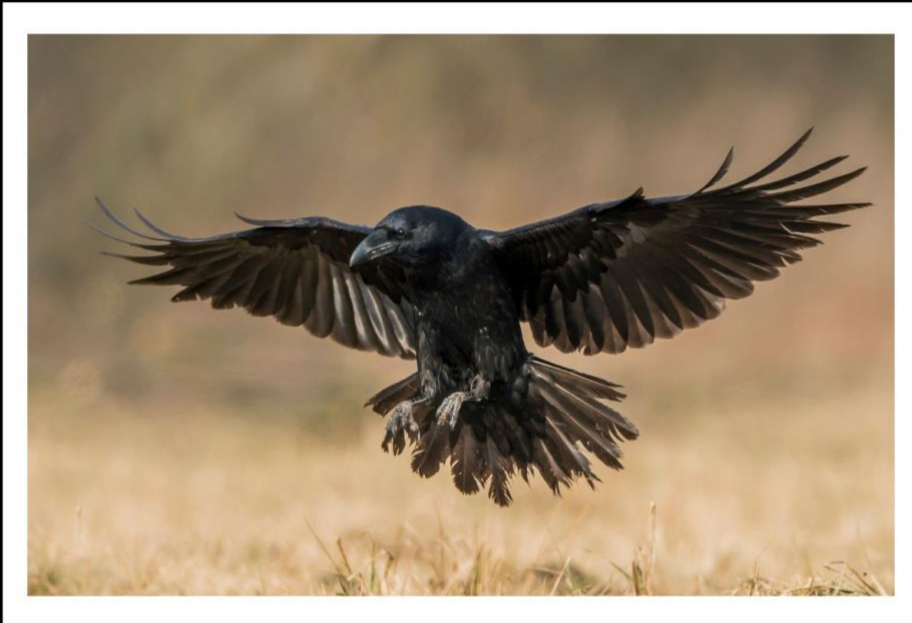


# THE RAVEN REVIEW

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# THE RAVEN REVIEW

Volume V, Issue II

April 2024

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*Angie Hexum*

## **The Reaper Rides**

And so it begins  
with the death of a friend,  
the Reaper is on the ride.

Two years younger than you,  
his promise came due,  
request for extension denied.

Now you're on the list  
Death tucks in his vest,  
as he spurs on his steed to a gallop

to scour the land  
and harvest by hand  
fresh souls with a scythe and a mallet.

Don't make a sound!  
If you keep your head down,  
he just might miss you this pass.

Then savor each breath  
that you've stolen from Death  
cuz he's comin' back for your ass.

*Aydin Akgün*

**Death the Bureaucrat**

*In memory of Anthony Hecht*

There is one form  
for all—for you,  
the rich, the poor.  
The dates are set  
from birth and can't  
be changed. So please,  
respect these rules  
and know your place.  
Oh and, before  
I forget, don't try  
to cut the line,  
you really can't  
afford the fine.

*C. Walker*

## **A Drunkard's Ballad**

Sullen is the unmouthed word, the lonely love,  
    Tragedy the ne'er writ book, the ne'er sung song;  
Hopeless is the flight that fell from high above,  
    Agony the sick and weak that were once strong.

This we say when life has gone and gave us up,  
    All the world a daunting and a draining place,  
Then in pity and in habit take our cup,  
    Which we fill with drink, with fire to burn, erase.

And, in bouts of fervour, we are born again,  
    Toxin turned to mirth; it churns, it swirls, it swells!  
Air, once tense, turns light from dark and joy from bane,  
    And that hope once felled, it rises, stirs; it wells!

Though this drink may be a curse, it is a cure;  
    It, the motivator for man's love, man's word.  
And it's true that all of us were never pure,  
    So, let's drink to be the men we never were!

*Charlene Stegman Moskal*  
**Bus Stop**

I imagine I know what is implied  
your face set in its frozen mask;  
mouth speaks for you, softness denied,  
no more questions left to ask.  
Ever so slightly lips thrust out,  
frown of stone in an icy pout.

Your face set in its frozen mask  
reveals dreams now grown dim;  
a street messiah knows your past,  
your sharpened tongue does not scare him.  
Furred with thirsty smoke filled anger  
he understands too well the silent avenger.

Mouth speaks for you, softness denied,  
fierce, to keep away the hurt  
hidden under your fragile pride.  
You look away, eyes dart, alert--  
don't worry about the secrets you keep,  
we have our own as dark and deep.

No more questions left to ask,  
the answers false in your guarded lies;  
you act the role in which you're cast  
to keep the story locked inside.  
Born from tales of beat down hope  
your static face a way to cope.

Ever so slightly lips thrust out  
tells the world this is your space:  
Do not approach, have no doubt  
in my glance there is no saving grace.  
The visage of my cold, hard stare,  
a silent warning to beware.

Frown of stone in an icy pout



your eyes shoot daggers of distrust.  
Your face fixed in a glacial shout,  
a litany of loss says nothing is just.  
From my car window I see how you wait,  
angry at circumstance, and the bus is late.

*Christopher Menezes*  
**End of Summer Party**

I left you bound  
to a bed, tubes and needle tips,  
puncturing your arm, abdomen,  
pumping fluid.

I left you for a silver keg, cold  
and heavy on the kitchen floor,  
beer foaming out its open valve.

It couldn't be you,  
releasing the pressure  
that filled my cup.

A thirsty line formed behind me.  
I fumbled with the spout.  
Ryan asked, how's Jenn?  
The apartment laughed,  
complained about work, bad tips.

I left you for these  
conversations, spiraling  
into nothingness, void  
of your beeping heart monitor,  
void of the toll  
of church bells  
ringing in my ear.

*David Radavich*

**At a Friend's House**

It's useless I should try to rhyme,  
you remind me: every time  
the verse inevitably falls flat  
as if I needed to wear a hat—  
who would ever sanction that?

Of course I realize you're right—  
no use putting up a fight,  
but even so it begins to gall  
that someone like me could fall  
into a pattern so predictable.

Better to keep away from form,  
stay wild and wicked as a storm  
that blows away all ghosts  
who might prompt me to boast  
or torment our charming host.

*Elizabeth Dingmann Schneider*

## **The Battle of Nashville**

The path beneath our feet is slick mud  
following a heavy afternoon rain,  
and I imagine this soil wet with blood.  
When men and boys fought to hold this city  
a century and a half ago,  
surely some of their lifeblood soaked in deep,  
the traces a permanent stain on this hill,  
one more battleground in a war fought over  
the fundamental nature of humanity—  
whether or not it is acceptable  
to own another human being.

In the North, our schoolbook Civil War lessons  
are often intangible.  
We don't walk its battlegrounds,  
we haven't dug them up to pour our foundations.  
At our friend's house, less than a mile from this hill,  
metal detectorists have found a handful of bullets,  
can identify which weapons they came from,  
which side of the war,  
whether they were ever fired  
or simply dropped where they lay.

Are we so sure there will never again be battles  
in the streets of our cities, on their hilltops?  
We're taught to believe that one hundred fifty years  
is impossibly long ago.  
But this isn't ancient history—  
it's as fresh as the mud beneath my boots.

*Emilie Helmbold*

## Homecoming

I end up on the front porch almost by accident, much the way my family had stumbled upon the house in the first place, when we were new to town fifteen years ago, when they'd been a deteriorating "for sale" sign nestled between the overgrown rose bushes. I'm in the neighborhood to meet a childhood friend for coffee, but not for another hour. I stroll aimlessly up and down the streets of the lakeside town I used to call home until I end up on the front porch of the house where I'd grown up. The outside of the house looks the same as I remember, with the pink and white antique roses still climbing up the columns, the black shutters silhouetting each window, and the eggshell white my mother had picked out from Lowe's.

The town is small, and people talk. They began to talk amongst themselves when a for-sale sign appeared in the front yard of the house the summer I graduated from high school. When my neighbor told her book club that our house was for sale because my parents were in the midst of a messy divorce, the talk became deafening.

The residents didn't stop talking when the for-sale sign was removed from the front yard, and I left for college. My parents sold the house to a business owner who lives there alone. I heard he gutted the interior as soon as my parents signed the paperwork. The Victorian woodwork and the blue tones that my mother chose to compliment the collection of nautical paintings my parents collected have been since removed.

I knock on the original stained-glass front door before I lose my nerve. I've nearly given up when an average-looking man with a receding hairline opens the door. Before he can ask me what I'm doing on his front doorstep, I'm explaining myself.

"I grew up here, and I was just wondering if could come inside and look around. I heard you remodeled?"

He seems confused for a moment, obviously never having imagined the daughter of two people he'd met once on formality would appear one morning on his doorstep asking for a tour.

"Uh, sure. Come on in."

I step into the entryway, instinctually removing my shoes like I used to when I was young. My curiosity about the renovations isn't the only reason I found myself knocking on the front door. I want to know if the house is haunted. I *need* to know. I've spent the last two years wondering if I'd been slowly losing my mind for years, or if there had actually been something unnamable, unknowable lurking within, either within me or the house itself.

It takes me a moment to reorient myself inside. Walls have been removed and added seemingly without logic. I was right in that the carefully chosen blue hues had been removed in favor of a basic shade of off-white and Michigan State memorabilia.

"I had the kitchen redone, if you want to see that?" I realize that I haven't even asked his name or even bothered to mention my own.

I manage a faint “sure” as we walk in the direction of what had been the kitchen. The man wouldn’t see any apparitions in the kitchen doorway, as the wall that had once separated the kitchen from the dining room was gone. I remembered the shadowy figure that used to loom in the open doorway, even when I was sure that I’d closed the door just minutes before. The apparition would disappear nearly as soon as I saw it, never sticking around long enough for me to determine if it was a trick of my young, lonely mind or reality. I was never able to reach out to try and grab it.

“Nice,” I mutter.

As we turn away from the kitchen, I’m faced with the stairway. Since the first time I was left home alone after dark, I’d heard footsteps climbing these stairs. Always walking the same path: up the stairs, and down the narrow, unlit hallway, to my bedroom door.

“Do you hear footsteps at night?” I blurt out.

The confusion returns to the man’s face like an incoming tide. He looks at me as if I’ve lost my mind. I realize now that maybe I had been losing my mind. Maybe I still am? I make a mental note to look up psychiatrists when I return to college.

“I live here alone.”

“Sorry, right, I knew that.”

I realize how insane I must sound. The man looks at me with the same mix of pity and frustration that my dad would give me when I’d call him at work and make him come home early because the footsteps had returned. He’d speed home and search the attic, the basement, every closet; he never found evidence of an intruder.

“Do you think this place is haunted?”

I remember the hours I spent alone in the house, an only child with two working parents. My parents told me that everything I’d seen and heard for years was a figment of my imagination. When they started calling up local psychiatrists asking if they took our insurance, I stopped talking about the things that I saw when I was alone. My parents decided it was a childish phase that I’d grown out of.

“I think it’s best if you leave,” he says.

Without another word, he walks me back to the front door. As soon as I’m over the threshold, he closes it behind me. I hear the tiny clink of the deadbolt as I make my way back down the brick pathway.

*Emma-Jane Barlow*

## **Death Dream**

Death visits me in my dreams,  
he floats in his obsidian cloak,  
with his festered hands around my throat,  
he plunges me into the raging sea,  
steals every breath of life from me.  
He drops my soul into the fire,  
burns my ivory flesh on a wooden pyre.

Death visits me in my dreams,  
Dangling those I love, on a tenuous thread.  
I am drowning and gasping for air in an ocean of dread.  
He creates a vivid snapshot of how it would feel.  
To bear witness to the cruelest ordeal.

Death visits me in my dreams,  
he leaves memories in my heart like a poisoned kiss.  
I awaken in a cold sweat, my body abandons the abyss.  
Soaked in fresh teardrops, bones pulsing with pain.  
I hope the reaper never visits me in my dreams again.

*E.R. Lutken*

**Rimas Dissolutas**

High notes carry a short distance, still  
higher, even shorter—air-splitting  
wincings of dragged fingernails—  
quick blinks into crisp silence.  
Piercing shrieks trip on grim  
pediments in unrelenting time,  
ricochet to whines, let go.  
Remnants roam in long, slow pulls  
across gray ages—low sounds lapping,  
mourning Enkidu in slurred wails.  
Om—mantras droning balance,  
Gregorian outpourings of solemn calm,  
growling, sorrow-soaked Blues-rhyme,  
all thrum through flailing blare of now.  
Wind rumbles, throbs within mortal hulls,  
shores-up pulses, echoes in rolling  
notes tossed past the unborn pale.  
The task falls to re-sound chants,  
send streams back to fill the world's brim.  
There now, tomorrow beyond dream,  
there, there. We are the breath in you.



*Hai-Mo Hu***Force to Chocolate**

The chocolate mirror gaze on the chocolate cake reflected the twisted face of Valerie. She let the pink sprinkle medley slide off one hand while the other hand pinched her nose tight.

“I have certainly never seen anyone hate chocolate like you, Val.” Suzan frowned at Valerie’s posture.

“Mom, a little respect?” Valerie gave her a stare and threw a handful of glitter onto the cake. “I never laugh at your fear of birds.”

“Because it’s a real thing.” Suzan poured chocolate mirror gaze onto another piece of cake.

Valerie retched and looked away. “Can I go now?”

“Fine. But be down for dinner in two hours.” Suzan sighed.

Valerie was never a dessert girl. Sweet things made her think of ants and cockroaches.

When she was seven, she came to the kitchen for water one night. The cake on the counter seemed to be moving and staying on the spot at the same time. She grabbed a stool and reached for a mug. When the light flickered on, the answer was revealed to be dozens of cockroaches squirming around on the three-layer cake.

Chocolate was the worst of all. Its smell had the power of making her nauseous. Its dark color reminded her of all kinds of disgusting and mysterious goo and liquid in horror films. Her mom was a baker, and her little brother loved horror films. Valerie was doomed to suffer. It was also hard to avoid chocolate. It could be a flavor to all desserts. It could be a drink and a flavor to beverages. It could be a scent. It could even be cooked into savory dishes. Chocolate roast chicken, what a nightmare! Valerie thought as she walked past that “creative restaurant.”

• • •

“Nobody can convince you to try even a teeny bite of chocolate?” Janet asked. “Nope.” Valerie hopped on a wobbly ground tile.

Two girls talked about their classes of the day, possible lunch options, and which club to join. Amid similar conversations before the classroom door, Valerie’s ears picked up a beautiful voice. This voice was bright and warm with a clear pronunciation delivery. It sounded like Valerie’s celebrity crush, Anne Hathaway. She turned to search for the voice. Under the sheet of winter sunshine by the railing was a girl with adorable silver glasses and light rouge on her cheeks. There was a pound on Valerie’s heart.

“Who’s that?” Valerie whispered in Janet’s ear even though the voices around them could well cover their conversation.

“Who?” Janet looked around.

“Stop that! The girl standing by the railing, with glasses. Don’t be so obvious!”

Valerie’s instructions did not tone down Janet’s movements. She stood on her toes to see the girl Valerie was talking about and got spotted by the girl. The girl smiled at them before turning back to her friends.

“Oh my god, Janet!” Valerie covered the bursting red on her face with her hands. “It’s fine. What’s wrong with you, Val?” Janet laughed at Valerie’s abnormality.

“She’s the new girl in Class B.”

• • •

“Hey, J, does it have to be chocolate on Valentine’s Day?” Valerie drew another chipmunk wearing glasses in her notebook.

“What’s with these chipmunks lately and this question...” Janet’s eyes widened.

Valerie blocked Janet’s loud noises with her hands. Janet shook Valerie’s shoulders so hard that Valerie’s hands loosened and begged her to stop.

“Are these chipmunks the new girl?” Janet finally calmed down. Valerie sighed and nodded.

Janet made another weird sound. It was like the screaming chicken toy. “Yes! Chocolate is tradition, girl! Chocolate is the message.”

The embarrassing blush from admitting her heart’s desire left Valerie’s face in an instant.

Janet did not notice the shift in emotions. “You have to give her a pack of the most unique chocolate possible so that she understands your feelings.”

How am I supposed to tell her how I feel on the most romantic day when the rule involves the thing that I hate the most? But she’s so special! She deserves this romantic gesture on this special day. Valerie began picking the skin around her fingernails.

“Hey, hey, hey, stop.” Janet woke up from her over-the-top joy for her friend and grabbed Valerie’s hands. “You see chocolate all the time at your mom’s bakery, right? It’s going to be fine. You just give her the chocolate. It’s not like you have to eat it.”

“Right, right.” Valerie took a deep breath. Janet was right.

She did not have to eat the filthy thing. She probably would not need to touch it. She could ask for extra wrapping layers. Thinking about chocolate made her stomach turn and goosebumps crawled up her arms. Janet was right, but Valerie had a bad feeling.

• • •

The fear of chocolate and nervousness of telling the new girl she liked her pulled Valentine’s Day in front of Valerie’s face faster than the arrival of midterms and finals. As if God could sense Valerie’s uneasiness, the sky poured rain down since morning. Everywhere Valerie looked was the endless gray of the sky and the chains of rain blocking the trees. The

pack of Valentine's Day chocolate slid back and forth in Valerie's bag, bumping her textbooks and pencil case.

"Valerie? You wanted to see me?" The new girl got the note about meeting in the art classroom.

"Yep, that's me. Hi, Anna." The awkwardness in Valerie's smile could freeze a cat into a statue.

Anna's hair had grown a little longer. It glowed even under the weakest sunlight on a rainy winter day.

"I want to give you this. Happy Valentine's Day." Another second of holding back the chocolate and her feelings might crack Valerie's tensed face.

"And why would you give me chocolate on Valentine's Day, Valerie?" Anna asked, smiling with a soft hint of blush.

Easy, Valerie Deng. Just a simple sentence consisting of three simple words. As long as I put the right word there. "Like," not love. I'll be fine. Worst case scenario is Anna turning down my proposal of becoming a couple. That's it. No big deal.

Anna opened the elaborately wrapped box while Valerie almost drowned in thoughts.

Light pink and coral blue ribbons scattered across the table that was tinted with colorful fireworks from previous classes. She popped one chocolate into her mouth and raised her left eyebrow at Valerie. The scent of chocolate burned Valerie's eyes. She covered her nose and mouth with her hands in both disgust and embarrassment.

Will I actually be alright when she turns me down? I've never done this before! Is a heartbreak going to kill me? I know I don't know her well enough to ask her this question and don't have the right to expect so much. But every moment I saw her in the hallway was killing me, knowing I hadn't tried this. Oh my god... What if I'm putting a burden on her?

"Hello?" Anna moved her fingers like playing a piano in front of Valerie's face. The distance was so small that Valerie could smell the chocolate grease on her fingers.

"Sorry." Valerie squeezed out an apology with all her strength. She turned her head to take a big gulp of air and looked Anna in the eyes. "I like you, Anna."

Anna put down the second piece of chocolate between her fingers.

"Romantically." Valerie looked down at her hands. Her fingers twisted into a ball of worms. "I know we haven't talked much, but I hope you can give me a chance. I'm sorry, no pressure. You can totally just say no, and I'll be gone in a second..."

"Okay," Anna said, taking over the train wreck Valerie could not shut up about.

"What?" Valerie jumped in disbelief. Perhaps I'm still in bed? It's only six-twenty?

Anna giggled. It was like a small Christmas bell and a baby deer jumping up and down. "I like you, too, Valerie. We can try to become a couple.

It was as if Anna lit up the room. The colors on the table and on the shelves, all brightened up. Her warm and confident smile also chased away the humid and moldy air in the room.

“Thank you for the chocolate, Valerie. It’s delicious.” Anna picked up the box, swept the ribbons to the ground, and moved a bit closer to Valerie. “First thing about me is that I love chocolate.”

Valerie only heard the first half of Anna’s speech. “I’m glad you like it.” She could not move her eyes away from Anna’s shiny hazel eyes and dewy lips.

Anna bit into another piece. “What about you? First thing about you?”

First thing about me, I hate chocolate. Shit, did she say that she loves chocolate?

Valerie gasped and woke up from obsessing over Anna’s appearance. “Um... I love reading novels.” She searched in Anna’s expression for any sign that she might notice the trembling in her voice.

“Do you want one?” Anna did not continue the conversation of getting to know each other better.

Valerie’s worst nightmare had finally come. It hurt more when there was something wonderful occurred before, and the sweetness from the wonder stripped away one’s defense. I should have started out as her friend or asked around things about her before this stupid glamorous plan.

“Valerie? You can’t eat chocolate? Or do you not like it?” Anna frowned as Suzan had.

“No! It’s not like that...” Before she could think of the next step, the eagerness to hold on to Anna took over Valerie’s mouth.

“Okay... Do you want the plain one or the strawberry one? I think the strawberry one’s really good.” Anna looked at the pieces of chocolate as if they were gems glowing on her lap. “Come on, you’ll love it. Let’s push the weight thing to tomorrow.”

Anna’s smile was so beautiful. Valerie took the one piece of chocolate Anna handed her. Oh, what the hell. I’ll tell her about my thing with chocolate later. She pushed down her urge to show any sign of her hate for chocolate on her face, chewed the piece as fast as she could, and swallowed the whole thing while trying to hold back her nausea.

“Oh! It’s sweeter than... Do you have water with you?” One hand of Valerie’s covered her mouth as people would do when they did not want others to see their lips stained by food. The other hand of hers pinched the outer side of her thigh and where Anna could not see.

“Yeah, I think so. It’s okay to not like it, Valerie.” Anna turned to her backpack on the floor.

Valerie could recognize the disappointment in Anna’s voice. It was like coming out of the exact mold Suzan built when she first saw Valerie push away a plate of chocolate cake. “I like it! It’s just, this flavor is a bit too sweet for me.” She squeezed out a smile and welcomed big gulps of water down her throat, hoping they would wash away the taste of chocolate for her.

“I guess I just never met anyone who doesn’t like chocolate. I never pictured my boyfriend or girlfriend not enjoying chocolate with me.” Anna wiped the leftover chocolate on her fingers with a tissue.

Valerie opened her mouth to tell Anna that she loved chocolate and that she would take another piece in plain flavor, but no sound came out. Anna’s voice drifted further away and

blurrier. It was as if Anna was talking to her on the surface of the ocean, and she was sinking deeper into the darkness. Bursts of burning heat and stings spread on her skin. A firm grip took her heart. Anna was shaking her, but she could no longer see the hazel eyes and silver glasses.

The rest of the chocolate in the box crashed to the ground and rolled under the tables. They would then melt and mold there with clouds of dust.

*J. Timothy Floyd*  
**Cry for Help**

“I’m here for a three o’clock session with Dr. McCullough. Is he ready for me?”

The woman standing behind the counter was poised and attractive—copper red hair and a statuesque body. She studied the desktop for a few moments. “You must be Mr. Mason. I see this is your first visit with us.”

“Alex Mason,” the client replied. “You can call me Alex.”

“Hello, I’m Dr. McCullough,” the woman replied. “My admin is out sick today, so I’m doing double duty.”

The client hesitated, stammering. “You’re Dr. McCullough? Dr. Corey McCullough? I was thinking you’d be a guy.”

She smiled. “That’s the Old World, Mr. Mason. Most of the practitioners in the field today are women. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“No problem,” he winked, licking his lower lip nervously. “All the better.”

“Come back to my office,” she replied.

The adjacent room bore all the markings of a sophisticated professional. A wall behind the desk boasted an array of academic degrees and professional awards, all in matching black frames with gold edging. The lighting was chill and urban. After a few moments, the doctor approached an armchair near a window, gesturing for Alex to take a seat in a matching chair nearby.

“Make yourself comfortable, Alex,” McCullough began. “Take a couple of deep breaths and relax. You can begin whenever you’re ready.”

“I don’t know where to start.” He slumped in his seat, spreading his legs. “What I really need is a prescription for something that will knock me out. I haven’t been able to sleep for a week!”

“I understand,” the therapist responded. “Sometimes clients like to start with how they’re feeling at the moment. Try to identify one emotion you’re experiencing right now.”

Mason hunched forward, nervously drawing his legs underneath him. He struggled for words before muttering, “Angry. I’m very angry!”

“That’s a good start. Why don’t you tell me about that?”

“Can’t you just write me a prescription for sleeping pills? I’m wide awake all night like some kind of vampire. I seriously need some sleep.”

McCullough smiled gently. “First, tell me about your anger. You feel angry because...?”

“Because I’m a fuck-up!” he blurted out. “I screw things up and piss people off! I can’t get through a day without somebody treating me like a piece of crap! It’s like there’s this code that everybody knows about but me.”

“You’re angry at God?”

“No. Why would I be angry at God? I’m not some raving atheist!”

“You mentioned a set of rules everyone else seems to understand. Where do you suppose everyone else acquired the rules?”

“I’m talking about the stuff parents teach you.”

“You think your parents failed you?”

“Okay, maybe it’s your conscience,” he scrambled.

“And you don’t have one—a conscience?”

“You don’t think I’ve got a conscience?” he snarled. “You think I’m a sociopath or something like that?”

McCullough intertwined her fingers and rested her chin on them. “You had mentioned a code that’s understood by everyone but you. Is someone to blame? What do you think?”

“I think you sound like my girlfriend. She told me I’m broken—that there’s something wrong with me. You wanna know why I’m angry? She actually told me—get this—that whenever she’s with me, it makes her wonder what’s wrong with her. So, I was making her crazy, too?”

The doctor studied her client’s face. “She broke up with you? You broke up with her?”

Mason glared. “Who said we broke up? Why would you think that?”

“You spoke about her in the past tense, Alex. But you’re still together?”

“It’s complicated. What kind of pills do you normally give for major league insomnia?”

“Pills aren’t always the answer. Why don’t we talk about another relationship that makes you feel rejected or angry?”

“Okay, I’m a Marine. I did three years in the Corps—even deployed to Afghanistan for six months. It’s 120 degrees in the desert over there. No highways, just tracks through the sand. I went through hell for the good old Semper Fi, but they booted me out anyway. Article Ninety-One!”

“A medical discharge?”

“Mmmm... you could say that. I sent another guy to the hospital.”

“How did that happen?”

“I whipped his ass. He was an officer.”

“Okay. Go on...”

“He wouldn’t get off my case; one thing after another, twenty-four-seven. He didn’t like me—said I had a bad attitude. Nobody is gung-ho about latrine duty every other day. He started in again when he found me in the rack one day, so I got up and punched him. Then I whacked him again and kicked him a couple of times.

“That’s interesting, Alex,” the doctor interjected. “The military code of conduct would be very familiar to you, yet you struck a superior officer anyway. How do you explain that?”

Gazing at his feet, Mason began to crack his knuckles. “It’s not like I’m stupid. You don’t hit an officer. You ask before you borrow someone’s car. You don’t hurt a girl. You don’t have to be a brainiac to know that. But sometimes... a lot of times... there’s just something boiling inside me, Doc! It’s like there’s a trigger in my head, and somebody else squeezes it. Does that mean I’m crazy?”

“We all cross the line more often than we want to admit. Quite often, we can’t even explain why, but there’s only been one perfect human in all of history. The rest of us have to ask for help. Is that why you’re here, Alex, or did you just come for a prescription?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nobody can help me. Maybe my girlfriend was right when she said I’m psycho or have a screw loose or something. She said it was like I never respected her, but that’s not true. I needed her.”

After a long silence, the therapist spoke softly. “I’m still listening...”

“She said I made her crazy! She’d break up with me one day, but then we’d talk or text, and she’d come back again. She finally moved out, but we couldn’t stay away from each other. The last time I went over there, she told me she’d made an appointment with you. She wanted to know why she was obsessed with me. She was afraid that she was crazy, too.”

“Interesting. What’s your girlfriend’s name, Alex?”

“Why?”

“She represents something you fear. It’s important to identify your fears. Can you speak her name?”

His voice took on a choking quality. “Mason. Alex Mason.

“But... you’re Alex Mason. Aren’t you?”

The client gazed out the window. “Alright, I’m Vince Norris. Yesterday, I called to confirm Alex’s appointment; to find out the day and time. She couldn’t be here, so I decided to come in.”

“It’s important that you’re honest with me, Vincent. You told me that you and Alex had not broken up, but you continue to use the past tense when you mention her. Tell me why.”

“Don’t ask me, Doc.”

“You weren’t honest about your identity when you arrived today. Therapy only helps if we’re completely transparent. What is the true status of your relationship with Alex?”

“This is confidential, right?”

“Doctor-client privilege means a therapist cannot be compelled by law to divulge personal details shared by a client. Why do you ask?”

The faint sounds of cars and buses in the street drifted through the window. There was a gentle whoosh as the air conditioning clicked on. Finally, the client looked up, tears streaming down his face.

“She’s dead. It happened just about a week ago.”

“I’m so sorry, Vincent. That must have come as a terrible shock.”

“I hurt her. I killed her, but it was an accident.”

Dr. McCullough hesitated. “You mean there was a crash? You were driving?”

“It wasn’t in a car. We were at her apartment. We got in another fight when I saw your name on her phone. So, she told me about this appointment with you- that she wanted to be strong enough to get me out of her life forever. She wanted help to move on and find somebody normal. That’s when something went off in my head and I grabbed her. I promised her I could



change. She kept saying no, and I kept holding her tighter and tighter till she dropped straight down to the floor. That's when I realized I had really hurt her. I swear I never meant to do that.

"One of the neighbors found her there the next day. I slept over with an old girlfriend who told the cops I was with her all night, so I have an alibi. But I haven't been able to eat or sleep since it happened. I can't get motivated. I'm going to lose my freaking job if I don't get this squared away. Is there anything you can do to help me, Dr. McCullough?"

"Only God can help you, Vincent."

"I don't mean like that. I mean, can you write me a prescription for sleeplessness... for anxiety or something? By the way, you called me Vincent again. Alex was the only one who used my proper name. That's creepy."

The therapist stood and walked over to her desk. "I should be more candid with you now, Vincent. I'm not Dr. McCullough, but I did make an audio recording of our session today."

The client's eyes widened. "Where's the doctor? Who are you?"

The woman smiled. "Dr. McCullough will be resting peacefully on the bathroom floor just a bit longer. His hands and feet are bound with duct tape in case he should awaken prematurely. My name is Mason. Abby Mason. Your late girlfriend Alex was my sister, scum bag."

She lifted her hands from the desk drawer, revealing a semiautomatic handgun aimed directly at the client. The young man remained frozen in his chair, searching for words.

"This isn't really happening," was all he could manage.

"That's what I thought when you called yesterday, asking the correct time for Alex's appointment. I was dumbstruck. You see, I was the one who begged her to see Dr. McCullough. I'm his admin, Vincent. I had recognized the sick way you were controlling my sister, alienating her from family and friends so you never had to face us. I was hopeful my boss could bring her back to her senses. Unfortunately, you strangled her before he could meet her. We buried my baby sister two days before you called."

Abby crossed the room calmly, still holding Vince at gunpoint. Her every move projected icy confidence. By contrast, the disgraced ex-Marine sat there sullen and breathing heavily.

"What are you going to do to me?"

Click. Abby pulled back the slide on the weapon, releasing a round into the chamber. She watched him with a mixture of contempt and sorrow.

"I suppose I could just call the police and turn you in, along with the audiotape of your confession. Or I could exterminate you right now and get out of Dodge. When Dr. McCullough finally gets out of the bathroom, he'll surely fire me and maybe even press charges. I doubt returning to normal will ever be an option for me.

"Life happens in the choices, doesn't it, Vincent? We know the code, but sometimes it's impossible to do the right thing. Your heart is at war with your mind, instinct against clear thinking. We can never fully trust ourselves, can we?"

"I know the right thing would be to hand you over to the authorities. But even though I know that would be best for me in the long run, my gut is tied in knots because it would feel so

unsatisfying. Shooting you in the groin, then in the head, would be like instant therapy. See the problem? I seriously need help, Vincent. There's just something boiling inside me, and nobody understands that better than you.

“What does your gut tell you, Vincent? What would you do?”

*John Peter Beck*

**The Nurse**

I am  
surrounded.

We call it triage,  
as if choosing who dies

is science more  
than guesswork, taking

on powers divine,  
wanting only miracles.

If he was a merciful god,  
would he try us

and these patients so?  
I no longer

sleep unless exhausted,  
eat unless forced.

St. Camillus, you are the saint  
of both nurses and the sick,

touching both sides of the bed,  
both sides of the curtain.

You knew battles  
where men sought to wound and kill

and those fights waged  
to close the rent flesh,

fan the flagging spark  
salvage the flickering spirit.

I am surrounded.  
Help me

to go back  
to the crowded floor,

halls overflowing,  
the decisions that await.

*K. Alma Peterson*

## **Meeting**

Her house was full of the dead  
and nowhere were the quick  
so quick to tell me their sweat  
was from the exertion it took  
to stay alive. She'd been dead  
a month, and earlier, onshore,  
I ran (I cannot run) along the long  
prelude to sensation: cool water  
on my doubts. These were  
my loved ones, simultaneously  
alive and dead, touching my skin,  
explaining why many layers were needed.  
Some bodies resisted long and hard  
more than one of themselves, never mind  
the house full of snakes shedding  
memories of other rivers.

*Kai-Lilly Karpman*  
**Anything Small**

I regret loving anything small.  
A sweet bird watches us  
through a crack in the blinds.

The wild unnerves me. My distance  
from it, how the facts of survival remain  
utterly neutral. The bird holds a worm

in her beak, I celebrate and mourn.  
Loving the small ensures you'll never be happy.  
Everything crushes what it can. Facts,

Men remind me, are not intended  
to be cruel. Couldn't I learn to love  
those cold, metal artifacts?

Winter's grip still offers golden light,  
out of place, yet crushingly beautiful.  
The morning errands, pick up the mail.

Desire returns to say: open your wrist,  
become the wide, wide vision free of fact.  
I wish someone would change all of that.

*Läilä Örken*

## The Glass-Eyed Twin

I got Mimi for Christmas.

“Look, darling, a real antique doll! They found her all alone in an old lady’s attic, or so the man at the shop told us,” Daddy said, carefully lowering her into my arms.

Mimi had plump cheeks, and round glass eyes, and long eyelashes that curled upwards, fluffy and ticklish to the touch. And she could only make a single sound.

“*Maaa!*” she would say, gently and plaintively, and my heart drummed with ache for Mimi, so lonely in a world that had no more use for her.

I kept her with me all the time. We ate together, and slept together, and brushed our hair sitting side by side in front of the brass mirror, and sometimes I would hold Mimi up to the ornate frame to see her reflection, more and more like my own as the time passed.

I told her all the fairy tales I knew by heart, and all the stories I invented in my head, and she listened, her eyes glazed over. And when I picked her up for a kiss, she would say “*Maaaa,*” as a thank you, I suppose.

The winter was mild and rainy, and the constant downpours meant that Mimi and I could not leave the house. Not that it bothered us. First thing in the morning, I would climb into the cushion-strewn nook of the windowsill behind a heavy velvet curtain, and there we would sit, watching the world outside go by, rain stream onto the pavement, and bronze horse statues on their hind legs gulp down the rainwater as it poured from the sodden rags of clouds overhead.

It was during that winter, as I lounged on the scattered cushions, that I first began to feel as if someone else was in the room: staring at me, breathing down the back of my neck. Sometimes my hair would stand on end, and I would whip around and push the curtain aside, my heart beating fast.

But there was no one around except Mimi. For weeks and weeks, we were alone, when Mummy and Daddy went out for the day, and the maids drank tea and gossiped downstairs.

Sometimes we crept down the staircase towards the servants’ quarters and listened to the Penny Dreadfuls they told each other in the dim light of the kitchen lamp. I would crouch on the stairs, terrified and thrilled at the chilling tales of possessed children: demon spawn that lurked in abandoned houses and latched onto unsuspecting travelers, waiting to feast upon their souls. And I clutched Mimi close to me, so tight that I could feel my pulse in my hands, and then it felt like the heartbeat belonged to Mimi: quick and ragged and ticking.

Then one morning, snow began to fall, thick and flaky, from the crumbling sky. We sat on the windowsill with our faces pressed to the glass, trying to follow the trajectory of each crystal clump, but only seeing endless speckles whisked around in the air, folding themselves into blinding white crust that grew on the pavement, and on the roofs of houses, and the iron fence by the park across the road.

When it was finally over, the world covered in a layer of fluffy, sound-cancelling stuff, Mimi looked outside with such longing in her glass eyes that I jumped off the windowsill and threw on my coat, and we ran into the park and played until I was sodden-through.

I could not get warm that night, my teeth chattering in my head despite all the maids' efforts. And the next morning I did not get out of bed. Red saucers swam in front of my face, and the sunlight split my head open.

My little room became my prison. They kept me under the blankets as my throat burned and my head ached, and my inflamed legs doubled in size, and I couldn't even see the sky from my side of the bed—only the fireplace that was no use when I shivered with cold, that burned like a furnace when I shook off the blankets, my mouth parched and dry. Then I had to trust Mimi's whispered stories from the other side: at least the *hallucinations*, as the doctor called them, did some good. Days and nights bubbled together in a sickening goo as I lay there, watching the painted blossoms of the wallpaper by the fireplace.

Until I woke up frozen stiff one morning, and found that I could not turn my head, so weak my muscles must have grown. But all the pain had gone. I beamed at the tall ceiling, and the gigantic window, and the pearly sky crisscrossed with dark triangles of bird wings.

Everything was clear and big, the room so spacious that I thought if I spoke, I would hear my own echo. I almost called out for Mummy, but looking at the sky and listening to the church bells outside felt so peaceful that I didn't bother.

Then Mummy and Daddy came in, hushed and sobbing, and I wanted to talk to them, but they were on the other side of the bed, and I could not see what they were looking at. I went back to staring at the sky when they left, before strange people bustled in with a big lacquered wooden box, and put something inside, and carried it away.

And I was left all alone for another night. No one would come in, or talk to me, or take me in their arms, and I felt so lonely in a world that had no more use for me.

Mummy stumbled into the room, crying, and I became giddy with relief when she scooped me up and held me close. I was going to smile at her, and say I was all better now, but nothing came out of my mouth except a long, plaintive "*Maaaaaa.*"



*Larry D. Thacker*

## **Saint Brittany the Ruthless**

Dr. Paul DeJuste (honorary) was the first to get struck down.

He arrived the funeral home with his young arm candy trophy wife, Hanna, who wasn't so much of a prize any longer some whispered behind their backs, stood in line impatiently, checking his gold watch, playing with his phone, obviously desiring to be anywhere but at this young lady's funeral, got up to the casket, quickly shook some hands and, while obligatorily standing and commenting on what a fine job the funeral home had done, eventually made the mistake of laying a finger absentmindedly on the deceased's nearest shoulder.

Have you ever accidentally touched the distributor of a car while it's running? That's how DeJuste reacted. Like he'd stuck his finger in a socket while standing in a mud puddle. Or maybe as if someone had snuck up and tagged him in the middle of the back with a taser gun. His arm went straight, he let out an awful, vibrating groan, staggered back a few feet and fell into the first pew of grievors.

Ever seen a hand after it's been rattlesnake bitten, all swollen and disfigured and turning brown and black and green? That's how his hand and forearm looked by that night.

Ever seen a dying asshole? That was him a week later, laid up, unable to breathe right, or walk, talk, eyes sunk into his head, the life draining out like that shock had pulled some sort of plug from his soul.

He was the first devil Saint Brittany took out.

The second devil she destroyed was taken out with dumb luck.

Ray Ange got away with murder. Fifteen years ago. Killed his wife sure as the sun will rise tomorrow. But he had a good lawyer. The jury wasn't quite convinced. He had an alibi that lied for him. Everybody knew all this, but you can't argue with a shitty verdict.

Ray was asked by Brittany's mother to serve as a pallbearer for her graveside service. Brittany's mother never believed Ray could do such a thing, so even though he got the stink eye from plenty of people, he didn't hesitate to help. He wasn't going to hide in his own town, he'd say.

He knew the family well but wasn't kin. He'd been sweet on the girl once. The other pallbearers were cousins and an uncle. Right before they closed the casket to roll Brittany out to the hearse, the family took a last moment with the body. The pallbearers were lined up, Ray was last, and they walked by the body, laying a hand on her hands. Her cold little hands were crossed ever so gently over her abdomen. Ray felt obligated to do the same. That was a mistake. He fell to the floor, sick as a poisoned dog, his right hand and arm shaking. An ambulance took him away. He never left the hospital and hardly anyone bothered noticing or caring.

Father Artemis at St. John Catholic (Reformed) was the first to put two and two together and called an emergency meeting of church elders of the Catholic, Episcopal, and Methodist congregations in town. Two mysterious deaths of two infamous characters within a day,

seemingly by way of touching the deceased's corpse? He could smell a miracle from a mile away. He'd managed to get the burial postponed at the last minute. The family balked. The church won, especially after suggesting that, at a minimum, it might suggest some awful disease at hand requiring emergency study.

After a few weeks, much more had happened. A few more men had been struck down. There was something undeniably miraculous at hand.

The reverend sent a letter to the Pope:

*Your Holiness,*

*These may strike you as unorthodox reasons for why we believe Brittany Sanders ought to be considered for beatification and possible canonization, but please hear us out.*

*First, can we consider this question? Can good happen by way of a seeming evil deed? In other words, can our Lord's work be found in what, on the surface, may initially be received as a tragedy? How about a necessary evil?*

*We believe genuinely evil people are being miraculously struck down or maimed by way of a recently deceased young woman of our community. Indeed, we believe miracles are taking place because of her since her mysterious unsolved murder.*

*We have taken to calling the deceased, Saint Brittany, which we realize is premature, but we hope shows our faith in what is to come.*

*Allow us to share our experiences:*

- *Anyone having committed the sin of murder, and who is caused to touch Saint Brittany's body, are immediately stricken with a paralysis of the hand and arm by which they used to touch the corpse, that limb turning dead and darkening within a day, and they are dead within a week, usually agonizingly.*
- *Anyone committing the sin of bearing false witness against their neighbor and is made to touch the body is stricken mute as their tongue swells, turns black, and falls away within a week.*
- *Anyone having a sexual affair outside of marriage and is caused to touch their privates to the deceased, experiences the same deadening and loss within a week.*

*How, your Holiness, can these events not be miracles if they result in good?*

*We've gone through quite a lot of scientific testing already, though we realize the Vatican and Holy See possess your own procedures and scientific body. Ours was conducted by the local university which has its own reputable Osteopathic School of Medicine.*

*The procedures were conducted thusly:*

*Saint Brittany, whose body is incorruptible to date, was secured in an airtight glass coffin in a room just out of the county courtroom. The accused were made aware of this fact. They were also informed that when making their plea of guilty or not guilty, they would then be required to touch Saint Brittany's hand by way of a vinyl glove which extends into the airtight space holding the body.*

*For example, three youths were arrested, accused of homicide. All three plead not guilty, though given the circumstances, their attorneys advised against it. The ringleader, a young man, dropped dead during the test. So did his girlfriend, his accomplice. The third, another girl, survived. She claimed only to have witnessed the crime and taken no part in it.*

*A certain man was accused of embezzling a great amount of money from a local technology company. He plead not guilty, refused to touch the holy corpse, but was made to do so, causing his left arm to turn black within the weekend and his tongue to fall out dead. He remains incarcerated on his seven-year sentence, though is very much invalid.*

*While local authorities consider Saint Brittany's death a cold case, there is hope, due to such great attention, that those guilty of taking her from us will be brought to swift justice.*

*Saint Brittany's work continues weekly here in our community. We pray for your consideration and hope for a positive outcome, your Holiness.*

*Most Sincerely in Agape,*

*Rev. Artemis J. Ramsey, II, Ph.D. +*

Another death brought about by our beloved Saint Brittany, is almost too embarrassing to speak about. It wouldn't have happened, of course, if the coroner's office had better vetted their county interns. The county coroner, Don Wester, had his suspicions, and there were rumors about the young man, Jared White, having taken liberties with cadavers in the past, but nothing had come of it. Yet. He'd dropped out of the local med school, it was rumored, not long after failing gross anatomy courses.

He fell ill after assisting with the girl's second autopsy. He should have never been left alone with the deceased, yet from his evil was birthed our present blessing. Mr. White was a married man, a father of two, a boy and girl, twins. He left them behind. He fell ill the night he took his evil liberties, his maleness turning gangrenous in less than 24-hours. He passed in a terribly painful manner.

Father Artemis informed us, after writing the Pope—that's THE POPE—that there would be no beatification, let alone a snowball's chance in you-know-where for our Saint Brittany to be heralded an official Saint by way of canonization by the church. The Pope would hear nothing of it. He'd send no scientific envoys. What's happening here should not, would not, could not, be associated with the Holy Church, in his preeminent opinion.

Well, that's too bad now, isn't it?

Now, we don't want some political feud with the Vatican. We just want to be left alone. To do as we see fit with our patron saint of justice, Saint Brittany. The way we see it, if the miracles weren't supposed to happen, they never would have started, and they sure wouldn't continue as they are now. She hasn't let up.

She's housed permanently in an alcove chapel we built onto the Catholic church with funds raised from visiting pilgrims. We finally elected us a county judge willing to hold court at the church. Everything's working out just great, I'd say. Judge Williams has no qualms with quoting Saint Brittany's latest statistics to people right before they plead.

The latest cumulative numbers are impressive to say the least:

7 murderers,  
76 liars,  
48 thieves,  
57 adulterers.

But what of the politicians, you ask?

Yes, the politicians are on Saint Brittany's radar as well. Rather than waiting on them being caught for a multitude of transgressions, and given that we know they're *guilty of something*, we are preempting the worry of social embarrassment and are rounding them up for a general visit with the saint. This, of course, accomplishes two things: instantly punishing what we didn't know about in the first place and warning off those who would be tempted in the future.

We were disappointed at first when the church rejected our little miraculous corner of the world. I've got a feeling, though, given how things are going, they may be the ones calling on us soon.

We can only pray, can't we?

*Linda Scheller*

**Subject to Art**

Love like water weeds ensnared  
A tall and slender girl, red-haired  
And pale, a stunning birch in flame  
Whose famous face outstrips her name.

Her downcast grace beguiled the sight  
Of every young Pre-Raphaelite.  
Rosetti, Hunt, and John Millais  
All painted her, but one held sway.

Rosetti kept her as his muse  
And tutored her in forms and hues.  
A decade passed. Unwed, unwell,  
She languished in laudanum hell.

Acclaimed as genius, scorned as low,  
Her art limned women's pain and woe  
In thrall to laws contrived by men  
And biases Victorian.

At last, to keep her in his life,  
Rosetti took her as his wife.  
Addiction brought new cause to mourn:  
Their longed-for child emerged stillborn.

Laudanum drowned her grief and fear.  
She quaffed enough to disappear,  
A fate that even Death abjures  
For life is brief, but art endures.

*Lisa Suhair Majaj*

## **The Dark is All Around You**

The dark is all around you  
the stars blink warily  
the moon's a leaky rowboat  
it will not take you home

the stars blink warily  
the night is steep with waves  
it will not take you home  
you will not find a shore

the night is steep with waves  
your courage has not left you  
you will not find a shore  
and still you travel on

your courage has not left you  
you find your path alone  
and still you travel on  
the moon has left the sky

you find your path alone  
your grief walks close beside  
the moon has left the sky  
the stars are almost gone

your grief walks close beside  
this helps you find the way  
the stars are almost gone  
a hint of dawn is breaking

this helps you find the way  
the moon's a leaky rowboat  
a hint of dawn is breaking  
the dark is all around you

*Marg Walker*

## **I Thought at the Time**

we were nothing alike.

From the port in Maine I called to tell

of the brilliant sea, the thrill of running the rigging,  
how I slept under stars on the bony island

and learned the languages of wind,  
the tiller seized in my calloused hand.

I don't understand you, she said. I could never  
do that. Yes, I thought. Good.

Now, a found photo. Her floral dress is trim.  
She pulls the rowboat's oars, tosses her curls,

laughs at the camera's lens. This was before  
she bore children, more than she wanted,

and I was one of them.

*Michelle Prodaniuk*

## **Two-Faced**

I see things everywhere, figures and shapes that cover the ground and the sky. I see them during the day and at night; they spiral around the air. At work, I answer phones and often get distracted by the swirls of black or white. People hang up on me a lot; I don't care for their complaints, anyway. The shapes form on walls, sometimes they look like monsters; other times, they look like nothing. What I see the most is my twin; my twin isn't real, but at the same time, he is. He appears out of the blue and will have conversations, eat together, even watch TV together. We're very different; he likes different foods, clothes, and TV; he also has a nasty temper and makes threats or gives bad looks to people on the street. I'm glad I have my twin; life would be awfully lonely without him.

It's a Tuesday, and I'm taking the bus to work just like every other day. My twin sits beside me; the bus is fairly busy with people going to work and such. I see a woman standing in front of the bus. She is extremely beautiful with long red hair and bright green eyes; she wears a long black coat. She looks over and has seen me staring. She looks away fast with a frightened look; I wonder why she looks so scared. Then I see my twin and his eyes pierce of evil and malice; I don't like when my twin scares people...I don't like when my twin hurts people either.

At work, the shadows dance around the offices and the sky; I watch them and talk to my twin about the woman with red hair. I can't stop thinking about her; all day at work, she is my only thought. After work, I walk around aimlessly for hours. The weather is crisp fall, and the smell is refreshing. I'm in no hurry to get home; I never really am. I sit on a park bench and to my utter shock, I see the woman with red hair through a window of a café. She looks hard at work, and I admire her from afar. My twin joins me in admiring her, and we watch until she leaves.

I wake up hours later; I'm in bed and slightly confused. My twin sits at the edge of the bed.

"I don't recall the last couple hours," I stated to my twin.

"You never do; you always will forget," my twin said with a sly grin and chuckle.

I feel sick and rush over into the bathroom. When in the light, I see that my hands are bloody and stained. I look at myself and my white shirt and shorts are crimson red and covered with blood. I turn my head as my eye follows the red on myself to a puddle on the floor that leads to the tub. The bathtub has a white curtain that is spotted with blood. I yank the curtain back and there is the woman, the woman with red hair. Her red hair now matches the rest of her. I take some steps back in terror and look into the mirror. I see my twin behind me in the mirror, smiling and feel sick when I see I'm smiling, too.



*N.J. Nofsinger*

## **Reciprocate**

Brown, worn, curled and misshapen leaves that rested upon the earth peacefully were shoved past and crushed, first a pair of heavy withered leather boots pounding across, and then two pale heels that were dragged along the dirt after. The momentum and rush the movement brought in the air was enough to alert all the other leaves ahead to clear a path, dancing around as the two made their way past.

At this time of the year, many of the shrubs and bushes had shed their pretty feathers, appearing thin and sickly, crooked in their posture, and threatening in elongation, protruding from the earth randomly wherever they pleased. Unlike the leaves, they did not care for who came by unless they were forced from their spots by accident or on purpose, crying out when one of their limbs snapped in half or broke off. Some got what was coming to them, but others got the last laugh, even if it was as minor as snagging a piece of a cotton white nightgown or the skin on a cold ankle.

For all the tall crusty trees that watched on in utter judgment of the careless act, each offered a different variation of apathy. They were all bystanders, entirely aware of what was being carried out, likely itching to take over and perform it in their own way, yet they did not care to help or even interfere, choosing to remain only as obstacles for the passersby. Oftentimes, they made eye contact with the one in front, dressed in rags and a white clay face mask with inky painted swirls on its skin, when they glanced around them cautiously. They held a woman under the arms, their limbs locked together like opposing flowers, dragging her and her nightgown through the forest. A red mask of her own plated half of her face, obscuring the upper portion and leaving the rest up to the imagination beside the thick long black hair that hung from her head like a cape.

Anyone who witnessed this might want to step in or alert someone with actual authority. Cry out to all the trees, shrubs, bushes, and leaves, beating at the ground in the hope that at least a grain of dirt might do something for the woman. Except she herself did not seek out any kind of attention. In fact, she was stiffer than a plank of wood, or comparatively as stiff as the surrounding trees. Her limbs hung from her frozen pale body, swaying aimlessly along the ground and herself. One would assume she was taken in her sleep judging by the nightgown, drugged or even knocked unconscious. Drugged she may have been, but not by traditional means, her eyes peering out at all the trees that looked down upon her from above, shaky as she was carried through the unconcerned crowd.

Her captor, whoever they were, huffed and puffed, their dark hands shaking under the woman's arms. They rushed to bring her to their destination, occasionally stumbling on the ground or sloppily harming the woman. She never seemed to mind, unbothered by the bumps in the road, scrapes, and bruises. Looking to have completely given themselves up to this

individual, it only clouded things the rougher they were with her, lacking all kinds of concern or even reaction to what was taking place.

The blue of the night was accented by the glow of a full moon, fitted with a small garden of clouds that crept around it, not daring to move in front and obscure its nightly shine. Shining down upon a small clearing in the woods, it was here where she was dropped on the ground. The one place where light shone through the fog of the skies.

They inched to a tree, abruptly spinning back around to face her as she shifted positions. She had extended one leg ahead of her, the other curled close at her right side. The two of them were silent, her captor shivering at the cold breeze that shimmied past them and along her hair and nightgown. Her gaze was positioned upwards at them, who looked down upon her from where they stood.

Judging by the history attached to the masks, the captor was Volto, a kind of larva, ghost-like and common enough for any who sought its anonymity. The woman was Colombina, supposedly brought upon by the sheer imagining that the original wearer was simply too beautiful to be seen without it upon a stage, seemingly always sought after by those that desired her.

She laid her palms on the ground at her sides and leaned back a little, looking to be waiting for something. Volto was completely aware, visibly trembling from the air outside and smaller in stature from how they were hunching and holding themselves. Her captor lifted a hand as they tried to suppress a cough, lingering for a few seconds longer just before they reached into their pockets, sifting through it for a dagger. Holding it above them, when angled correctly, light glimmered off its blade, ceasing as it was lowered.

Colombina looked above her, her neck falling back. They approached, bending down in front of her and holding the blade ahead of themselves. The woman looked to have readied herself, submissive in acceptance of a violent fate. Her flesh anticipated the stab of the dagger, warm and inviting in its welcoming arms. When a minute passed and nothing followed though, she returned her gaze ahead of her, cold with confusion and surprise.

The dagger shook in Volto's hands, who had not driven it into her. They had remained where they were, a hoarse and uneasy breathing seeping out from behind the mask. She sat upright at this, her shoulders rising in alarm as their hands weakly let the knife lay at their knees. Her captor made contact with the ground, sitting upon it, one hand around the dagger, and the next grasping their mask.

In the dimness of the clearing, the features of a dark-skinned man were released from the confines of the mask. He was around the same age as her, both of them just a few years into early adulthood. Upon this face was nothing but fright, his lips quivering in utter terror. His curled hair was messy, thrown off by the mask that had held most of him together up to this point. Without it now, he had lost all certainty and confidence in himself, anticipating the rage of Colombina as she moved closer to him.

Volto flinched at the action, nearly crying out before he himself froze up, feeling her hands upon the one he had dutied with holding the dagger. They found their way around his

fingers, melding together in their warmth. She was right up against him, within inches of his face, lifting a finger to her lips as she shushed him. Reaching to her own mask, she removed it from the upper half of her face, displaying her expression of understanding and an unscathed patience. At this, he calmed, his posture loosening as she rubbed the back of his hand with a thumb. Dropping her mask to the dirt, he did the same, both falling right beside each other, mirrored images of each other in the directions they faced.

Her lips curled into a small reassuring smile, slowing his pulse more and more until he was perfectly at peace. With this came a weakening grip on the dagger, allowing Colombina to take it from him and lean back from him. Just before he could protest or return to a point of self-doubt, she swiftly drove the blade into her abdomen, a pained grunt spewing out with the blood that quickly enveloped the newly formed wound under the nightgown on the surface of her flesh. Stunned at the abruptness of it, Volto stared helplessly, at first cringing at every moan of hers. Her breathing had climbed to a rapid pace, now rivaling his just minutes ago, but quickly steadied when she adjusted to the sensation. She pulled the dagger out and slumped over, letting the bloodied blade rest between them.

His eyes had followed it out of her and now to the place where it rested, settling on the oncoming decision he had to make. He eyed her desperate and dazed expression, hunger protruding before her from her breath that floated past within the freezing air. And that was enough, earnestness overcoming his uncertainty and guiding his hands to the bloodied dagger and directing it right into his own abdomen. Having committed to the act, blood pooled around his own twin wound, Volto holding in an anguished scream from the pain. Except like her, the burning agony soon passed, leaving when he retrieved the dagger and dropped it in the dirt between them.

Panting tiredly, he watched blood seep through his clothing, then looked upwards at Colombina, being met with a relieved and otherwise dizzying stare. She inched closer and took him in her arms, falling on him and pressing her lips to his. As they swapped liquids, tossed, and turned in the dirt, rolling and jostling upon each other, a small puddle of blood made itself known below. Together, their wounds filled it, being neither more or less of his or her or her blood, but both of theirs, mixed equally.

Beside the discarded masks, this spot was a pact of undying commitment. A pact of love.

*Rodolfo G. Ledesma*

**It Burned**

it burned  
a hole in a dark corner  
deep in my mind

in that awful New York  
minute when she turned  
and coldly  
walked away

her strides persuasive  
in marking a fault line  
I never  
would have guessed

a suspicion eating  
its way  
to the surface

gone in seconds  
as if she had seen  
in my silence  
the stillness  
of something broken

gone like rain  
disappearing in the sand  
her forced smile  
I realized too late  
a hasty wave of goodbye.

*Samantha Penturf*

## **Know No End**

Sunlight swiped the side of my face and woke me from my blank sleep. I swallowed hard, hoping my spit would be enough to coat my dry throat. Do dead people get thirsty, I wondered. My eyes opened and began to focus. I was in the same room. The room where last night I had accepted my demise. The place was a disaster but one on our own making. A fly zapped over a pile of crusted plates in the sink. Empty prescription and liquor bottles littered the floor, marking the territory where they were emptied. Newspapers covered the kitchen table. And in the middle of all this mess, there was Kevin.

Kevin lay stretched across the couch, slack-jawed and motionless. He was dead or in a slumber close enough to it. The night before he had mixed a drug cocktail for the final big event. “Do you want any?” he asked as he shook the medical maraca, and his hips gyrated with the rattle beat.

“No, I want to see it happen,” I responded, even though I later managed to drink myself to the state I was trying to wake up from. In the movies the male lead would have said something profound in response, possibly joined my efforts in solidarity. Unaffected by my dramatic response, Kevin threw a handful of colored dots to the back of his throat.

I couldn't wait to be rid of him, even if it meant my riddance, too. I did try to break up with him once over a text. That was the week the broadcaster announced there were no other efforts that could be done. All missions had failed. Kevin appeared at my door that night sobbing and saying he couldn't imagine spending our time left without each other. I felt guilty but mostly embarrassed by the front porch display. His snotty heaves and the moths were under the spotlight. I finally let him in, and he never left. There we were in that same room, possibly purgatory.

Whatever realm I was in, it still had hangovers. The sharp light penetrated through my eyes and made my brain feel dried and shriveled. The headache was more evidence that I was still alive. Kevin's status was still undetermined. Anxiety started to stir in my core. It crept through my bloodstream as I let my thoughts run unchecked. What if nothing has happened? My heart pounded as the complete uncertainty intensified. My dog, Mike, popped his head up from the pile of clothes on the floor that doubled as his bed. He always jumped from my lap when I passed out for his own space to watch me sleep. A good guard dog. I crouched on the ground and teared up as Mike wiggled his sausage shaped figure over to me and licked my face. “Oh, Mike,” I cried, as I wrapped my arms around his tiny body. He squirmed, anticipating I would take him outside before his bladder popped.

I opened the front door and put one foot out, as I held Mike on my hip to shield him from whatever was on the other side of the door. My leg appeared fine, not melted off my body. I crept forward and football tucked Mike into my stomach. I looked up at the sky with a squint, further challenging the sun. I was in a trance seeing the clear blue sky until Mike's whine

knocked me out of it. I set him on the grass but walked my bare legs on both sides of him as a potential shield against this world. The street sat early Sunday morning quiet, but I could not recall the day of the week. It wasn't supposed to be any day. The nearby highway used to sound like a distant river, but the flow dried up weeks ago. As soon as Mike looked up at me in relief, I snatched him up and ran back into the house. "Mike, we're alive," I whispered to him with my back to the closed door, my eyes still spangled from being outside. His black button eyes blinked at me. He fidgeted to freedom and trotted over to his food sack. It was empty after I drunkenly poured the entire contents on the floor last night, so Mike could die happy. I grabbed Kevin's pork rinds bag and poured the rest on the floor for Mike's celebratory breakfast. I began to chug a jar of boiled water, carelessly dribbling some on my shirt until I stopped to inhale deeply and leaned over the countertop. I took another look at Kevin. What are we going to do about Kevin? I threw down some newspaper to soak up the spilled water. The paper on the floor began to water blur the ink. "Global Scientists Confirm All Attempts to Stop Collision Have Failed," the murky headline read.

I grabbed my bra that was draped over the back of the chair. I put it on under my t-shirt, feeling newly modest in case Kevin woke up. He had seen these boobs a dozen times over, but he was no longer welcome to viewership. My mind began to wonder if some sort of rapture had occurred. All the Christians got sucked up and left the losers behind. That didn't explain why the Earth was still intact, though. I tried to recall the Sunday School lesson about the fiery rapture beast when I remembered the gun Kevin stole from an abandoned sports store. I pulled it out from underneath the sink and perched myself back in the same chair I had previously waited for something to happen to us.

I finally heard Kevin shift around on the couch and I met his eyes when they opened. "Are we alive?" he rasped, little confusion or shock on his face with a slow yawn. He had this remarkable ability to benignly operate his life at the dullest bare minimum. The fact that he could oversleep for the end of the world, or lack thereof, was pathetically typical. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked at me, "What's going on?"

"I am pretty certain we didn't die last night," I said.

"I guess the collision time estimation was off. Of course, they can't even get that right," he said, as though the weatherman reported no chance of rain and then received an afternoon sprinkle. He reached for what was left of his pill collection.

"No, there is nothing in the sky anymore either," I corrected him. I hoped this might bait a reaction, but he just fell back on the couch and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Now what are we supposed to do?" he said.

"We are not doing anything," I said. "You're leaving." He froze with his hands still on his face.

"What are you talking about?" he asked through his fingers, his degree of hangover evident by the exhausted confusion in his voice.

"I am saying I want you to leave," I said. Finally, he jolted up.

"We just spent the end of the world together. You were going to die with me," he said.

His voice trembled. Again, I felt embarrassed, but everything continued spinning on its axis.

“Yeah,” I said flatly as I walked to get another glass of water. “And we were not going to die together. You passed out early last night and I stayed up staring out the window alone,” I said. Kevin bent over to grab his pants and shimmied them up his legs. I remember the first time he did that after we slept together. I wasn’t upset that it happened, but I wasn’t happy either. It was just something that I did. The only thing I was mad about afterwards was how little I enjoyed it and how much he did. But now, he wasn’t pulling up his pants in joy; rather, in agitation.

“You are just being emotional because things are crazy right now,” he said. “I’m not leaving you. We love each other.”

“Yes, you are,” I said, still in my affectless tone.

He stood there silent with his head tilted, as though he was waiting for me to come to my senses. I stared back until I broke him, “You are a cold miserable bitch, you know that?” Nothing back from me. He hastily started to grab his things scattered around our former doomsday den. He yelled with each movement, but I only registered the sound, not the words. I waited until he walked to the door, and then I followed him. “Where am I supposed to go?” he asked as he turned around to show me his lost eyes.

“Kevin, you have an apartment,” I said and shut the door. After a moment of hearing no movement, I opened the door where Kevin still stood. He started to smile before I pulled the gun from the back of my shorts and said, “Fucking leave, Kevin.”

“Jesus,” he yelled as he jumped back. I slammed the door and locked it. I set down the gun and I felt adrenaline flood my stomach as I started to laugh. I slid to the floor where Mike came to me. I picked him up and placed him between my bent knees and face. My cheeks pushed into the soft fur of his neck. Every time I hugged him, his glow absorbed into my body and rerouted my faulty wiring. I used to cry when I would drink too much and then thought about him dying. I should have known I wasn’t in hell due to Mike’s presence.

The first time I saw Kevin was in a photo on my phone. Swipe left or right to reject or accept this potential suitor. I began to fill the empty bar seats next to me with warm bodies that I could easily pluck out of a photo on the app.

“So, how long have you lived in this city?” Jeremy asked, his glasses were too small for his face.

“Do you have siblings?” Zach asked, he had one long gray hair in his eyebrow.

“What’s the weirdest question you’ve heard on a date?” Thomas asked. He had on flip-flops.

“They said it wasn’t a threat to our atmosphere,” Kevin said, as he flipped his beer bottle cap. Kevin didn’t really ask questions. Kevin just talked.

“Let’s hope,” I said.

On that first date I ended up going for the third drink. One was obligatory while you got to know each other, a second drink signaled you both were interested in carrying on the

conversation. A third drink meant you would likely be kissing or maybe more if the logistics of a location worked out. I continued to drink until my guard was low enough that I would take him home and entangle our bodies long enough to forget we were all going to die. His smile was nice, and his beard gave me the sense that he was open to new ideas and had decent taste in movies.

That morning after our first date, Kevin woke up and kissed me on the lips. As soon as I swung my feet over the bed to collect my clothes, he grabbed my hand. "I have to get ready for work," is what I said. *Please get the fuck out of my house*, is what I thought. When he finally got up to leave, he leaned in and kissed me as I tried to shut the door. "I'll text you later," he said. I had no intentions of responding later. A text later meant he was convinced we would carry this forward into next week. Then maybe in continuum until we moved in together and I finally agreed to marry him. After that, I would just let it go on and wait the whole thing out. We would be together until the end of our boring lives. Or the end of the world. One in the same.



*Teryn Tominaga*  
**An Ode to My the First**

To you who they say to be right  
In the Wrong moment  
I refuse to let you be but a memory  
Yet as was our agreement

To you who I so easily adore  
My mind lost in our abyss  
To turn strangers  
Would hurt more than your kiss

To you who in a few  
Moon phases we submerged  
Exchanges of affinity  
Free of the forgotten world

To you who seeks penance  
For where is the crime?  
Howbeit it appears  
Shunning the budding months of yours and mine

To you who brought forth  
Sweet words, lullabies made  
I fell in love with how  
My affections weren't repaid

To you who resides in my mind  
I hear you in melodies  
See you, flickering on film  
Yet I want no remedy

To you whom I reassured  
Has my accord without fumble  
I was always a liar  
Where do I land as I crumble?

To you, a deemed "bad idea"  
Though never a fault

I'll pretend not to feel for you  
Let me fall, let me fall

To you who I found holding my heart  
Whereby you selfishly returned  
Time turns it to frost  
I'd rather it had burned

To you, in who's clumsy vines  
I'd been caught  
How could you release me?  
Yours, until I'm not