’m gay? You’ve made me *gay*?’

‘Well, yeah.’ Danny frowned. ‘I hope you’re not *homophobic*, Torky?’

Torquil paused, composed himself, and said, ‘I’ve asked before, Danny, *please* don’t call me “Torky”.’

‘Hey, no need to get sore, Tork... Torquil. Now, you see the stuff about Chester being an ex-spook? That explains why he never makes public appearances and stays outta sight. Clever, huh? And you get to rake in the money but everyone still thinks you only write... well, the kind of stuff you *do* write.’

Code Violation was published amid an explosive publicity campaign from which the author was strangely absent. Sales were impressive. Within a few months the paperback edition came out; great piles of it appeared on the shelves of WH Smith and just as quickly disappeared. The eBook became Danny’s company’s biggest ever electronic seller.

Torquil’s wife, Ilona, was a Lecturer in Transcultural Intertextual Studies. She showed little interest in his literary work and was even more dismissive about his new popular success. Torquil tried to ease the tension by being apologetic about *Code Violation*, while pointing out how the royalties would ensure they were even more financially comfortable. And he refrained from asking, again, what ‘Transcultural Intertextual Studies’ actually was.

‘I thought,’ he said, ‘that with the money we’re saving now, we could manage a holiday in Strathspey this summer.’ He pictured a few weeks spent relaxing and hillwalking and visiting friends and family.

Ilona looked up from the pile of books and journal articles she was consulting for her in-progress PhD and snorted, ‘Scotland? Not bloody likely. Never again. If you’re loaded you can take us to the Caribbean. What would Isla do in those bloody Highlands of yours?’

Torquil sighed. Brad McQueen, the hero of *Code Violation*, would get more respect than this from his wife, if he had one. This, he pondered, was a moot point; was he married? In the limited space available for backstory in *Code Violation* such details had not been explored. Perhaps in the sequel?

Just a few days later, Torquil was back at his publishers, in the contracts department, discussing the advance for the Brad McQueen sequel and the terms for his next literary work. Solly was good at these things but it didn't do to let him too far off the leash, as Torquil had learned over the Chester Ridgeway affair. After the meeting he decided to pop upstairs to see Danny.

He emerged from the lift and was greeted by Marian, Danny's smilingly capable PA. 'He's in a meeting, Torquil,' she said, 'but he shouldn't be long. Have a seat.'

'Who's with him, Marian?'

Marian smiled an uncomfortable smile, 'I think I'd better let *him* tell you.'

The tense silence was broken when Danny's door opened. The first person to emerge was a tall, muscular man in his mid-thirties, dressed in clean but rustic tweeds with an AIDS ribbon on one lapel. He was followed out by two other men, younger, dark-suited, but even taller and more muscular. The two younger men walked on either side of the tweedy one, who looked like he was under arrest. None of the three spoke.

'Who was that?' asked Torquil, once he was inside Danny's office.

Danny smiled uneasily. 'The chap in tweeds? That was Chester Ridgeway.'

'What?'

'Bit of a situation came up, Torky. People in the security community read the author bio on *Code Violation* and contacted us. They said that if the story was true, Ridgeway needed protection in case his cover was blown. What were we supposed to say? Tell the secret squirrels that it was all a lie, that there is no Chester Ridgeway and risk it all coming out? No, so we hired an actor to play him, and these chaps will protect him when he's out and about.'

Torquil's head swam. He wrote fiction, but he wasn't used to being in it.

'I'm Chester Ridgeway,' he said, 'and I don't exist!'

'I know,' Danny smiled, 'Crazy thing, huh?'

The following day Torquil was at home in London, working at his desk. He heard a noise at the door and turned to see his daughter Isla standing there, looking at him with a sullen expression.

‘I thought you wrote that *Code Violation* crap?’ she said.

‘You’ve *read* it?’ said Torquil with genuine surprise.

‘Of course not! Mum said it sucked. Totally. And, anyway, she says writers don’t matter. Their work is just,’ and here she paused to get the words right, ‘*socially constructed*.’

‘Thanks for your support, Isla.’

‘Anyway you lied. You didn’t write it. The guy who wrote it is dead.’

The story had even made the half-hourly summary on the BBC News Channel and was running along the ticker on the bottom of the screen - ‘Gay Ex-spoak Thriller Writer Dies in M-way Pile-up’. There had been a multiple car smash and the hapless actor playing his last role had been killed instantly. The car behind his - with the two men from the security services, Torquil guessed - had also been involved and one occupant had been killed. Somehow, in the post-crash confusion, it must have got out that one of the victims was Chester Ridgeway, and the media had gone public with it.

Torquil texted Danny, and texted him again when he didn’t reply, and then again and again. The Chester Ridgeway brand was dead - unless, perhaps, Torquil could assume another name and ‘complete’ some story ideas allegedly found among Ridgeway’s papers? He tried phoning. According to the switchboard, Danny wasn’t available.

The following evening, Ilona and Isla went off to a Transcultural Intertextual Issues Seminar at a local college. Torquil was enjoying the quietness, tapping away happily at his keyboard, when the doorbell rang. On the doorstep, wrapped tightly in voluminous raincoats, like characters in bad spy fiction, were Marian and Solly.

‘You’re in trouble, Torquil,’ said Marian as soon as the door was open, ‘Let us in and we’ll explain.’

They sat facing each other, Torquil on one sofa, Solly and Marian on the other. The visitors left their raincoats on, didn’t even unbutton them.

‘You’ve heard about Chester Ridgeway?’ said Solly.

‘I’ve heard about the actor playing him.’

‘Poor man,’ said Marian, ‘It was his biggest ever role.’

‘Well, he played a policeman in *Emmerdale*, once,’ corrected Solly.

‘So what’s the problem?’ said Torquil.

‘The spook who survived seems to have blabbed about Ridgeway while he was dopey on painkillers,’ said Solly, ‘Some weasely journalist picked it up. Chester Ridgeway can’t write any more. He never lived, but now he’s dead.’

‘That’s OK. I can write thrillers under another name.’

‘Hold on, Torquil, let Marian tell you what she knows.’

‘Torquil,’ said Marian, reaching out and taking his hand, ‘Danny’s hired a contract killer to rub you out.’

‘Contract killer? *Rub me out?*’

‘Obviously I don’t want to alarm you, but...’

‘Marian, this is *publishing*, it’s not the *mob*!’

‘Torquil, publishing *is* the mob. Penguin, HarperCollins, Random House, they’re all in the pockets of organised crime. People are murdered all the time in publishing. Up to now you’ve been shielded from it because you’re in literary fiction, books that no one buys or reads. You’re no use to Danny now. Your literary books lose money and you *know* about Chester Ridgeway. He needs you taken out.

‘Danny’s my friend, Marian, my *publisher*. He wouldn’t do anything bad.’

‘Publishers can do whatever they want,’ said Solly.

‘Are you suggesting that some other publisher might have caused the crash that killed the guy they thought was Chester Ridgeway?’

Solly shrugged his shoulders slyly. ‘It *might* have been an accident, but some guys in publishing think that if another writer at another company is selling loads, people must be buying less of their stuff so... who knows?’

You have to run, Torquil,' said Marian, 'In some ways it's the chance you've been waiting for. You and Ilona need to split up. You're a writer, a creator; she doesn't understand that. You're a Presbyterian boy, she's an atheist. You earn most of the money and she resents it. You wish you could move back in Scotland, Ilona doesn't recognise any life outside the M25...'

'Yes and Isla hates me as well, said Torquil, 'I hope you're going somewhere with this.'

'Go back to Scotland, Torquil, find somewhere quiet, somewhere they won't find you. Change your name. Write - Solly will find deals for both the literary stuff and the thrillers. And this conversation never happened, OK?'

The money from *Code Violation* funded Torquil's move north and Ilona and Isla seemed happy to see him go, and happy to accept the handsome royalties he made over to them. Yet even months later, Torquil struggled to believe that publishing really was a blood-drenched gangster demi-monde. He moved to a small cottage on the southern slopes of the Monadhliath, a couple of miles north from Kingussie on a narrow road.

The new thriller was almost complete, now, a rollicking affair where a mild-mannered novelist hired an actor to carry out his personal appearances. Then the actor was murdered, everyone believed the novelist himself was dead and his publishers sent hit men after him.

Solly was coming north by the Highland Chieftain from King's Cross to discuss the novel and the author's new persona. Torquil's cottage was too small to take guests, so they had booked rooms in the Duke Hotel in Kingussie. Torquil, who didn't drive, packed a holdall, his laptop and a document case and travelled to town by taxi. The drivers all knew him by now. Some remembered him from his youth, but the younger ones, and the Poles who had moved into the area, were fascinated by this affable, mysterious newcomer. He must have seemed like some donnish retired spymaster from a le Carré novel. Which, as it turned out, wasn't so far from the truth.

He checked into the Duke and unpacked. He looked at his watch - nearly ten past seven. If it was on time, the Chieftain would already be rumbling towards Kingussie. He put on his jacket and patted his shoulder. The gun felt snug and comforting in its holster. Solly had warned him that some of the big London publishers might be tailing him as he headed north, and so Torquil should pack heat.

Torquil strode out into the sharp autumn evening, whistling. It was just a short walk to the station and when he arrived he found it was quiet, just a few people waiting for the Chieftain. 'Sam Power' was the author name he favoured for his new thriller - strong, crisp, easy to remember. He hoped Solly would like it.

The rails sang and the headlights of a substantial train appeared at the end of the long straight from Newtonmore. Torquil was no longer the spineless writer he'd once been. He faced the lights and waited patiently for the train, for Solly, and for whatever else might accompany them.

Experience more than clean

by Christina Brannon

experience original sinlessness,
your celebrity crush's
tongue down your throat,
the reality of Santa —
A day no dogs would die
is tapping on the door,
the iconoclast's iconoclast —
I would answer
but I am in the shower
speaking to and with the bubbles
who impact the secrets of spotlessness.
Can't you see heaven out yonder,
just beyond the waterproof radio that came with the bathroom
that came with the house —
What didn't accompany the house,
was this soap,
your last gift to me,
lavender and chamomile and the whisperings of the universe,
the secret to being really really clean.
I never bathe and sit in all I'm leaving behind,
I shower, as a martyr,
tiny water bullets make me new,
made in the image of God with room to improve —
less room now, as bubbles foam and fizz filling up the negative space.
Sometimes when I really want something to go my way
I stick my nose so far down the spout of the bottle,
I inhale like a new vacuum
my bathroom reveries.
Thank you, thank you,
for the soap that's so much more —
thank you for the gift of
Getting Rid Of —

If I could press through the soft eggshell of my skull
to rifle through my brain,
the loofah of remembrance and all time,
I would wring out the violence, the imagery
and keep only what I need —
Confetti tassels on the childhood bike,
pastel jelly bean trails of Easter morning...
I could go on and on with the memories marked safe but
the good dogs and good cats who never die are
knocking louder,
the ice cream truck is here, I hear it,
there's a taffeta tutu hanging in the closet.

Lexical Firmament

by Luca Angius

Loosen the grip
lower the defence
now we enter
in the fluid paragraph
the one with no punctuation
and with metaphors without like

identified by new styles without methods

by the gentle bounce of the nib
of a new fountain pen on Fabriano
sadly lost in typed text

Interminable terms
made up by hectic sniffing dogs
tracing invisible squiggles
as they take us down the road
of various perceptive levels

Now we tread onto
unexpected syntaxes

someone must have wrung their tongue
and hung it
not on a line
but spread onto the freshly cut grass
of these idyllic semiotic meadows
where diphthongs bend backwards
and we manage to make in a way that
the subjunctive clauses don't really work

It is here that languages scuffle
in crowded arenas of nominal particles

Do not be too surprised
if conjugations get stuck
and they have to be released

Let's be patient and loiter
in the middle of the page for the rest of the poem
while distilled words suspended still
are vibrating and pulsing
of their own meanings

unable to link with one another
as if they were read
all at the same moment
in this infinite lexical firmament

Grey as a Seagull's Wings

by Bobbi Sinha-Morey

I'd sift the years clean
before a wave of time could
ever break me like a fragile
piece of china again, cast me
into a future grey as a seagull's
wings, my life left torn as
puckered autumn leaves,
my spirit pale as the wind.

I'd live where no one could
ever find me, where grief
could never touch me, and
I hungered for the scent of
sun-warmed grass, a gentle
dream. In the yesteryears
of long ago my heart died
before the sun could ever
set or the sweet smell of
a rose ever reach me.

I'd love it if a kind nurse
would patch my soul and
news of warm dawns
would replace the winter.

I'd live in the uninterrupted
silence of my home, cherish
drowsy afternoons, let my
dreams rise like balloons.

Paraph

by Cody Stetzel

And if there an indication sprouts that life
may be anything but draining, nurture it.

Green is a tired color for growth now, let
the simple glory of lavender fertilize a tract

of wonder. The sorrows you carry on your back
can slide off in the rain, can be wiped clean.

One day there will be a one-legged statue
on a handrail holding a birds nest in one hand

and a trellis in the other. This kind of urban
naturalization dances with Persephone on the threshold

between inaction and reward. So we love a growing city
so we love so we love a splash of color —

if we still have rain in sixty years even its gray deluge
will be a palet of hope's commerce against commiseration.

You can plant seeds in the rows between vertebrae,
you, as you've done every day I've known you,

could break or bend the shackle against your delight
micrometers with every action.

mitosis

by Rowan Tate

from where god is, he must have watched
the kafilas muscle across a red-bitten earth like
ants driven out by the sting of smoke in hordes.

it must have been easier to see the crack in
the continent, a broken-up country like
broken pottery, land divided by eyes that

never saw it: a body cut in two, a mother
to share between two sons, an arm and a leg
for each of them. i went looking for that

crooked line and could never find it; instead
i found villages like empty hornet's nests and
women in ashrams who forgot how to pronounce

their own name. we had been walking for a month and
a half, none of us knowing where one country ends
or the other begins. childhood left me like incense smoke;

i still go looking for it through the jackfruit leaves but
instead i see a man watch a girl beg for water before he
sets her on fire. in my dreams, a bird sits warm like a fig

in my hand, not knowing that it is dying. tomorrow is praying
i forget where i came from. in some future, i am a nani
saying that those times were bad, not the people.

Hindsight is a Cruel Mason

by Maudie Bryant

Wisdom
whispers: you *should have*,
 should have,
 should have known
 better.

Decisions draft hallways
of yesterdays, without entrances
or exits, echoing
mistakes: *you knew*,
you knew, *you knew*.

Every word a brick of regret
pelting lessons learned too late,
building a prison without
doors: *a tomb*,
a tomb a tomb.

How to Love

by Maudie Bryant

Look into God's teeth—not Hollywood-white veneers, but yellowed, jagged edges that tear through your marrow's softness—and admit you're still pink, still screaming, still fumbling in the dark for anything warm that might love you back.

None of it matters: hunger, survival, the way the body keeps begging for milk, for blood, for mercy. Press your cheek to the fang, suckle venom if you must. Don't go down easy, even when you taste your own fear, even when you're spat out—only smile.

The View From The Bus

by Ed Walsh

We went across for Sunday lunch today. They – my mother, my grandmother and my partner, Bet – talked about my father and how well his funeral had gone. As they were talking – how many were there, the number of eulogies, the kindness of the weather – I wondered if these things ever went badly. I didn't ask the question, of course. It would have seemed impertinent in the circumstances. But I could imagine how my father's send-off might have gone awry.

We were on the west side of Grover, in the Old Powers district, where the money lives. But from Monday to Friday my father, the now late William Bussey, stayed in the city of Bellenberg, about 170 miles to the north. He was a defence lawyer and that was where he had chambers. And he was not just any defence lawyer; he was one of the best and worked on some of the biggest cases in the country. His obituary in *The National* said he had one of the greatest forensic minds of this or any previous generation. He could, according to *The Bellenberger*, convince a jury that the pope was an atheist. He was so much in demand that there were times, like during the Pastor Billy James trial, when we saw more of him in the newspapers and on television than we did at home.

Family history has it that he and my mother met just as he was starting out in the legal profession and she was at the Bellenberg Medical School. They married and bought the apartment in Grover – the one in which we were having lunch – Grover being my mother's home town. In their first four married years, they had three children; first me, then my sisters who are twins. My mother never returned to medicine. By that time, my father was providing enough and more.

It seems that as he got more work, it became difficult for him to keep pace with his briefs, travelling such a distance every day. So, he bought himself a small apartment

in Bellenberg, not far from his chambers and the main court. The routine was this: at six on a Monday morning, a cab would take him to the station in time for the six-twenty straight through. He would ring at five-thirty each evening and the twins, Moya and Francine, would fight for who got to speak to him first and longest. Usually, he would return to us in Grover at about eight on the Friday when my mother would have his favourite meal waiting – rib-eye steak, French fries and a half bottle of red from his cellar. My sisters would sit with him in the kitchen while he ate, firing questions at him, and answering his questions of them. Growing up, I never knew any other routine; he was mainly a weekend father, but he did his best the times we did spend with him.

For instance, when I started to get interested in sports – which he had no care for – he would accompany me to the Sunday games at the Grover Stadium. And although he didn't really know what the hell was going on, in there among 60,000 crazy people, he would pretend to be enthusiastic just so we would both feel part of the same thing. And when the game finished, we would stroll back through the English Park and stop at Solomon's Café for a beer and a lemonade and a hot-dog each. I loved it, just the two of us, because at home my sisters commanded far more of his time. And I think he liked it also; boys' time, he would call it, away from the attentions of the women.

We usually saw more of him in summer. Then, we spent time with his parents on their farm in Brown Valley, about ninety miles west of Grover, and he would come across for a few days whenever he could get away. He was their only child and they kind of held him in awe, the kid who had gone away to university and was now referred to in the news. They called him Willie which, every time we heard it, my sisters and I thought was hilarious. To everyone else he was William but to them, and to the neighbours who would call in when they knew he was there, it was Willie. And they, the parents and the son, looked and sounded as if they came from different worlds. He had lost his country accent – presuming that he once had one – and even though it was only a two-hour drive at most, his parents had only been to Grover once, and that was for my parent's wedding.

And the way his mother fussed over him also killed us. She always made a shepherd's pie on the first night he was there because, although I cannot recall it ever being made back home, that was his favourite meal as a kid. She would sit by him to make sure he finished it too. 'Eat it all up, Willie,' she would say. 'You need to keep your strength up.'

'Don't fuss over the boy,' his father would say.

For a while after each visit my mother would fuss exaggeratedly over him and call him Willie, tell him to eat all of his food up.

His father was also William, and everybody called him William. He was a large and friendly man who read bedtime stories to my sisters. But there was an awkwardness about him. He seemed to be all too aware of the distance his son had travelled from his upbringing, and there was no way of covering the territory that now lay between them. His mother's way was to draw him back to his childhood again, to pretend that things were as they always had been, that her boy had stayed with them on the farm.

After his father died, which was when I was about sixteen, and when it became obvious that she could not run the farm alone, they persuaded my grandmother to move in with us. At first, she refused. In her sixty-two years she had barely been beyond Brown Valley, but eventually she faced reality, sold the farm, and came to the city. Our apartment was plenty big enough to accommodate her without much inconvenience to anybody. And even though they came from different worlds, she and my mother, bound by a love of my father, got along tolerably well. And once she started getting the hang of the city, she seemed to make a decent life for herself; at least I never heard any complaint from her.

Later, Bet and I moved into a place in the north of the city. By then, I was working as a data analyst for the Grover Institute and we were studying the effects of low incomes upon the crime rate. You might think that those effects would be pretty obvious to anybody who gave a thought to these things, but the people who commissioned the research – that is, *The North Bellenberg People's Collective* – wanted a clear demonstration to back up their case for a minimum wage. So, every few weeks I went up there for a meeting with the Bellenberg people.

Although he had taken me to his apartment once or twice when I was younger, it never occurred to me to call in on my father. Although I was never in doubt as to his affection and concern for me, I also had the feeling that a spontaneous visit would not be greatly appreciated.

On this occasion, I was upstairs on the 202 from the station to the campus. It was a pleasure which remained from childhood, the front upstairs bus-seat with the 180-degree view. Because from when my mother thought I was old enough and responsible enough – which would have been when I was around the nine or ten mark – I would go down to the main station and buy day-passes for the Grover network; and at the soonest opportunity, wherever I chose to go that day, I would

get the front upstairs seat. From there I could look out and down on all parts of the city, and the outer suburbs – many of which I had never heard of - and some of the farming country beyond. Some of the journeys from central Grover took three and four hours and I took sandwiches with me, eating my lunch as I was driven slowly through the city. Apart from school, it was the first look at life I had which was not dictated by my family in one way or another. So even as an adult, that 202 ride from the station to the campus gave me that same feeling, just me looking out at the world and making of it what I would.

This time there had been an accident and the bus was diverted. We turned off the usual route and into a wide curving street which, like the streets of Old Powers, spoke of money; porticoed entrances, panelled doors, big windows and balconies. It was a slow crawl, the street was not used to heavy traffic; horns sounded, voices were raised, and pedestrians stared.

When the bus came to a standstill, I looked up from my newspaper and gazed idly into one of the apartments; it was difficult not to, those windows invited voyeurism. It looked like an expensively furnished place and I noticed that one of the pictures on the wall was an Andrew Wyeth print, the same as we had in our apartment. There were two kids in there, a boy and a girl, and they must have been around seven or eight. The girl was showing something, maybe a drawing, to a seated man who was also reading a newspaper. Straightaway he reminded me of my father, same striped trousers, same dangling braces, same disordered hair.

Then, a woman, looking not dissimilar to my mother, walked into my line of vision and gave him a cup. When he turned to take it, there seemed to be no doubt. The man was my father. He was William Bussey. But – and this was a huge but - that wasn't his apartment; his apartment was a smaller affair close to his chambers on the other side of town. And even had I allowed the idea that it might be his apartment, who was the woman? Who were the children?

The bus moved on. I didn't look into any of the other apartments.

'You ok, Matt?' one of my colleagues asked during our morning meeting. 'You're miles away.'

'Yeah, yeah sure,' I said. 'Sorry, where were we?'

I was miles away. About five miles away to be precise, looking into that apartment. I tried to persuade myself I was mistaken. I told myself that my father must have a brother I hadn't heard of; or that I might need to get my eyes tested; or my head.

At three, I made an excuse and left. I found the street again, and the apartment, opposite which stood the Rott-Siskin Library. I went into the library, took down a book at random and found a table from which I could look out at number twelve Raglan Crescent. At five-thirty, a cab drew up and a man got out. He paid the fare, and let himself into the building. There was no doubt. It was him. The man was my father.

I replaced the book – which for some reason I recall being *The Birds of the Custer Hills* – and caught the train back to Grover. I didn't say anything to Bet. It sounded too crazy; she would think I had lost my mind. I didn't say anything to anybody for the same reason.

The following Sunday we went across to Old Powers for lunch as usual. My mother was a good cook and my father liked to play the host. There would always be at least two bottles from his cellar. Invited by Bet – and despite my asking her not to encourage him – he liked to tell tales of his famous cases, often recounting word-for-word passages from his closing speeches.

It was our habit after lunch for my father and I to do a couple of circuits round the big lake in the English Park while the women cleared away. We rarely had much to say, but for me at least it was a connection to my time with him as a kid, walking back from a Grover game, or taking a rowing-boat out. This time, though, there was something to say. I just didn't know how to say it.

He must have guessed there was something on my mind.

‘What is it, son?’ he said. ‘You look serious. You and Bet ok?’

‘Yeah, we're fine, I said. ‘It's just...’

‘Just?’

‘It's just that I happened to be in Bellenberg last week.’

‘And?’

‘And I happened to find myself on Raglan Crescent.’

‘I see.’

He looked away from me, as if something had caught his attention over on the other side of the lake. And we remained silent for a good while. I had hoped that he might lie; tell me a story which, though improbable, we could both live with.

‘We find ourselves in a delicate position, son,’ he said. ‘A position which may require your assistance. Your acquiescence at the least, if the people we love are to remain unharmed.’

We did three circuits, during which he told me.

She - the woman in the apartment - was called Mirrin Lincoln. They had met at law school. At the end of their studies they did not maintain contact but met again some years later when she happened to be instructing him during a six-week murder trial.

‘I was getting lonely up there,’ he said. ‘And one thing led to another.’

We fell to silence, and thinking that might be the end of the conversation I prompted him.

‘And?’

‘And by that time, I was married to your mother, whom I love as dearly now as ever, and we had three young children.’

‘Couldn’t you have just ended it?’ I said. ‘Given your circumstances.’

‘I was about to,’ he said. ‘Then we discovered that Mirrin was pregnant. So, I did what I thought was the right thing and set her up in the apartment in Raglan Crescent. Then the present routine developed and we had another child.’

We became silent again. It was a bright afternoon and the park was busy. He was in the middle of the Bailey Three trial which was all over the news, and some of the people we passed stared at him, thinking that they recognised him.

‘Well, Richard,’ he said. ‘Now you know. My secret is a secret no more.’

Richard? He rarely, if ever, called me Richard. I was his son and that was how he referred to me – *son*. Richard suggested a change in status, suggested a person separated from my relationship to him, a person who might be man enough to bear the weight of what he was telling me.

‘I cannot apologise enough,’ he said. ‘Your mother knows nothing.’

‘And the other woman?’ I couldn’t bring myself to say her name.

‘Mirrin has always been fully apprised of the situation. She knew from the start that I had my family in Grover, whom I loved and could not abandon.’

‘Lucky us.’

‘Richard,’ he said, with a tone of mild rebuke.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘It’s just...’

‘I know.’ He gripped my forearm. ‘An appalling burden for you. I’m sorry.’

After a further silence, he said, ‘Did I ever tell you about the Scobie case?’

Had he waited for an answer, the answer would have been no.

‘James Scobie was a bigamist, two families in two different and distant cities, neither of whom had knowledge of the other until, when he could not live with the strain of his deceit any longer, he told them and turned himself in. He was wealthy, as he would have to be to maintain the several children scattered thus, and visiting both families as if they were exclusively his. He was an inarticulate, ill-educated, and objectionable little man. And not detecting any legal source, I was certain that his wealth was accrued nefariously. But my curiosity in that regard was blunted by the fact that he paid his considerable bills promptly, thus contributing to the education of my own children.’

‘Of which it now seems there are five,’ I said.

‘Indeed. Anyway, following his instructions, I argued that his deceit was motivated not by malice, and certainly not by hopes of enrichment or self-advancement, but by love with an admixture of human weakness and folly. Shall we?’ he said. We were approaching Solomon’s Café. I had not been in there for many years and neither, I’m fairly sure, had he.

‘Why not,’ I said.

We sat at one of the sunlit tables and he ordered a cold beer for both of us. It was Burl Solomon himself who served us and they remembered each other and chatted amiably for a while.

‘So?’ I asked, when Mr Solomon left us. ‘Scobie?’

‘Ah, Mr Scobie. I have defended many sinners. In fact, I have argued for the acquittal of many sinners of whose guilt I was fairly certain. But there is difference between the fool and the sinner. The fool is not wilful, he has not the desire to harm, only the misguided desire to please. That, and maybe for one of the few times in his wretched life, was Mr Scobie’s desire, and it has been my desire also. His is the only case I recall in which I argued from the heart rather than the head. The argument of a fool.’ My father was not a man to invite pity, but at that moment I felt sorry for him.

‘How have you borne this for so long?’ I asked.

‘Look,’ he said, and pointed. Five swans were gliding down onto the lake. ‘Isn’t that a magnificent sight.’

We were mainly silent as we walked back through the Sunday streets.

‘What happened to Mr Scobie?’ I asked, as we approached the apartment.

‘Four years.’

We found ourselves laughing quietly.

‘What have you two been up to?’ my mother asked. ‘It’s nearly five.’

‘So it is,’ he said. ‘Time for a whisky, I think. Son?’

‘Why not?’ I said.

The Sunday lunches were strange affairs after that, and at first I often made an excuse not to go over. When we did go, he never showed any sign of discomfort. Apart from one occasion. About a year after his revelation, we had eaten lunch and were sitting out in the garden. ‘You look tired, Willie,’ his mother said. Not for the first time she asked why he could not work in Grover. ‘It must be killing you,’ she said. ‘You should be with your wife at the end of the working day. Not all those miles away with no one to feed you.’

He gave me the briefest glance, the only time my complicity in his arrangements was acknowledged. ‘We all have our cross to bear, mother,’ was all he said, and the matter was not pursued.

And eventually we continued our post-lunch circuits of the lake. And I would allude to his situation by asking how things were in Bellenberg, to which he would respond by saying, things are quite well in Bellenberg thank you for asking, or words similar. And I had the feeling that he really did mean it when he said thank you for asking.

He was fifty-seven when he died. He had been on his feet for over two hours in the Bellenberg Central Court, defending a priest charged with duping rich widows out of their stash. In mid-sentence, he sat back in his chair. They cleared the court, but he was gone.

Although it took place near the old farm in Brown Valley, the mourners overflowed into the small car-park and into an adjoining field. At his burial, the woman and the two children, whom I hadn’t noticed at the service, were seated on a bench about fifty yards from the crowd around his grave. They were seated, I was pretty sure, in order to minimise the attention they might have drawn to themselves had they stood like everyone else. And I guessed too that, had they seen them, those accompanying my father to his final place would suppose Mirrin and her children, whose names I still do not know, to be early for a party not yet arrived.

Only they and I knew that we were saying the same farewells.

Epitaph

by Eleni Karagianni

He slipped away from the Paidotribe's stern gaze
And ran through green meadows, chasing winged souls—
Cicadas, ants, bees, golden beetles.
With them, the Little Soldier held a feast.

And when the wind carried his laughter far,
His Friends' hearts grew heavy with sorrow.
At every dawn, They wait for him in silence,
Only Their wings singing softly above the marble.

His Mother scratches her cheeks and weeps,
While His Father, tear-stained, bends low,
Listening through the soil for the Child's breath.
The hum of insects, a pure psalm,
Rises as a gentle hymn to comfort them.

Upon the stone, Anytis carves sacred words:
“Here rests a Child, Kleinias, Son of Melitos.
The small wonders of the Earth—his own army.
A sweet libation to Hades, Bitter-Cheeked, a fleeting life.
Eternally, His Friends will sing his praise.”

Paidotribe: Ancient Greek physical trainer

Angius, Luca

Luca Angius aka Dhyano, Italian Multidisciplinary Artist and Poet Performer based in St.Ives Cornwall, UK. Background in experimental theatre, developed a unique style of Poetry Performance combining sound art, spoken word and ambient music.

Over the past forty years, he has dedicated himself entirely to performative poetry, from his early years at the University of Bologna, through to Florence, London, and now Cornwall. Despite having amassed an enormous amount of material, he has never published any of his work.

Brannon, Christina

Christina Brannon (she/her) is a nonprofit professional from New York City. Christina received her Master's from The New School in Nonprofit Management. She moonlights as a Little Free Librarian and senior dog enthusiast. Long nights of writing are made sweeter with her blind rescue dog and manager, Petey, on her lap.

Bryant, Maudie

Maudie Bryant (she/her) is a Pushcart-nominated poet, multidisciplinary artist, and educator based in Shreveport, Louisiana. A graduate of the University of Louisiana Monroe (M.A. in English), she surveys the complexities of memory and identity through her work. Her writing explores the layers of human experience, uncovering the disquiet that lies just beneath the surface. Maudie's poetry has been featured or is forthcoming in *Apricity Magazine*, *Welter*, and *Rathalla Review*. Connect with her on Instagram at @maudiemichelle and Bluesky at [@maudiemichelle.com](https://blueskyapp.com/@maudiemichelle).

Buba, Abdullahi

Abdullahi Buba was born in Hambagda, Gwoza, Borno State, Nigeria. He has a B.A English Language from University of Maiduguri. He lectures in the Department of Remedial and General Studies, Mohammed Goni College of Legal Islamic and Educational Studies. He resides in Maiduguri. He is married with children.

Case, Susana H.

Susana H. Case is the award-winning author of nine books of poetry, most recently, *If This Isn't Love* (Broadstone Books) and co-editor with Margo Taft Stever of *I Wanna Be Loved by You: Poems on Marilyn Monroe* (Milk & Cake Press). The first of her five chapbooks, *The Scottish Café* (Slapering Hol Press), was re-released in an English-Polish version, *Kawiarnia Szkocka*, by Opole University Press and as an English-Ukrainian edition, *Шотландська Кав'ярня*, by Slapering Hol Press. <https://www.susanahcase.com>

Chakravarti, Srinjay

Srinjay Chakravarti is a writer, editor, and translator based in Salt Lake City, Calcutta, India. He was educated at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, and at universities based in Calcutta and New Delhi. University degrees: BSc (Economics honours) and MA (English). A former journalist with *The Financial Times Group*, his creative writing has appeared in over 150 publications in 40-odd countries. His first book of poems *Occam's Razor* (1994) received the Salt Literary Award. He won first prize (\$7,500) in the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Poetry Competition 2007–08. Website: www.srinjaychakravarti.com.

Choi, Jennifer

Jennifer Choi is a passionate high school student. Her love for poetry began at an early age, and she finds inspiration in exploring themes of identity, love, and the complexities of the human experience through her writing.

De Giorgio, Marcon

Marcon De Giorgio is a Maltese writer whose love for language led her to pursue a study in English. Although she loves most genres, she mainly enjoys writing fantasy stories. Her love for myth and monsters has moved with her since her youth, but only recently has she garnered an interest in Maltese folklore. Since this discovery she was inspired to write and explore such rich history in her writing. She hopes to share her stories with the world. Find her on Instagram using @youdidntseeanytin or @marukon on Bluesky, where she shares art and doodles of the worlds she creates.

Doherty, Rory

Crafting short fiction that moves the reader is Rory's passion. In addition to being a writer, Rory is and has been many things: son, brother, student, athlete, soldier, bartender, teacher, husband, father, business owner, pet lover, etc. Through all past lives and including this iteration, he feels mostly like a thief trying to not get caught. Publication credits include *Side Show*, *Howth Castle*, *Fish and Bull*.

Fortune, Steven

Steven Fortune is a resident of Sydney, Nova Scotia (Canada) and a graduate of Acadia University (English Literature/History). He has released five poetry collections to date, edited several works for others, and has also appeared on CBC Radio, while his work has been featured and read on several radio programs. He also aspires to write for the stage, having recently completed his first one-act play.

Frost Greenstein, Shannon

Shannon Frost Greenstein (she/they) is the author of *Through the Lens of Time* (2026), a fiction collection with Thirty West Publishing, and *These Are a Few of My Least Favorite Things* (2022), a book of poetry from Really Serious Lit. Shannon is a former Ph.D. candidate in Continental Philosophy and a multi-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Find her at shannonfrostgreenstein.com or on Twitter and Bluesky at @ShannonFrostGre. Insta: @zarathustra_speaks

Goodland, Giles

Giles Goodland's books include *Of Discourse* (Grand Iota 2023), *A Spy in the House of Years* (Leviathan, 2001), *Capital* (Salt, 2006), *Dumb Messengers* (Salt, 2012) and *The Masses* (Shearsman, 2018). *Civil Twilight* was published by Parlor Press in 2022. He has worked as a lexicographer, editor, and bookseller, and teaches evening classes on poetry for Oxford University's department of continuing education, and lives in West London.

Grech Ganado, Maria

Maria Grech Ganado (b.1943) has won National Book Prizes for four of her eight poetry collections in Maltese or English and co-organised an international seminar with LAF and Inizjamed in Malta in 2005. She has been translated into 12 other languages and published in many countries where she was also invited to book festivals over the years. Her publications in English have appeared in print in *Imago Literary Magazine* (Australia), *Orbis*, *Envoi*, *Cinnamon Press* (Britain), *In Focus* and *Cadences* (Cyprus), *The Massachusetts Review* (US), as well as in various magazines online. Maria has been awarded by her hometown, Floriana, the University of Malta and the State. She has three children and three grandchildren.

Harper, HR

HR Harper is a writer living in the redwoods above Santa Cruz, California. A student of meditation and the emptying traditions, he writes to understand the nature of human consciousness in a natural world humans seem to be destroying. He began to publish in 2021. Several of his recently published poems and stories may be found at: <https://brusheswiththedarklaw.blogspot.com>

Howard, Anita

Anita Howard is a writer, storyteller and actor living in Passage West, Co. Cork, Ireland. Her work features in many publications including *HeadStuff*, *Poetica Review*, the *Querencia Press Autumn 22 Anthology*, the December 2022 *Mslexia Moth*, *Literature Today*, *Atrium*, the *Boundless 2023 Anthology of the Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival* and the December 2024 issue of *Non-Binary Review*.

Jairaj, Roshni Marath

Roshni Marath Jairaj is a Non-Resident Indian poet and writer currently based in the UK. Her work reflects her experiences growing up in Dubai, Singapore, and Kerala, exploring themes of identity, family, and belonging. She is a PhD student at the University of Leeds, where her practice-based research focuses on writing a memoir that explores the concept of home through her experiences as a Non-Resident Indian. Her poetry and prose seek to examine cultural intersections and the fluid, evolving nature of belonging.

JT Beatty, James

James "JT" Beatty is a double-major in Religious Studies and Journalism at Louisiana State University. He lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he drills in the United States Marine Corps Reserve and works at a children's museum.

Karagianni, Eleni

Eleni Karagianni is a philologist. She teaches history, ancient Greek language, and literature to high school students, and coordinates creative writing workshops for teenagers. She is the editor-in-chief of the online literary magazine *GRAFEIN*. She considers writing a form of therapy, and her motto is: "*nulla dies sine linea*".

McVey, David

David McVey lectures at New College Lanarkshire in Scotland. He has published over 150 short stories and a great deal of non-fiction that focuses on history and the outdoors. He enjoys hillwalking, visiting historic sites, reading, watching telly, and supporting his home-town football team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC.

Osum, Illiria

Illiria Osum is an interdisciplinary artist who lives and works on unceded Kumeyaay land in Southern California. Prose and poetry have most recently been published in *Glint*, *Welter*, and *OFIC*, while dramatic and interactive work has been produced in La Jolla, CA (La Jolla Playhouse Without Walls Festival, 2024); San Antonio, TX (Communion Gallery, 2024); San Diego, CA; NYC, NY; and London, UK.

Rueda, Roger B.

Roger B. Rueda moves with ease between the rigor of grammar and the lyricism of poetry. His books, *A Plain & Practically Lucid English Grammar* and *Vines and Verges: Short Stories*, reflect his fascination with language—its rhythms, its subtleties, its power. His essays and poems have found homes in *Home Life*, *Philippines Graphic*, *Philippine Panorama*, and anthologies like *Mantala 3* and *Under the Storm*. A writing fellow and educator with a PhD in educational management, he has also shaped words as an editor and columnist. Explore his books at www.amazon.com/Roger-B-Rueda/e/B00E3WROB4.

Shimmin, Grant

Grant Shimmin is a New Zealand writer and poet who grew up in South Africa and prizes humanity and the natural world as subjects. He is an editor for the US-based literary journal *Does it Have Pockets?* He is a new phase poet with work in a range of journals worldwide including *Roi Faineant Press*, *The Hooghly Review*, *Bull*, *Blue Bottle Journal*, *underscore_magazine*, *Stone Poetry Quarterly* and *Cool Beans Lit*.

Sinha-Morey, Bobbi

Bobbi Sinha-Morey's poetry has appeared in a wide variety of places such as *Plainsongs*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *The Wayfarer*, *Helix Magazine*, *Miller's Pond*, *The Tau*, *Vita Brevis*, *Cascadia Rising Review*, *Old Red Kimono*, and *Woods Reader*. Her books of poetry are available at Amazon.com and her work has been nominated for Best of the Net in 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2021 as well as having been nominated for The Pushcart Prize in 2020.

St. Claire, Joshua

Joshua St. Claire is an accountant from a small town in Pennsylvania works as a financial director for a non-profit. His haiku and related poetry have been published broadly including in *Frogpond*, *Modern Haiku*, *The Heron's Nest*, and *Mayfly*. He has received recognition in the following international contests/awards for his work in these forms: the Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival Haiku Invitational, the San Francisco International Award for Senryu, the Robert Speiss Memorial Award, the Touchstone Award for Individual Haiku, the British Haiku Society Award for Haiku, and the Trailblazer Award.

Stephenson, Paul

Paul Stephenson's first collection *Hard Drive* was published by Carcanet in 2023. It was shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Award and Polari Book Prize. He previously published three pamphlets: *Those People* (Smith/Doorstop, 2015), *The Days that Followed Paris* (Happenstance, 2016), written after the Paris terrorist attacks, and *Selfie with Waterlilies* (Paper Swans Press, 2017). He has an MA in Creative Writing with Pedagogy (Poetry) from the Manchester Writing School. He co-edited the 'Europe' issue of *Magma* and helps curate the Poetry in Aldeburgh festival. He lives between Cambridge and Brussels.

Stetzel, Cody

Cody Stetzel is a Seattle resident working within arts organizing. They are a literary critic in journals like *Tupelo Quarterly* and *The Colorado Review*, offering insights on contemporary queer poetry and poetry-in-translation. They are the co-host of *Other People's Poems* (@SeattlePoetry), a reading series for readers. They are a volunteer organizer and event staff for Seattle's poetry bookstore *Open Books: A Poem Emporium*. Find them on bluesky @bearable or find more of their writing at riantly.substack.com.

Tate, Rowan

Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative and curator of beauty. Her writing appears in the *Stinging Fly*, *Josephine Quarterly*, *Meniscus Literary Journal*, and Stanford University's *Mantis* among others. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

Walsh, Ed

Ed Walsh is a writer of short fiction who lives in the north-east of England.

Wysocky, Claudia

Claudia Wysocky, a Polish writer and poet based in New York, is known for her diverse literary creations, including fiction and poetry. Her poems, such as 'Stargazing Love' and 'Heaven and Hell', reflect her ability to capture the beauty of life through rich descriptions. Besides poetry, she authored *All Up in Smoke*, published by Anxiety Press. With over five years of writing experience, Claudia's work has been featured in local newspapers, magazines, and even literary journals like *WordCityLit* and *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*. Her writing is powered by her belief in art's potential to inspire positive change. Claudia also shares her personal journey and love for writing on her own blog, and she expresses her literary talent as an immigrant raised in post-communism Poland.