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ONE

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A flash fiction anthology

Ellipsis Zine: ONE

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- *Steve*

- 5 Expedition * by Stephanie Hutton
- 5 Water by Joely Dutton
- 6 Aubade by J. Bradley
- 7 The Tyranny of the Coiffure (nf) by Tyrel Kessinger
- 7 Neverland * by Christina Dalcher
- 9 Girls' Night In * by Cathy Ulrich
- 10 House Number One by Eleanor Jones
- 11 Yard Sale by Nick Black
- 11 Spring Cleaning (nf) * by Richard de Nooy
- 12 Lost by F E Clark
- 13 $1 + 1 = 3$ * by Jennifer Harvey
- 14 One Carriage Away by Amanda Quinn
- 15 The Pragmatist * by Sian Brighal
- 17 My Last Piece of Genius by Sarah Wallis
- 18 Countdown by Mark Dixon
- 19 Henry in Exile by Mark Sadler
- 20 Cell for One by Damhnait Monaghan
- 21 Tangerine by Chris Milam
- 22 The Crack In Everything (nf) * by Samuel J Fox
- 23 What Happens When Hot Air and Cold Air Meet? by Danny Beusch
- 24 Silverfish by Simon Pinkerton
- 25 Recovery * by Brandy Wilkinson
- 27 Bird Girl by Janelle Hardacre
- 28 Love Is Plastered by Caleb Echterling
- 29 The Things We Let Go by Stephanie Bento
- 29 Active Shooter by Kathy Lanzarotti
- 30 Eating Letters by Clodagh O'Brien
- 31 1 For Sorrow... by Lee Hamblin
- 33 Birth (nf) by Maggie Jankuloska

(nf) nonfiction *Previously published online

- 33 Global Warming * by Nicholas Cook
- 36 One Last Time by Sophie Watson
- 37 My Dad: No Relation by Eilise Norris
- 38 Sainsbury Sorrow by Louise Mangos
- 39 Scar by Victoria Richards
- 40 Halt, Desist, Cease by Gaynor Jones
- 41 Abandoned by JY Saville
- 42 Daisy Chain by Debbi Voisey
- 43 The Blackbird Sings by Melissa Goode
- 44 Different Kinds of Broken by Jan Kaneen
- 45 Thinking of the One Who Got Away by Federica Silvi
- 45 Here But You by Sophie Stern
- 46 My, She was Yar by Zoë Meager
- 47 Calla Lilies by Stephen Jackman
- 48 Caught by Nathalie Kernot
- 49 The Day Sonny James Went Missing by Janis Lane
- 49 Melange by Karen Jones
- 50 Division (nf) by Charles Allison
- 51 A Dream of Yesterday by Christopher M Drew
- 54 Only One by Alexandria Nicole
- 55 Paternity Test by David Alexander
- 56 The Basket Case by T. L. Sherwood
- 57 What's in a Name by Lucie McKnight Hardy
- 58 Dog by Jason Jackson
- 59 Day One by J. S. Chlapowski
- 60 Out of All of Us by Yael van der Wouden
- 61 The Museum by Bibi Hamblin
- 62 Desperate Teething Tumor by Noa Sivan

Expedition

by Stephanie Hutton

My sharpness is smoothed out at the edges. White fog has seeped through the tent lining, swirled around the fleece of my hood, into my grey matter. As my tent rocks, the mercury level drops a fraction more. In the sideways sleet I can't figure out how far north of the main party I am. The vanilla weakness of them, giving up so soon. Those spoilt boy-babies. Twenty-six years of mockery fuelled my legs. I'd chanted onwards through my teeth like a hundred thousand Hail Marys. The silence of snow absorbed my words.

Cramps in my limbs shock me back into now. Beyond cold, beyond numbness, comes a swampy heat. I pull at my clothes, gasping. A voice like that newscaster from back home with the high neck sweater and soothing voice is telling me the heat is an illusion: keep clothed, curl up, wait for help. It is outside of my control. Fast fingers that belong to another pull at my clothes. I lie back as his darkness crowds over me. The pant of a lover, the sweet syrup of my body's reply. Underneath layers of cloth and rage, I remember that I am woman. His weight squeezes the air from me. Tender hands stroke my throat. At last, I am wanted.

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Water

by Joely Dutton

Air escaped as water pushed in, with a muffled rush that made Ryan's gut creep. His one year old giggled holding the plastic bottle under the surface, filling the bath with more bubbles that rotated slowly and came back on themselves.

Ryan's son repeated 'bubbow bubbow', practising the word. He looked at Ryan smiling an unspoken plea. Ryan hadn't expected those loving looks he'd get from his child.

The boy watched for his dad's attention but an unwanted idea was distracting Ryan, of Jake having been a one year old. He remembered the man's name. Jake had been small, once.

No one knew what Ryan did to Jake. He'd had no comeback for what he'd done. They were both eighteen when they'd met that night, walking home through the park. Jake was gobby, like he had been too many times. But with no-one else around, that time Ryan had pinned him at the brook to warn him off, mouth curling into the shape of his rage. And when Jake laughed, he'd leaned in and he'd heard air escaping then and knew he should stop.

He stayed there. Until muffled bubbles smoothed.

He'd waited months for a uniform at his door, for CCTV footage of the park on his telly. And when there was none, he felt invincible.

His son babbled to him again, chubbiness shining, wet under spotlights. Ten years on from that night, Ryan still rotated explanations about cocaine and not planning and man deserving it. He thought how, if he'd been sentenced, he'd only just be up for release. Instead, he had his missus and his kid. As much reward as any man gets.

Bathing his best prize, he felt the detachment of not deserving it. Punishment had found its route. It was seeping in like water.

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Aubade

by J. Bradley

On day 74, the boy with chainsaws for arms carved a smile into the house for his father, included dimples. He sat on the driveway until the sun went down. He wanted his father's car to be the first thing it saw.

Later that night, the boy with chainsaws for arms thought he heard his father walk in the house, but it was just the footsteps he had stored, the *honey*, *I'm home* decayed to *oney ome*.

The Tyranny of the Coiffure

by Tyrel Kessinger

Once, I refused to cut my hair. My father, who thought it the practice of “druggies” to wear one’s hair in such fashion, aired this belief religiously. Once, before I got in my car to do whatever teenagers with cars do, he stopped me. In the throes of one of his infamous moods, he demanded, like king to peon, that I cut my hair. Cut it or lose it, he said, implying he’d do it if I didn’t voluntarily. (I was wise enough not to answer: “just try it, old man.”) Cut it or the keys are mine. Once, on a cold November afternoon, my father took the keys to my treasured ‘91 Ford Escort hatchback while I stood my ground. I became an unyielding statue, rigid and unbending like the bare trees of our yard, not flinching, appendages beginning to tingle in the frigid air. Once, I made a close-mouthed vow to the open atmosphere that I would plant myself in the frozen ground until my keys were returned to me and I won deliverance from my father’s tyranny of the coiffure. Once, after nearly twenty minutes of looking a fool who had not the sense to come in from the cold my father silently capitulated and I was crowned winner of a small battle. My father: 789. Me: 1. He watched me as I drove away, victorious. I didn’t grin until I was out of sight. Not because I knew I’d reflect on this memory later in life; recall my youth, remember the hardness of my father’s face softening under a winter sky. Certainly, it was only because my hair was safe. Once, I lived in open rebellion. To my father; to desire outlawed. To dreams restricted. Though only just the once.

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Neverland

by Christina Dalcher

Licorice-flavored steam rises from the bath. At home we have normal bubbles from a pink plastic bottle, but Gran picks elderflower leaves from her tree in

the courtyard and boils them until they stink nicely and make my nose twitch like I've somehow turned into a rabbit. When I'm shriveled like a fig left out too long in the sun, Gran drains the tub and rubs my skin with the world's scratchiest towel. It tingles and it tickles, both at the same time. Gran never uses fabric softener.

Gran has three sausage-shaped dogs that never make any noise. They come waddling into the bathroom, lapping at my toes with rough tongues. I giggle and squirm and stick my arms up into the silk nightie I get to wear whenever I come for a sleepover. I ask her if silk is magic. She says she doesn't know, but she thinks it is.

"Time for brushies!" she says, leading our parade out of the bath and into her room. On the way, my feet stick to the plastic carpet runners and make cha-cha noises every time I lift up a heel.

We take turns, sitting on the big bed with the sausage-dogs. Gran's hair is a soft, gray waterfall that spills down her back. I count to one hundred and then we switch. The stiff bristles graze my scalp and pull a little. She sings while she brushes because she says singing makes your hair long. I say maybe that's why Mommy never lets her hair grow out, and Gran laughs. I hear bells when she does that.

Later we eat tiny sausages from a tin. They taste like raw frankfurters. Or baby's fingers. The dogs lick my hands clean.

"Beddy-byes," Gran says. She tucks me in with a hot water bottle covered in kitten fur, which she says is mink, but I know anything this soft is really made from kitten. We sing a lullaby and make up the words as we go. Tomorrow we'll sweep snails from the house and tug carrots and beets from the garden and afterward I'll go back home for dinner that isn't made from baby's fingers and baths with regular bubbles from pink plastic bottles. We'll never have any pets at home, not even the kind that don't make noise, because Mommy says she's allergic.

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Girls' Night In

by Cathy Ulrich

We've run out of forks, so we use wooden chopsticks to eat with, use our hands. Mama bought the chopsticks at the Asian market down the street. She bought them and sriracha sauce and a packet of red beans that she boiled with sugar on the stove for an entire afternoon to make *anko*.

It was still lumpy at the end, though, and Mama muttered *can't do anything right*, like she does, and dumped it down the garbage.

I wanted good anko, you know, she said, and that night we ate takeout from cardboard boxes. We used the chopsticks then, too, and Mama tipped the Mandarin-speaking delivery boy with a ten.

We're eating mashed potatoes that came out of a box, we're eating pieces of bacon that Mama cut with scissors before frying on the stove.

Aren't we lucky we have a gas stove? Mama says. *Aren't we lucky we have matches?*

We boil water in the teapot and pour it into the bathtub, over and over, until it's full. We sit in it in our bathing suits, Mama stretching her legs over the edge and sighing. Candles flicker on the bathroom counter. Reflections of candles flicker in the mirror.

I wish we could watch a movie, says Mama.

Right now, she's in love with Greta Garbo.

Those eyebrows, sighs Mama, shakes her head. *I know they're plucked.*

There's potato flakes on your chin, says Mama, and wipes them off with a damp washcloth. *Don't you think this water's getting cold?*

Mama moves the candles one by one back into the kitchen. We drip water onto the floor, even though we're all bundled up in beach towels. Mama tosses paper towels over the puddles so we won't slip, puts the mashed potatoes pot in the sink with the rest of the dishes.

I should wash these. Says: *I should, I should.*

Outside is black, the blackest we've ever seen. We look out the window for any lights that aren't the moon, aren't the stars. We miss the neon light from

the nearby casino, miss the lit-up billboard advertising dental surgery. The whole world is dark when we look out the window, dark for days.

When will the sun come back again?

Soon, says Mama, *soon*, and blows out the candles, one by one by one.

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House Number One

by Eleanor Jones

Mum has made the new house sound so cool. ‘It’ll have a massive swimming pool, a garden for you to play in, thousands of rooms,’ she says, her smile bright but her hands shaking. Looking through her purse, I find a key behind some old receipts. The key is silver, and has a tag on it that says ‘one’ in black marker. This won’t be any old house, not like the one we live in now, which is boring fifty. This will be house Number One. We will be the first house on the street, Number One, the best. I imagine our new house, sporting a swimming pool, with a large number one proudly displayed in gold on the front door.

One night, as soon as dad trudges off to the pub, mum scrambles for her suitcase, throwing clothes in haphazardly. She told me not to tell dad about the move, saying it’s a surprise. Somehow, I can’t see dad coming back with the same excitement as I did at my surprise party last year.

While she packs, she cries softly, tears falling down her cheeks. I don’t know why - the new house sounds amazing. I throw my swimming costume into the suitcase. For some reason that makes mum cry harder. We walk out of the door, catching endless buses in pursuit of house Number One. Suddenly, mum stops outside a looming block of flats. Kids my age hang around nearby, leering at us. ‘Come on,’ I say impatiently. ‘We need to keep going. How long until we reach the house?’

But mum walks towards the flats, clasping the key that should lead us to house Number One. ‘Maybe the swimming pool is around the back,’ I think wisely, as I run to catch up with her.

Yard Sale

by Nick Black

Vern sat in his yard with his life in a box at his feet, and a sign, ‘Best Offer Accepted, ONO’. He had one offer for the box, so long as it was emptied first.

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Spring Cleaning

by Richard de Nooy

“Where should we start?” I ask.

“Maybe at either end,” shrugs the nurse.

We glance at each other – my love and I – and nod in agreement.

She takes the head, I take the feet, working towards each other.

“Nice and warm,” I say.

“Microwave,” says the nurse. “I can put in more if you want.”

“We should be alright,” I say. “She’s not very big.”

I pull her toes apart and clean in between.

“Wonderful!” she had sighed as I massaged hand cream into her soles, marvelling as her bird-like toes unfurled from their spasm. “Why didn’t you tell me you were so good at this?”

Tarsals. Metatarsals. What’s the anklebone called?

When the wipe cools, I drop it into the bedpan.

I work my way up her hairless shins and calves.

See my love lifting my mother’s breasts to clean places unseen.

I work my way up her thighs. Left and right. Front and back. Lifting her legs at the knee. Taking my time. Summoning courage.

I glance at my love.

When she nods, I take a fresh wipe and dive down the crease, deep into my mother’s groin, pretend I’m spring cleaning the house of my birth.

Lost

by F E Clark

I woke with the song of the run in my head. In the evening we went to walk the course route to see if I could take part in the race. I remember because it was the first day the newspapers printed the photo of the child.

Along the esplanade, blown by the north wind, we went. Practicing for the leisure of running; inexplicable the unnecessary challenges we set ourselves.

We miscalculated the late summer evening, night fell, Prussian blue bled with the lights; car red, street orange. Between the thrum of the city and the roar of the sea I felt both cocooned and out of kilter.

A solitary man walked up from the beach onto the pavement in front of us. He had dark hair, wore a sand coloured suit. His hands were cupped in front of him, as if he was carrying a precious gift from the sea. He walked with a ceremony that seemed from another place or time. I don't think he even saw us.

He disappeared into the darkness ahead of us. The wind slapped gusts of rotting fish stink from the harbour in our faces. My coat snapped around me.

I gasped aloud when we saw him next. He was standing on the roof of a concrete shelter further along the beachfront. Hands pressed together. In prayer? Up and out to the sea and sky. I averted my eyes. I regret that now, I wish I had looked harder. Later, we would speculate the man's intent.

I never did the run in the end.

Later I would remember, imagine I understood, this entreaty to the heavens and oceans. The next day the photo of the dead child, washed up on a beach hundreds of miles away, was still all over the media.

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1 + 1 = 3

by Jennifer Harvey

‘There’s this thing he does,’ I say.

She doesn’t let me finish.

‘Yeah, you told me already.’

But I ignore her, because in my head, it’s started already. I can see him. Smell him. Taste him.

Early morning, the air hazy with the musky smell of sex and sleep. Me, flopped on the sofa, still woozy with it all. My eyes smudged with yesterday’s mascara, so when I watch him, it’s like peering through a gauze of last night’s sweat and kisses. All I can do is lie there and watch.

He’s in the kitchen fixing coffee, his every move slow and hypnotic. He flicks a switch, and the oily aroma of freshly ground coffee fills the room. I watch him as he gives the coffee a stamp, then eases it into the machine, which sets to dripping and buzzing.

He knows I’m watching him, I’m sure of it. And that’s when he does this thing. A tiny exhalation. And when I hear it, I think of Marilyn Monroe. And it makes me laugh. Sends a little goose-bump of giggles down my spine.

I exhale.

Gina looks at me, and I see it there behind her eyes, the flicker, the tell.

So I breathe out again and let the whisper of his name whistle through my teeth. And the sound of his name there between us makes her jittery.

‘Whatever you’re thinking, I don’t want to know, okay?’ she says.

‘Yeah, I bet you don’t,’ I think.

And I want to tell her about Marilyn and how sexy it is that he can be like that. Feminine. Strong. Sensual.

I want to tell her about the coffee and the smudged mascara. But she’s spoiled the moment, and already the freshly ground smell is vanishing. I swallow to try and catch what’s left of it, but it’s gone. It feels like he’s evaporating right there in my head, and I think, to hell with it.

‘It’s got so I can’t think straight. You ever had that with a guy?’

‘What?’

‘You know, crazy, breathless, ...

‘Can’t say I have.’

‘Shame.’

She looks at me like she’s daring me to say something, so I push it.

‘You know,’ I tell her. ‘What you need is a guy like Aaron.’

‘Listen, quit going on about him, alright?’

‘Geez, what is it with you? It’s getting so I can’t say a damn thing about him.’

And maybe she thinks I’m going to come straight out now and ask her, she can feel I’m on the verge it, so she puts her arm around my shoulder and says, ‘Sorry. I’ve just got stuff on my mind is all.’

‘Yeah,’ I think. ‘I know you have.’

It’s got that I can see it in her eyes every time she thinks of him. Conflict. Complexity. Right there in her pupils. The way they narrow, then widen, at the mention of his name.

But she knows I’m never gonna chase it. Knows I’m never gonna spoil it.

She knows I’ve done the arithmetic. Knows I’m happy with the score.

One plus one. Sometimes it makes three.

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One Carriage Away

by Amanda Quinn

Through two windows I see you. Wearing the shirt I bought last Christmas. You’re smiling at someone else. She has my pixie cut. And my tortoiseshell glasses. I bet she likes Cary Grant films too. I want to bang on the glass. Warn her. But she’ll be here – like me – soon enough.

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The Pragmatist

by Sian Brighal

Baxter had let them down, so Baxter got it. He got it in the head. A solid dry branch. I can still see the dry bark and dead wood exploding outwards like a fragmented halo: perhaps a tooth or two flashed red and white. While he gurgled and twitched, we emptied his pack and shared out the extra rations. We sit and somehow make a decision on where to go based on hints and veiled support: no one wants to be a Baxter. I almost laugh at the preposterous housekeeping as we stuff the empty food wrappers into our packs while ignoring basic funerary pleasantries.

Seven days out and this was survival. War? Disease? No, this is eight—excuse me—six of us, lost and walking through the forests of North America. A hiking trip gone wrong. Baxter was the second—well spotted. Maggie had been the first. Sad that, but she just wouldn't calm down and be part of the group. At least we'd buried her...or perhaps just hid her. I'm not sure now.

The maps were wrong. That had sparked it off. Somehow, they just didn't quite tally up with the actual geography. Resentment had crept in at the easy way we'd laughed off the guide. There were trails, and this was their backyard, dude! Getting lost happened to rookies...tourists. I'm the only tourist: a Brit hooking up with some locals. I'm keeping my mouth shut. I see them looking at me, like I'm some kind of bad luck charm.

The first two days had been awe inspiring, basking in the glory of the landscape, feeling the history. We'd all kind of paired up. Funnily enough, I'd ended up with Maggie. She'd been fun. It had been fun. Then the trail had petered out. That's when it stopped being fun. Amazing how quickly relationships degrade when the chips are down.

Then came the reasoning, the attempt at logic. We couldn't be far off the trail. Logic had helped for a few days: we'll see it soon, just a few more hours. Two days of exhausting rationalising had been too much. Maggie had asked for it, really. And bonus! More rations for the rest of us. Odd, but I can't remember feeling much else...other than the extra foil packets, cool and

reassuringly solid, in my hand. It was so much more satisfying than soft hair and warm skin.

When Baxter had proven false, we'd been lost five days. I expect we're doing okay under the circumstances: two dead in five days. Now he's gone, we have more rations, and that's good. They haven't looked at me funny in a while now. I'm reassured more by the way Susanne is moaning; pretty soon, they'll get tired of her. Twice, she's complained about her pack, and her team mentality seems to be slipping. Maybe we should pair up for a bit; now Baxter's gone, she's alone.

Day six started off with a scream. Toby had gone for a piss. When he got back, he'd grabbed Michelle by an arm, dragging her out the tent they shared. A few nasty words were thrown around, before he disappeared back inside, chucking clothes out. I watch her shiver in her undies before gathering her things and storming off. Susanne seems to lap it up, as if humiliation were honey. I find it unappealing. When she asks Toby if he needs anything, he tells her to piss off. I idly wonder if her mouth would now taste of sour grapes.

Toby asked for more water. I can understand why he grimaced. Luckily, we have more than enough. Just means it'll last longer, I guess. We die faster from thirst than hunger. Michelle sent her best wishes he'd suffer. I'll speak with her later, when the anger morphs into that empty dread we've all been ignoring. Chloe and Fergus are still shagging their way through it: tiny, little deaths against the big one. I must admit, I find their enthusiasm a little wearing.

Dinner was rehydrated beef chilli and rice. Michelle overcame vegetarianism and joined me. Perhaps I should stick with Susanne after all; Toby's been watching me. After dinner, I rinsed out my bowl and looked for Susanne. I needed a pick-me-up. Seems she didn't like team-playing. Ants are already crawling over her; looks like she went through a month's supply of Demerol. Well, it killed the pain. When I get back, I lie about knowing where she is; I don't owe them anything. I hear the shouts later.

Eight days into our current dilemma, and in the pale pre-dawn light, I see Toby furtively striking camp. Michelle is silently stuffing the rutting pair's

rations into her rucksack. I can't say I'm surprised. I'm left in a quandary. On reflection, I should have expected this. I decide to leave. Michelle and Toby are far more interesting.

Two days into our northerly trek, and Michelle has just sneaked into my tent. Toby's discomfort has left him pained and vomiting in his sleeping bag. She said she just wants company...comfort as she presses close. Oddly, I oblige, just holding her, stroking the limp, dirty hair.

In the morning, we take Toby's supplies. I think the infection has spread to his kidneys, based on the fever. He never drank enough. Michelle follows me. She doesn't ask me where we're going; I don't think she cares. It's better...just the two of us; maybe because it's a choice between me and utter loneliness. I hadn't planned this—me and Michelle—but ever the pragmatist, I'll take it.

Ten days in and I'm done. I have Uni next week. According to my map—yeah, it added a delightful edge to it, knowing how close they were to the right trail—there's a steep valley coming up...and accidents happen. Shame, really; the bite on her leg is festering and looks promising, but I just can't hang around in the hopes. This group has been more fascinating than the others.

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My Last Piece of Genius

by Sarah Wallis

I was holidaying alone, as usual, at the seaside. The ocean draws me back every year to the same place, the same people, and they know to leave me to my thoughts and squeals of the sea. It was at the local pub quiz, so genius might be pushing it a bit, but it was a difficult question.

‘How far is it to the middle of the forest?’ the quizmaster's voice rang out.

Silence fell; people shrugged and ran their fingers through the memory of hair. Tried not to fiddle with their banned smartphones. Took a gulp of beer. Crackled their salt and vinegar treats. The quizmaster took stock of the puzzled faces.

‘Anyone?’ Heads shook.

‘If anyone can answer that one I’ll take them out in my boat for a spin,’ said a large hairy goat. I’d always wanted to go out on a boat with a goat so I cleared my throat and spoke up.

‘Halfway,’ I said. The pub fell silent and turned to look at me, usually so quiet and unassuming. ‘Well?’ I said, ‘is that the one answer you wanted?’ The crowd turned to the quizmaster who consulted his book.

‘By Jove she’s got it!’

‘The Mouse and the Goat went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat,’ muttered some cliché clown, there were muted giggles all round. I looked at the goat and nodded. He shrugged and I thought might renege on his offer but no, he downed the rest of his pint and we made a date there and then. I may be a Mouse but when I see something I want, a bargain for instance, I’m there. And I’ve always wanted to go to sea.

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Countdown

by Mark Dixon

Of course it had to be a ‘he’, some grey haired white guy overseeing the proceedings, folding his hair into place before he can begin the countdown “Five, four, three...”

“Wait, wait!” I scream, “wait” and Mr. Judge, Mr Powerpants over there, deems it acceptable enough that we stand down.

Of course, a break at this juncture is a distraction to everyone involved, but a slip up, one wrong move, could prove too dangerous. Mr. Powerpants knows what I mean. Knows that things have to be just so.

I readjust, planting both feet firmly on the floor, shuffling my backside so it sticks out just so.

“Okay, okay!” I shout, and the judge holds his finger to the air so that we might begin again. “Five, four, three, two...”

Here we go, I tell myself, here we go. Except at that very moment, at that very point in the proceedings, time decides that it's going to renege on its God-given obligation to move forward - on its mandate to process events at that constant velocity we are all so accustomed to.

Of course, I can use this time, this time outside of time, for whatever purpose I see fit. For additional preparations perhaps, or to unbalance my competitors - to even engage in other unspeakable acts: acts of blackness.

But, no, this is my time, and I choose it to think well of the world. To reimagine all those who have gone before me. Those who have left us.

And only then can I see him: the other man - my father, pointing his long bony index finger in my direction.

'Go kid,' I hear him whisper, 'go.'

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Henry in Exile

by Mark Sadler

Henry saw his mother cutting through the playground in the park with Dennis from The Pebbles. He leapt around her like an over-excited dog, his head almost level with the top of the slide as he placed his hands on one rung of the ladder. He got stuck halfway down. Henry watched his mother bent over laughing as he struggled to free himself.

He met them on the broken cement path that bisected a ratty un-mowed square of grass.

"Make yourself scarce. Tea will be at six," said his mum.

She slapped Dennis's hand as he began to reach into his pocket.

"Don't be daft."

They went inside without him. Henry loitered by the front door for a while, before trying the handle. It was locked.

He walked uptown, through the steep rows and along the footpath at the end of Crooked Orchard Lane, to the sheer embankment that trenched the

tunnel-opening of the steam railway.

The trains emerged from the darkness trailing ghostly after-images of themselves. When his mother dated Mr Millward from school, he had explained that this was an optical illusion caused by the action of heat on the bricks.

A few months, later, when wide-eyed Mick was living with them, Henry had sat with him on the rise. Mick had his own theories about the ghost trains:

“The steam trains are dead because it’s all electric now. They have to anchor down their souls or the railway would stop working. But in the tunnel they try to escape. Like, get free.”

Henry sheered down the embankment, slipping almost vertically the last ten feet. He stood before darkened tunnel. Then he began to run towards it.

Behind him, in the distance, the light breeze that stirred the spring branches, thickened to smoke.

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Cell for One

by Damhnait Monaghan

My husband, when he was still my husband, once told me I’d make a good prison guard. He said I kept all my feelings locked away and he’d never found the key to release them.

My son, when he was still alive, told me I’d make a good prison guard. He shouted it up the stairs to where I sat silent in the kitchen. I did lock him in the basement that night, but I thought it might get him off drugs.

My mother says I’d make a good prison guard. She says I’m no better than a jailor, that I never visit, never take her out. She rings me to tell me when I’m back home after the three hour drive from the nursing home where I’ve visited her.

People say I’d make a good prison guard. But they’ve got it all wrong. How could that be true when I’m trapped in my grief, unable to escape.

Tangerine

by Chris Milam

Once a month at midnight, a redbird with wings like circus tents landed at 17 Riverstone Way. Tonight, it stood still on the lawn. Inside the home, Megan's withdrawn face was pressed against the bedroom window.

They talked through the screen. Megan told her about school, how lunch was her favorite subject. Cynthia laughed like a cherry bomb, told her that eating pizza was better than pecking on rocks tossed by that boy three towns over.

"Why don't you just eat him? You're big enough to do it," Megan asked, her finger tracing circles in breath fog on the glass above.

"He's just confused. I don't hurt people, Megan. You know that."

"Sorry. You're a good bird."

"And you're a wonderful girl. Everybody says so."

"Except them," she said, pointing her thumb backwards. They don't say anything nice. Sometimes I wish I was a can of beer."

Cynthia tilted her head. "I think it's time. You ready?"

"I don't want to hear them yelling. Let's go." She stepped through the window, climbed inside her friend's golden beak.

They flew as one above snowcaps, rain forests, and oceans, eventually descending into a sweet-scented oasis called Tangerine. Megan caught everything at the same time, her walnut eyes darting from rejuvenated kids riding atop elephants and giraffes to glaciers made of vanilla cupcakes to flowing streams of bubbling cream soda.

"Go on now," said Cynthia. "We only have a few hours before the sun wakes up and we fly back. Sing, play, do whatever you can't do at home. I'll be over here eating rocks."

Megan's laugh mimicked birdsong as she ran through a vibrant valley choked with marshmallow trees, popsicle flowers, and honey bees the size of grandfather clocks. She ran until her feet were drowning in cool morning dew.

The Crack In Everything

by Samuel J Fox

for E.L.H.

This is a letter. Like most letters, it is for a recipient we all call you. Like most senders hope, I want the recipient to smile. Smile wide: like an ivory gorge. The first thing most people notice are teeth: are they soft and gleam, or are they tartar-stained and sharp? This letter does not have teeth. It has holes. Lapses in what it refuses to mention: like how I remember how you taste, but how I cannot remember how it felt to taste you it's been so long. I've been reading Jack Gilbert and listening to Leonard Cohen covers most of the past couple weeks. The last time we spoke, I forgot you had told me you were doing nothing for spring break. You're almost through with college. I've already had my fair share of failures, but with plenty of room for more to spare. There is an elephant on this page. I keep trying to point it out, but it's difficult to see through the forest for the single tree. I use the word we. There isn't a we; rather, there was. Have you thought about becoming a photographic journalist yet? You taught me that the photo is not the thing itself, but the essence of the thing itself. Ce n'est pas l'amour veritable; ce n'est qu'une image d'elle.[1] Even this is not a letter. It is too self-indulgent. Just as I was with your beauty. Now, I'm listening to Melody Gardot sing that my heart is, indeed, black as night. Azure black. Mauve or Indigo or Violet hinging on Scarlet. Can a heart stop because it drops through the chest and breaks? It feels like it. When was the last time you had really good sex? I wish it would have been me. I wish so much I feel like I'm losing my own magic. I think unrequited love does this to me. Makes me sour. Turns me back to water. I used to be sparkling wine and dazzle. I used to be Mr. Bright Eyes. Mr. Poet Pants. Mr. You're Going to Take my Breath Away. Now, there is no us, no we. Hardly any memories for you to cherish. That's why I write this to you. I'm asking you to hold on. Jack Gilbert says We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars. Jack Gilbert asks *Would you go out in the middle of the night and put a bucket into the well so you could feel something down there tug at the other end of the rope?*[2]

I say: *if it meant I could drink and be full instead of knowing the pull would not last*. I would ask you: *have you ever seen a vase so beautiful that you imagine it breaking just to know what it might sound like?* I am so full of darkness these days that, when I crack my knuckles, my bones spark. I want you to write this down, love. I want you to write this down. Hold on. Yes, the world has pneumonia and God is on vacation. Yes, I know I was not as kind as I was masculine. Yes, I know that promises stab us when we turn our backs to them. I just want you to know: if anything I could have been, I would have been better for you, not to you. I am as cracked as a Sahara plateau under an armada of starlight. But you can almost see God through these crevices. Like Leonard Cohen says, *there's a crack in everything: that's how the light gets in*. This is no longer a letter: this is now a negative. Please, n'oubliez pas de faire l'art de vous-même - sois belle parce que tu es.[3]

[1] French for *This is not true love; it is only an image of her*.

[2] "The Abandoned Valley" from Refusing Heaven

[3] French for *Do not forget to make art of yourself – be beautiful because you are*.

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What Happens When Hot Air and Cold Air Meet?

by Danny Beusch

I only met my father once. I was twelve. We had lunch in town and then I watched him haggle for a discount on a helium-filled balloon. It was big and red, like his face.

‘For you’, he said. I was surprised; I’d assumed it was for the kid he lived with. The wind pummelled the balloon left and right so I wrapped the string around my finger, praying that no one from school would see me.

Within an hour we were back in his car, staring intently at my house, hail stones battering the windscreen. Eventually he spoke. ‘Let’s do something again soon. Come round ours maybe. Meet your brother. We’ve got a big

garden. You'd get on with Sarah, she's good with kids.' I wound the string tighter and tighter, the pressure building under the thickening layers.

He drove off as I walked up our drive. Mum opened the door, clocked his gift, and rolled her eyes. 'For God's sake,' she said, 'that man never had a bloody clue.'

'Why are you wearing make up?' I asked.

In the dining room I released the balloon, watching it drunkenly stagger across the ceiling, rubbing at the indent on my finger until all that remained was a blotchy red mark.

Later, restless in bed, I heard a bang. And then I slept.

When I woke, it smelled like Saturday. 'I'm doing bacon for breakfast,' Mum said, rustling my hair, avoiding eye contact. 'A treat before school'. I sat at the dining table - stomach rumbling – and stared at the lipstick-stained wine glass and the kitchen scissors.

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Silverfish

by Simon Pinkerton

I sat screwed up like a twist tie on the big wooden box next to the telephone table, twirling the phone cord into ragged lightbulb shapes, shivering slightly in the morning chill, listening to your distant, small, tired voice, the joy of hearing you insulating me against the cold. My feet were pale and long in the half-light, slapped onto the unfinished wood next to the frayed knotholes and splintered joins. You talked about your evening selling your soul and other products at your low-paid second job, and I tuned out, thinking about being with you, morphing your words into past conversations when we were together.

I implored you to continue even though all you wanted to do was sleep, the time difference keeping both of us from our beds, and I heard my voice echo in the big, bare dining room that my housemate and I used for nothing

but talking on the phone. A silverfish, some metallic quick bug made of thin slippery muscle and legs, glided out from a crack between the floorboards and around each of the toes on my right foot, and I felt a playful sense of companionship. I thought about how long it might live, and wondered if it would stay with me the whole month until it was time for you to return. Maybe it would live longer and we could name it, and it might scurry around and trace the contours of all four of our feet, intertwined as we sat folded into one another.

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Recovery

by Brandy Wilkinson

At first I think he wants to shake my hand, but when I hold it out to meet his, he grabs my fingers and presses a coin into my palm. *I'm a Friend of Bill now, baby*, he says. *Thirty days*. I nod, run my finger over the words printed on the coin. I say nothing. Our breaths hang frozen, ghosts in the air between us. Despite the cold, we are meeting outside the university library; I don't want him to know where I live now. Six months ago I called campus police when I found him unconscious, crumpled in a sorry heap outside my apartment building. *You know this guy?* the cop had asked, my neighbors leaning in. *It's my dad*, I whispered.

*

I listen to the voicemail seven times. I comb it like a crime scene. The slightest slur, the slide of glass on glass, the crashing clack of billiards – but there is nothing. Only his voice. *Fifty-six days*, he says. *I'm doing this for you*. It is not an accusation but a promise. Not the first one he has made.

*

It's the call on day one hundred that I finally answer. I agree to meet him for coffee and he is waiting there when I arrive. He stands as I approach the booth. He is wearing a long-sleeved blue work shirt with a patch that says

Joseph in red script. I ask him who Joseph is, and he laughs tightly. *Joe is the man who asks his daughter for money and crawls home every night*, he says. He doesn't look at me. *I'm Joseph now*.

✱

I graduate in May. He calls, asks to take me to dinner. He wants to pick me up, and my mother's voice echoes in my ear: *Check Daddy's eyes before you get in the car, Renee. Check Daddy's eyes*. I tell him I will meet him there.

✱

Work and home and back again, Dad tells me. *Only other place I ever go is my meetings*. I ask him if it's worth it. *I'm doing this for you*, he says. I ask: *Just me?* He flares his nostrils, breathes a big dragon breath. *I guess it's for us both*, he says. I write my address on an old receipt I find in my purse. *Now you have another place to go*, I tell him.

✱

When my phone rings on day two hundred and ninety-eight, my aunt's voice is on the other end of it. *I'm so sorry, Renee*, she says, and for the next three hours I pick apart my little studio in search of that stupid coin. In the end, I imagine it in the bottom of the coin-counting machine at the Second Street Laundromat. I cry. I say his name for no other reason than to hear it: *Dad. Daddy. Joseph, Joe*.

✱

The coat is an afterthought, the temperature teetering just on the edge of winter. I grab it from the back of the closet and slide my arms through. The cemetery isn't far so I decide to save myself the bus fare. I have not been back since his burial five weeks ago. I run my fingers along the rounded shapes of his name, the numbers in the dates. The air grows colder and I check my pockets for last winter's gloves. The nearly numb tips of my right hand hit something and I know. I just know. I draw the coin from my pocket and press it against the palm of my other hand. *I found you*, I say.

• • •

Bird Girl

by Janelle Hardacre

‘Bird girl. You coming?’

There was no need to check he meant me. Only I had a budgerigar perched on my head and iridescent feathers on my face.

‘Yeah, okay. Thanks.’

I had to push to catch up with the girl dressed as Harley Quinn and the boy whose blue face glittered. There were nine of us. And I was one of them. Nine people who had designed away their real personas. A Power Ranger, Beetlejuice, a couple of Disney Princesses and Totoro. Somehow, we were a flock.

With my feathers, violet lips and eyeliner flicks I was different, but not alone. They’d invited me. Not like when Catriona screen grabbed my RSVP to her party. #tragic #loner.

‘So, what are you?’ Anna from Frozen asked as she pushed closer to explore trinkets in my hair.

‘Oh, I’m not a character. I just like dressing up.’

‘Right on. You go girl.’ Her words travelled straight into my heart, warming me from the inside.

‘I know, right?’

As we walked through the atrium, I enjoyed catching people looking. I was visible. I saw myself in a mirror as we progressed. A beautiful bird. Shiny, mystical and ready to migrate.

I jolted and yelped at the stab of fingers on my shoulder.

‘What was that?’ Asked Anna from Frozen. I felt myself wilt.

‘I’ll be back,’ I whispered. I lifted my hands and removed my Vive headset. My little bespectacled brother was standing in front of me.

‘I said tea’s ready. Come on.’ Once he knew I’d heard he thudded downstairs.

Something else was more important than eating. I needed to think of a place that was really high up. Higher than my bedroom, the house, our town. A place from where I could fly away. For real this time.

Love Is Plastered

by Caleb Echterling

The vicar held her arms aloft. A bandolier packed with shot glasses clinked as it slid over her gold-embroidered stole. Low slung holsters on each hip cradled bottles of tequila. “We are gathered today to forge two souls into one as Brittany and Jennifer join in holy matrimony. Also to play a super cool drinking game I invented. Every time someone says the word ‘love’, take an Italian tequila shot. Lick a dash of oregano, throw down the booze, then chew on a clove of raw garlic. Our reading is that passage from First Corinthians that everyone picks for weddings, so put on your drinking hats.”

She wagged unsheathed tequila bottles over the altar. Ominous minor chords pumped from the pipe organ. A swarm of bats flew overhead. A dapper but rather pale gentleman appeared in a puff of smoke. “I’m afraid I can’t allow this wedding to go forward.” He flared his midnight black cape, and tucked it under his chin. “You see, that would break the curse that has kept me as the undead master of this fine castle these many centuries, since an unfortunate incident with the Habsburgs robbed me of my mortal body...”

He flew to the top of the white-draped altar, and bared his fangs. “While I would love to...”

A cheer rose from the hundred-strong army of guests. Tongues lapped up dried leaves, tequila splashed down gullets, and teeth masticated on pungent bulbs. A collective gag rippled through the room. Everyone jettisoned gobs of garlic. The dapper gentleman screamed as the bulbs peppered his body, which aged three centuries in ten seconds, leaving a pile of dust surrounded by a cape.

The vicar took a slug from each of her bottles. “Let’s rock this lovey love-fest, you twatwaffles!”

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The Things We Let Go

by Stephanie Bento

You and I were digging with our bare hands, like wild animals. Under the dogwood tree, the one that rained pink petals and smelled like decay in the spring. My bangs kept falling in my eyes as we burrowed, getting dirt stuck under our fingernails and autumn cold in our bones. *Hurry*, your mother's voice reached our ears. *Come home for supper*, said the wind. I held on to our time capsule, an old pencil box we had filled with paper airplanes, letters to our future selves, and a mixtape of songs recorded from the radio, as you broke ground with a shovel, your breath forming temporary clouds. *There*, you said, as your shovel touched stone. *On the count of three*, you whispered, *let go*. I raised the box above the void, releasing the metal, memorial weight of the past from my frozen grip, and we quickly filled the hole with freshly unearthed soil. *Don't forget*, you hollered, as you raced back to your house, your voice echoing in the wake.

That was forever ago.

Last summer after the flood, the landscapers came to remove the dogwood tree, its roots exposed to the sunlight. In the soft ground, they found our rusted treasure. I wiped the mud away, and opened the box. I read your letter. You wrote we'd always be friends. And I saw your mother yesterday. Sometimes I even hear the wind calling your name, *come home for supper*.

...

Active Shooter

by Kathy Lanzarotti

The text alert had been short and to the point.

ONE: Run in the opposite direction of the danger. TWO: Find a place to hide. Lock and barricade the door. THREE: Call for help, then silence all cell phones.

But she can't run anywhere. Her office is on the eighth floor. Tenth with the garage and the lobby. So is the "danger". Some crazy man whose bellows are punctuated by short controlled bursts of machine gun fire. She imagines him dressed in tattered clothes with a face full of matted hair. He's probably wearing jeans and a polo shirt.

Her flimsy wooden file cabinet has been pushed under the knob of the hollow office door. She's tucked behind a metal desk.

911 knew about her emergency and asked her if there was any way out of the room. She had popped the window above her head.

The pathetic door next to hers splinters under a spray of bullets and another roar from the hallway. She jams a fist in her mouth when she hears something heavy fall on the other side of the wall.

She'd read somewhere that four is the number of stories that will prove fatal to fifty percent of jumpers. She'll take her chances.

She's just a slip of a thing, her mother always said. She can wiggle easily under the metal frame. The air is cool as she looks down. Nothing between her and the ground except the hand of God, and it seems He's otherwise engaged. She takes a deep breath and counts down.

THREE: She prays as she pushes with her forearms. Once to see her mother again. TWO: For a miracle. A soft landing, or a quick death. ONE: She shuts her eyes and lets go.

...

Eating Letters

by Clodagh O'Brien

I look at him because he won't look at me. He's in the corner; surrounded by the wooden letters he loves to pour from one saucepan to another. He picks up a letter and points it at me.

"K," I say. "K for keys."

He narrows his eyes.

“Or kite,” I declare in a pounce. “Remember the kite mummy bought you?”

He turns the K over in his fingers; doughy, dextrous. I think of that day on the beach, the lemon curd sun high, boats crowding the horizon; their sails like upturned paper aeroplanes.

“No,” he shouts as he throws. “No, you.” The K trembles on the floor, its edges shuddering.

“Okay,” I say gulping down his N and then his O.

I hand him a sandwich. The perfect cheese triangle I held snug to the chopping board. “Do you want this?” I ask. “Do you want this sandwich?”

I lean in and hand it to him as if there’s a cage between us.

He slaps my hand away. “No.”

I nod and feel the fragments shift; the pieces of myself drift further apart.

The door opens. Everything illuminates as if a lighthouse has found the room. He screams and runs, dada bouncing off his tongue like it’s the only word he was born to say.

I pick up the cheese triangle and chew.

...

1 For Sorrow...

by Lee Hamblin

Christmas, A Long Time Ago

I’ve drunk too much. I don’t usually drink. Vodka veiled in orange juice.

‘Let your hair down, it’s a party,’ a stranger says.

We share more than just a dance.

I don’t even know his name, and come tomorrow he won’t remember mine.

July, Last Year

I remember a different London, a London without hope, monochrome, and angry. I haven’t been here in thirty-four years.

In a small, quiet room, the doctor, or perhaps she said professor, taps away

on a keyboard. I follow her eyes; left to right, up to down, left to right, up to down, fixed point, stop.

She removes her spectacles, and shifts her gaze towards us. She is pretty, and ageless.

I hate her. She shouldn't know before a mother does. A mother should be the first to know.

She swallows, lip-curls compassion.

He and I grip hands.

There is nothing more we can do, she says, you have to let him go.

August

As I sleep, he whispers to me. I love you, he says.

I hate me, I say, but not so he'd hear.

December

I tell him a truth, a secret never to be told.

He says he needs a few days, a couple of weeks. Time to think.

I don't hear him leave.

Today

The early morning sun is peppery, tingling on the skin. An audience of swallows whirl around me, the bravest edging closer as if a schoolchild's dare. My body sways to their chirruped song, thrusts to their plosive clicks.

I am dancing for them. They are singing for me.

Like a fleeting spirit, a cold arctic wind sweeps through me, biting at my bones, breaking the spell.

I dance to forget, even if it's only for a moment.

...

Birth

by Maggie Jankuloska

I am undersized and twisted in my mother's womb – in no hurry to enter the world. I float in silence, warm in a seventeen-year-old's stomach, sheltered.

We are bound together, Mother and me. We share a cord and I read her troubles – an ugly accident, a rushed wedding, frayed connections, shame. I can't ask if she considered discarding me, if that ugly thought swam through her head as her belly swelled and her life was turned to ash. I'll never ask.

I don't cry when the doctors yank me out, it's as if I know what awaits me and I meet the world with defeat. I am stunted, purple – a week late. I'm a sickly thing, holding together two incompatible people for a lifetime – a monolithic task.

The doctors jab me with needles, I howl. I'm puckered and unsettled, a conduit of all the discord around me. But I don't give up. I thrive. I find the crumbs of love among the chaos and I fight all the stacked odds. I'm a tiny seed full of fire and resolve. Despite it all – I grow, I exist.

...

Global Warming

by Nicholas Cook

January

We wore shorts and believed the world was dying. You showed me the tooth you lost in a fight. "I can stick it back in," you said. Your sweaty hand wrapped mine like a glove.

February

Your dad said you weren't eating enough real food. I slept on your floor and whistled Desperado. You said I was doing more harm to my teeth that way,

that I should be sucking in instead of blowing out. Your dad came running into your room. “What’s this?” he asked.

March

The soil cracked and split open. I had a handful of marbles I rolled around on the sidewalk. You came over with your sack of dead birds. “What’s happening?” you said, watching my game. Someone had painted the curb a bright blue overnight. “You see that,” I said, “that means do not cross.”

April

The hottest month on record. Birds stopped dying because they’d gone someplace else. This was when your liver did something funny to the rest of your body. You showed me photos of white spots. You were proud of your plump liver. You promised me you could live forever on all that junk you ate.

May

You scrapped your knee trying to cross the barricade. Police had to be called out. Your dad said, “This is not fun and games, boys.” I sat with you in the bathroom while you dared me to taste your blood. “Just try it,” you said, so I did.

June

We were allowed outside for an hour after dark. The air felt like an armpit and everything had melted—plastic mailboxes, the tar between sheets of concrete. You were on the dead grass with a washcloth over your head. I handed you a still warm marble from inside my pocket. “We can run away,” I said.

July

You learned the meaning of the word onus. Your dad was handing out flyers. He claimed it was his purpose. He drove around in his minivan broadcasting sermons. “Repent or perish,” he said, or was it just perish?

August

They stopped selling shoes. The TV was filled with commercials for air conditioning companies. “I’m tired of looking at everyone’s disgusting feet,” you said. You wrapped yours with paper towels and masking tape. You commented on my one long toenail I was letting grow out like a root. “That’s freaky,” you said.

September

I wanted to kiss you, but your face was molten like the sea. Your dad called me a non-believer, and you punched him in the jaw.

October

“Something should be happening by now,” you said. The blue on the curbs had faded to an almost invisible sky color. “I think that’s still blue,” you said. For Halloween you covered your face with a scarf and went as a wayfarer. The candy was melt-proof and tasteless.

November

Your dad said, “All I want is for it to feel like Christmas.” It was 132 degrees outside. When you carried me on your back I was afraid I was going to slither off. “I’d never let anything happen to you,” you said.

December

We made plans to live like naturists near the South Pole. “I don’t like being nude,” I confessed. You admitted your own bodily issues. “Sometimes my head feels like it’s on fire,” you said. We stole fifty dollars from your dad’s collection jar. “This will get us as far as the ocean,” I said, believing that was enough.

...

One Last Time

by Sophie Watson

Thea entered the last carriage just as the train slalomed around a bend, slamming her into the frame. Only one seat was occupied. Banker type. Blue striped shirt, navy suit, big watch. His briefcase looked new, the sheen on its surface reflecting the butter-yellow lighting overhead. It was tucked under his arm as he slept, his head lolling in time with each shunt of the train around the coastal bends.

Thea checked he was asleep before sliding into the seat opposite him. She looked closer. In repose he looked like a child playing dress up, his face cherubic, a Caravaggio boy with a Rolex. Beyond his curls, the brutalist seascape brushed past in swathes of Payne's grey, clouds hanging low over the horizon.

Protruding from his jacket pocket was a pen, neatly tucked behind the lip of fabric. She looked slowly around the carriage, then extended her fingers towards it. Up close he looked even younger, his lips parted in sleep, long eyelashes fluttering on unmarked cheeks.

She pinched the lid and pulled. The pen slid, unresistant from his pocket. She paused, pen dangling above his pocket, metronomic, as the train rocked faster. The man stayed still, as if cast in bronze. She jerked her hand away and thumped back down in her seat, heart thundering.

Surely he must feel its absence, she thought. Surely he could feel the loss. Any moment he would rise up, eyes wild, shouting for the conductor *thief thief!*

But, maybe not.

Thea moved back to the doorway. On closer inspection, the pen wasn't a Montblanc, or even a Waterman. She turned it over and over, but there were no identifying marks. The pen hadn't been worth stealing.

She pocketed it all the same, and moved further down the train.

...

My Dad: No Relation

by Eilise Norris

“I’m adopted,” I explain to the first one who asks about my dad. They haven’t heard this before, even if they trawled the internet for longer than they’d care to admit. For a moment their image of me shifts, like dust in sunlight, echoing snow. Not enough to stop them asking questions or to soften their mouth. I understand. Hating myself from the outside would be easier.

Statues on the court steps - that’s how mum and I looked for a long time. It was the only photo we’d stood for, our fight or flight given up to something else entirely. We were listening to the families read their joint statement. The huddle around us reminded me of birds descending, picking at the ground and leaving it colder, greyer.

My new co-worker, Sam, doesn’t know how to use the word awful. He uses it twice as a sigh on its own; thinks that it describes the shadow over me, over my mum of 26 years. Awful just feeds the shadow. It cling films your lungs like you’ve nothing else to say. Most days I haven’t. I work, I run; I call my mum if she can’t sleep.

I have no new answers for Sam. No, I didn’t know. No, I kept my distance.

“I was adopted,” I say and see the flutter of hesitation, even his hand loosening in his pocket.

Mum understands. She’d let me change my name and move to Australia if it helped. She’d let me deny her in the street, whatever sinkhole was left of us.

So she allows me this lie. The one I can reflexively stomach, which draws the slimmest line between her and me and him.

...

Sainsbury Sorrow

by Louise Mangos

I see you in the fruit and veg aisle before you see me. I'm tumbling Braeburns into a plastic bag when I clock you. The last apple misses the top of the bag, and falls to the floor with a hollow bruising thud.

I swore if I ever bumped into you on the street, I would force myself to say hello in a normal voice, make as if to walk past you, make you think I didn't still have this big thing for you, pressing against my chest. There had been enough destructive mud slinging. I wanted to make you think I'd moved on.

I wonder what you're shopping for. After you've passed the potatoes and carrots, I hurry round the other end of the aisle into dairy. The chill air from the open fridges helps to calm the flush on my cheeks, as you look up and say:

'Hi Sal. How's it going?'

'Good, good,' I lie.

I want to ask 'How is she?' but press my lips together. I want to say 'Jesus, Joe, I miss you,' but clear my throat and say:

'Well, I'd better be off. Busy day. New project is growing...'

'What project's that?' you ask.

'Oh, this thing,' I say vaguely.

You pause. There's silence.

'See you around,' you say.

I smile and slink off to the health aisle, where I pick up a jar of folic acid capsules. I approach the maternity section and with hot tears blinding my vision, bury my hands into the soft cotton of a new-born baby onesie.

...

Scar

by Victoria Richards

Yesterday you were still zero, a not-person, a tiny ghost made of promises, human in the making. Today you are one.

One. I look at your face, your small hands, those chubby, fault-line wrists. You're already fighting to get away, to - *What's that bang? What is a bang? What makes a bang happen?*

You laugh even as you pull on your right ear, which I know means you're tired, or shy, or afraid. You look at me sideways to check the ceiling of the world hasn't caved in, that this house, the heart of this house hasn't fractured, and I grin to hide the fact that I'm more fragile than I've ever been. I am David Blaine suspended over the Thames in a Perspex box for 44 days, I am my grandmother's compact mirror with its sickly powder breath, I am that Dartington crystal wine glass, a wedding gift, smashed to pieces.

The cat walks by. Your eyes crinkle at the edges like the lines on male faces three generations before you. "Gentle," I murmur. "Gentle." But you haven't learned to be gentle, yet. Perhaps you never will. You come away clutching clumps of damp, black fur, fingers splayed, eyes incandescent with disbelief. You stare at your fingers and wiggle them back and forth, back and forth. The cat has gone. In six months he'll fight back, glorious retribution carved two inches long into the soft, peach-fuzz of your cheek. Twenty-three years from now a lover will spot it in the light of a bedside lamp that's turned towards the ceiling as you lay on a bedspread of forget-me-nots. He or she will trace the faint line with a nail that is slightly too sharp and ask, "What happened?" and you'll shrug and say you can't remember.

...

Halt, Desist, Cease

by Gaynor Jones

When I was younger, I would pore over my grandmother's thesaurus. I believed then that words gave me power when I had none.

This man in the courtroom is not just upstanding. According to his lawyer, he is honest, moral, principled, trustworthy, decent and conscientious. The supporters in the gallery punctuate each word with a nod.

We are next reminded of his academic accomplishments, as if that's the only reason for our presence here. Clever wouldn't be enough. He is bright, able, astute, reputable, capable and responsible.

I want to rise up at them, to scream and rage. If he's so fucking smart, then why did he not understand my one simple word?

I said it first at the restaurant.

'Stop. You're making me blush.' Coquettish, provocative, flirtatious.

Then in the taxi.

'Stop. This is my place.' Confident, cool, relaxed.

Next on the steps.

'Stop. Wait, let me get in.' Embarrassed, self-conscious, awkward.

In the living room.

'Stop. Jesus, give me a minute.' Unsure, hesitant, apprehensive.

Against the wall.

'Stop. What are you doing?' Annoyed, irritated, pissed off.

On the floor.

'Stop. Please, please. Stop.' Distressed, panicky, terrified.

I look to the jury and pray that they won't be swayed by the beauty of language, but will return a verdict of just one simple word.

...

Abandoned

by JY Saville

“Caitlyn, stop messing about.”

It had been Caitlyn’s idea to come into the abandoned house, though she’d shoved Jackie in first. Everything was always Caitlyn’s idea.

“It’s not funny.”

Caitlyn didn’t answer.

“Fine, you won’t see what I’ve found, will you?”

Jackie flounced, the way she’d seen her mum do it, chin tilted and skirt swishing as she crossed the hallway. Her hands were cold and shaking, and she could smell a sour smell that might be her own armpits and not stale air. A floorboard creaked and there was a momentary slackening down below, so familiar from when she’d moved to the new school and Miss Potter had said it wasn’t Jackie’s fault, plenty of eight-year-olds wet themselves when they were nervous. Caitlyn had laughed.

“I’m not scared, so we may as well explore together.”

Still no response, and Jackie hadn’t heard her move from where she’d been lurking halfway up the stairs, hair pushed forward to make her look like a faceless ghost. Jackie pushed the thought of ghosts away and chewed on her plastic necklace. She peered at the fireplace but the window was too grimy to let much light into the empty room. It was boring in the abandoned house.

“I’m going,” she called from the hallway but Caitlyn still seemed to be playing statues.

Jackie opened the front door and jumped. Caitlyn was on the step. She glanced over Jackie’s shoulder and screamed.

...

Daisy Chain

by Debbi Voisey

I first saw you when I was seven and you were twelve. I hid my face in my mother's skirt and wrapped my arms around her leg. You were wearing your school v-neck over a shirt whose winged collar could have lifted you up had the wind been strong, and carried you above the houses in our little estate. Your school tie was folded into a fat, square knot.

You were the one.

You were the only boy I ever cried for, and when I went to my first confession I told the faceless voice that I often thought of you when I should be paying attention to other things. I told the voice that when I went to bed at night I dreamed of you.

Because you were the one.

You often came to hang out with my older brother, Kevin. I would rush out into the yard and kick stones while you and he shot BB guns at Heinz Beans tins. The only time you ever saw me was the day I was making the daisy chain and you said you thought the daisies looked pretty around my neck.

It proved to me that you were the one.

I saw you with girls, all with creamy skin and dreamy eyes... and boobs! At night I would stand in front of the mirror in our bathroom and wonder when mine would come.

I wished I could be good enough to be the one.

When you got ill and started to go to the hospital, I didn't visit you, because it wasn't my place to and I was too young. I never told anyone else that you were the one.

At your funeral I laid a daisy chain on your coffin, and cried for that one time you saw me.

...

The Blackbird Sings

by Melissa Goode

We walk along the river and the rain has made the place smell of earth. The grass is bright. So are you, your face and hands. You are so pale, you glow. It feels like an afternoon thirty years ago, when I was a child, a gloomy afternoon in a rainy week when trees towered above, iridescent green and suffocating.

Our house is now far behind. Our house which is empty with Jacob at school, our bedroom strewn with clothes, beckoning at least for us to sleep, joined together. But I feel it coming off you, this restlessness

The sun emerges, hitting the water at thousands of points, making it mirror-like. I squint. A single blackbird sits in a tree and watches us. It sings, reminding me of a hymn we sang as children where the blackbird spoke, or had spoken, only to rhyme with broken.

“Let’s go home,” I say, taking your hand. It is cold. Your hand squeezes mine as if it has been waiting to be held.

We will go home and have tea and the little dense chocolate cakes I bought from the bakery. Not the bakery we usually go to, the other one, the French patisserie. Tiny, crystallised violets are set into glossy ganache. Maybe the violets will make you smile, make you close your mouth, stop you saying what you want to say.

I will kiss you, both of us tasting of dark chocolate and violets. I will say, *do you remember when we first met?*

You draw me over to the damp stone wall of the bridge. I cannot hear the blackbird anymore for all of the water rushing beneath us, tumbling, racing. You say my name. Slow. It turns. Clem-en-tine. No one else says my name like you do.

...

Different Kinds of Broken

by Jan Kaneen

Sylvia stands still and naked on the faux fur rug in front of a dying fire.

‘Don’t move,’ he’d said. ‘Don’t move an inch.’

A silent tear runs see-through down her hot cheek as she looks at the scattered clothes and shards of broken pot lying around her, some pin-prick sharp. Without moving, she can see bigger pieces further away on the dark floorboards, arcs of broken bone china, round and delicate where they fell. She raises her gaze up past the embers, to where it used to stand. It’s mirror image stands there still, guarding the other end of the black slate mantelpiece, a round-backed spaniel with cavalier ears looking past her with glazed eyes. They had been her grandmother’s dying gift.

The one that’s left, is already heavily mended. Spidery lines crackle across its opalescence where super glue holds it together. Sylvia winces motionless, as fragments of memory crash back from that night, sharp fragments, stupid bitch, cruel fragments you always loved it more than me, hard fragments, useless piece of nothing, go on then, pick it up.

But that was years ago, long before Jim, when she herself was broken.

He comes in with a dustpan and brush.

‘Stay still,’ he says, bending at her feet to sweep the floor, patting flat-handed for pieces he’s missed. ‘I think we’re okay.’

She fingertips the biggest piece, as fragments of earlier replay themselves: warm fragments, love you darling, breathless fragments, I love you too, ecstatic fragments, please don’t stop. She’d clung to the wall before her steadying palm had reached too far, and tipped it over.

‘It’s not that bad he says. I think it’ll mend.’ He kisses her forehead then picks up two pieces and pushes them together. They slot into one another, perfectly.

...

Thinking of the One Who Got Away

by Federica Silvi

A white envelope, borders sharp like the edges of a blade. I hold it with two fingers, arm outstretched, breath trapped in my chest, waiting for the letterbox to shut and say “release”.

The words in there can dry tears, but might open floodgates; they can mend a heart or puncture it, let it burst and bleed. I’m supposed to be throwing a lifeline, but can’t stop picturing objects that cut and stab instead. I have seen wounds not even time or stitches can repair, and know a bandage pressed lightly can sting like a knife pushed in deeper.

I must not think this way or the words will stay with me forever. I don’t need the comfort they’re meant to bring. A beam of light inside a dark tunnel: that’s what I need to believe I’m sending. But my ink, too, is black; it spreads across the paper like poison through a vein. It says “with love”, “sorry”, “I’m here” - and before all this, a white lie in silver letters: “Thinking of you today”.

I believed it when I saw the card at the store, picked it from the pile of deepest sympathies on the shelf everyone speeds by. Yet, my thoughts refuse to go where the envelope is headed, where it will set off a surge of gratitude or a shockwave of pain. What I’m really thinking of is a pair of eyes that won’t see my words, a voice that won’t read anything aloud anymore. That’s why I feel like an unwanted guest, a dealer of solace cut with platitudes. But I must honour this deal none of us chose to enter: the only way to remember the one who left is to go on living with those who remain.

...

Here But You

by Sophie Stern

At the car-hire station there was a poster of a blonde woman. *There’s nobody here but you!!!* it exclaimed. Annie asked if they needed snow chains. *Snow*

chains? the car-man laughed, as she shivered in her parka. *It's summer!*

Ben placed their bags, one, two, in the boot of the car. *Why do you need so much?* he had asked. The car-man laughed again, at what she didn't know.

They drove through the lava fields, a landscape that looked more like skin than earth. Annie tapped on the glass. *We're like astronauts on the moon!* She said. *Don't open the windows!* She turned to see if Ben laughed, but he stared straight ahead.

They stopped at a lookout, a flag limp in one corner. *Why is there a lookout when there's nothing to see?* Ben asked. He passed a thermos to her, and Annie had to stop herself from wiping her sleeve on its rim before she took a sip. She felt her skin prickle as though it could sprout the same pale green moss as the lava.

She had marked on a map the spots they wanted to visit. After the lookout they drove through them all, occasionally turning to see what they had missed. They passed an airport with no planes and a beach of black sand, its colours sucked into the sea. She told Ben they had driven through the tectonic plates, through the gulf of two continents crashing towards each other then drifting apart. *Don't believe everything you read,* he replied.

She turned her face to the window. *We're at the edge of the world,* she whispered. She felt her insides turn, as though the emptiness outside could contain all that she was, all that she is, and she could tumble out.

...

My, She was Yar

by Zoë Meager

A boat, brand new and canary yellow, is taking on water. Another, identical in make, patterned with gilt-edged cherry blossoms, lies on its side. It too is going under.

A third boat of blue, more exactly formed, leaves Keiti's outstretched hands and sails across the slick mahogany of the round kitchen table. With her eyes

level to the sea she watches the boat slide into uncharted depths.

Her father, an inky shadow, flips the origami book. “This was your sister’s eh? You’ll upset your mother.”

“What’s the difference.”

Her mother has already taken on all the water the sea can spare, plummeted to the ocean’s floor and resurfaced, is now a ghost ship haunting the chambers of their house, witness to a fathomless dark.

“Hey,” he squats, trying to get at her eyes. “We still love each other, okay? We’re still a family.”

He doesn’t realise that she intercepts their adult semaphore daily. The complex signals of the death of a child are indecipherable to the outside world, but she has the key swallowed cold and sharp in her throat.

So Keiti smiles, her face an open circle, her cheeks cherry blossom pink.

...

Calla Lilies

by Stephen Jackman

With a phrase by Meridel LeSueur

I float on the pool’s calm surface as the watercolor-blue sky fades to gray. Clouds the shape of hastily rendered birds fly overhead, their wings feathering at the edges like newborn hair. In the hush of nearing dusk, laughter from the lifeguard station snaps me out of my reverie. The girl on duty is laughing at a guy in trunks which grip his lean, taut thighs, nothing left to the imagination. I watch as she tosses her blond locks and he smooths away fabric creases, their want a charge between them. I want as well. Not him, nor her, but to be her. If only I could transform with ease, dive into a fountain of femininity. After a long drink of air, I close my eyes and slip under, between the worlds of land and sea, of men and women. Alone in that muted place, I wait. Strands of my cropped hair dance like seaweed, lengthening until they’re a cascade. I imagine swinging my soaked mane behind me, a nymph plucked from faraway

waters, with meadow breasts and hips as supple as cresting waves. There's a blooming in my chest that spreads like calla lilies clutching at sunlight. The change is underway. Then a clasp, a hitch, and I'm laid out on concrete. Hands press on me and voices call out, but I hide in the dark, for my body is the one I've always had and always will.

...

Caught

by Nathalie Kernot

The moth looked like a knot of thread at first, two of its legs frayed out to one side. It's stuck to the windowsill in the very corner, just close enough to her arm for a little rush of horror, a chill breeze. She isn't sure it's quite dead.

The window is pressing a damp circle on her forehead that stings at the edges. It's early, the light still pearly and grey, the street outside blurred by the moving edges of her breath. There's half a dandelion on the path. She watched him step on it on the way out.

The moth moves and she flinches away, her skin on the glass giving a little scream, one foot coming to the cold floor for balance. It's still when she looks back, though. Her own shadow, maybe. A trick.

She pushes her lips together, hard enough almost to hurt. The tiredness weighs on her like nausea, high in her belly, wet in her throat. When he was leaving she felt so heavy on the bed, watching him through the furze of her eyelashes. His shoes in his hand. The bag from the back of the wardrobe. She closed her fingers on the blanket and he startled, rabbit-still.

She eases the rest of the way to her feet with the windowsill for support. It's harder to balance on her own, now. Her warm leg presses against the cold one, prickled with goosebumps, a stranger's skin. The sigh catches at the top of her throat and she blinks, hard, her eyes suddenly hot. The moth a knotted thread again, just twitching under the wave of her breath.

The Day Sonny James Went Missing

by Janis Lane

I remember the day I drove her home. Thanksgiving, '62, it was. On a beautiful Fall afternoon. The maple leaves shone deep gold driving through county, dappled copper when the sun caught them just right. Boy, the fender on that Cadillac dazzled. Sky-blue she was, with bubble-bum pink interior. Chrome trim. Polished to the hilt.

While the women basted turkeys and the men folk swilled beer, I drove out to Baba Joe's place in the next town, to collect her. Joe had been working on her for two straight months. He was the best in the business and no mistake. When I first saw her, she clean took my breath away.

I remember fresh air stinging my face as I rode home with all the windows down. I remember the sweet smell of those leaves. I remember I felt so alive. I remember the tingle in the pit of my stomach as I approached the town limits.

I could tell straight off that somethin' just wasn't right. You know that feeling? Like a sixth sense. There were no knowing, smiling faces, no hands reaching out to shake mine through the car window. Hell, I might as well have been riding a dustcart down that street.

Instead I saw flurried movement and tight faces. I heard anxious, hurried shouts. Someone – funny, I don't remember who it was – waved me down as they ran over to speak to me through the open window.

Yeah, I remember the day I drove that Cadillac home. It was the day Sonny James went missing.

...

Melange

by Karen Jones

Meli sits on the smooth stone in the warmth of the early morning sun and grinds the spices in the mortar. It's her favourite chore. Scents fill her senses,

colours flood her vision, repetitive motion lets her mind drift.

He smells of cinnamon, her one true love. She can almost taste him, the boy with the light brown skin and sly smile. She pictures his muscles tighten, shimmering red earth clinging to his sweat as he works in the field opposite her house. Not this house – this will never be her home – but the house where she grew up, with the mother who loved her and the father who knew she'd fetch a good price.

The old man passes. He smells of tobacco and piss and bitterness, her husband. He stares at her, as if he can see her thoughts. He slaps her face. She doesn't see it coming, can't avoid it, so it stings and blushes her cheek. But when he swings his leg back to aim a kick, she could move just enough for him fail, to force him to flail and fall as balance shifts, leaving him lost. She could laugh, break free, jump on his frail, filthy, fading body. Instead, she takes the force of the kick, feigns pain and fear, lets him keep his power. For now.

Meli blends the spices, thinks of her sly-smiling boy. The rope around her ankle – the one that tethers her to her new house, to this old husband – loosens a little each day, and this evening, when it finally breaks, she'll be bathed in the scent of cinnamon.

...

Division

by Charles Allison

Creation begins with one body, torn in half to make the earth and the heavens.

Doesn't matter which one body or which worldview is under discussion. Most creation stories are murderous, creatively so. Take your pick.

Ymir, the screaming giant whose passing thoughts are clouds now after his grandchildren tore him in half to make the earth and the heavens. His blood is the ocean (a body of water indeed), his corpse and skull the earth, his scattered teeth boulders and mountains.

Perhaps you'd prefer to recall glistening, saline and scaled Tiamat. She was

slick with estuary water and tears when her upstart children were destroyed in their war against the heavens. Before Marduk bisected the dragon-mother and made the earth and oceans from her body, that is. In her dying, Tiamat granted her surviving, monstrous children poison instead of blood, a final, spiteful gift against the soft things that now built ziggurats to Marduk.

Or maybe Tlaltecuhtli, the fabled earth monster pictured as a colossal, cosmic caiman springs to mind first, nibbling on nebulae. She ate the formerly invincible Smoking Mirror's foot, tearing away deific muscle and tendon with barely a click of one of her thousand-thousand-fold jaws. The Smoking Mirror and the Wind God set aside their feud perpetual, became galaxy-spanning snakes and ripped Tlaltecuhtli asunder to make the earth. Her mouths became caves to the underworld, her tears lakes, rivers, bays, oceans; her nose and spines mountains and ridges while her flesh became fertile soil, hungry for jeweled water.

The geo-progenitors, the first cosmological murder victims, are parentally patient as we tread upon them, muddling through as best we can.

Gods and human minds can't make a world without sacrifice or division, no ethereal body can be left to waste.

...

A Dream of Yesterday

by Christopher M Drew

i. The Sky Kingdom

My people call our home the Sky Kingdom. When I drive the herd between the mountains, I feel as though I am walking next to God. Sometimes, He speaks to me. Other times, He shows me things.

Today, I have angered Him.

ii. 'Little Fish'

My name is Tuma, and I am a herd boy. That's Tuma, although my

grandfather calls me ‘little fish’. Papa says I am too slippery for Death’s hands, which must be true because I have cheated him three times.

The first was when my mother gave me life. She pulled me out by my feet, uncoiled the cord wrapped around my throat, and breathed life into me. Death took her in my place.

The second was when my father beat me for spilling the water he collected from the river half a mile away from our home, but again Death spared me and clenched his fist around my father’s heart instead.

Today was the third time, when the moon fell from the sky.

I talk to God and tell him I am sorry for killing my parents.

Perhaps that is why he is so angry.

iii. The Corn Blanket

I do not know much, but everything I do know Papa taught me. Papa, the mountains, and the kleinvee—now three hundred sheep and one goat.

That was my school. That was my life.

When I awoke, it was just another day, exactly like the one before, as though my dreams turned the world backwards. At sunrise, I boiled some water and took a bath. The water turned to smoke and mixed with my breath.

I dressed, pulled on my boots, and wrapped a blanket around my shoulders. My sisters, Lebone and Mantso, gave me this blanket when I last returned home—almost a year ago now. Thick black wool with silver corn stalks sewn around the hem.

It was a magnificent gift.

iv. No More Mirrors

Most nights, it is the scream of the jackals that wakes me. When the moon fell, it was the herd. I grabbed my blanket and my staff and ripped through the sheet covering the doorway to my hut. My bare feet crunched through the snow, but I did not feel the cold. Instead, I felt fire.

A shadow moved through the night towards me. Its eyes glowed like mirrors, like two silver coins. I leapt and brought my staff down hard. I heard

a crack, a howl, and silence. I looked up. Mirrors surrounded me.

I stood my ground. I have spent my entire life with the herd. Over nine years I have named them all. They are my family. I would die for them.

I raised my staff as a gust of wind caught my blanket. A ball of fire lit up the sky and crashed into the beasts. The earth shook. I fell, and all went black. When I awoke, the pen was on fire and the sheep scattered. Some ran through the flames and caught fire.

There were no more mirrors.

v. Falling like Fireflies

I called to the herd as they squealed and bolted and crashed into one another. Even then, I knew I had failed.

I chased them up the mountain's snow-covered peak and watched them tumble over the edge. I dived. My fingers brushed Benya's soft wool before she tipped away. They fell like fireflies in the distance, but through the flames I saw only the faces of my sisters and grandfather. They wept, and screamed my name.

I have never felt so ashamed.

I stood and looked out across the world, six thousand feet beyond man or time. It looked like Hell. The scorched sky was thick with smoke and everything burned. The mountains, the villages. The people.

At that moment my life changed.

I was a herd boy. Now, I am something else.

vi. The Miracle of Palesa

I turned and made my way back to the hut. The roof was ablaze. Tongues of fire licked a flurry of snowflakes that tumbled from the sky like ash.

I collected my belongings and strapped them to my back. When I stepped out of the hut, Palesa was waiting for me. Three hundred sheep dead and one goat survived.

I think it has been a full month, but now it is hard to tell. All that matters is that, at last, we are home.

vii. Another Yesterday

My home used to stand here. Now it has turned to dust. Shining stones stick out of the earth at every angle and pop-pop like broken bones. I stand in the frame of the doorway but dare not enter. I give Palesa a tap. She moves away to the remains of the vegetable garden.

I look at the sky. It is strange without the moon. Instead, a line of glittering rock drifts overhead and shines like shattered ice through the smoke.

Perhaps if I go to sleep here, God will turn the world backwards. I will be in the mountains. The sheep will be in their pens. The moon will be in full circle, looking down upon the Sky Kingdom.

I unwrap my blanket and fold it into a pillow. I lie in front of my home and curl my arms around my heart. Palesa purrs beside me.

I close my eyes, although this does not stop the tears.

Some nights, it is impossible to sleep in the mountains. Papa taught me how. *Feel the sunshine on your face*, he would say. *See the herd graze in the field. Count them, little fish. Every single one. I promise that, before the end, you will be at peace.*

I try to count the sheep, but they fall across my eyelids in flames. All I see is fire. All I hear are screams.

Perhaps tomorrow will bring another yesterday.

I can dream.

...

Only One

by Alexandria Nicole

I pinch the worm tight. It curls and uncurls between my fingers, turning from pink to a bruised purple.

“Ew,” Lucy says over my shoulder, close to my ear. Her breath like a tickle.

“Quit,” I say, rubbing the moist word away with my arm.

The worm thrashes as the metal slides through its middle.

“Watch out.” I swing my arm back and then fling it forward. The worm sails through the air and then plops into the lake.

I hunker down while Lucy shuffles her feet in the dirt, making mud prints with her wet toes. Her dress rides up and baby fine hairs glisten along the edge of a raised white scar.

My mind flashes to papa with the broken bottle. I tuck the memory back down.

“Quit movin’. You’re gonna scare away the fish.”

“I thought you said we were gonna get a pop,” she says.

“That isn’t exactly what I said.”

Lucy flops to the ground, her body limp. Her ponytail swims into a thatch of dead leaves.

The water is like glass. My line invisible against the sky.

“What are ya gonna wish for?” Lucy asks as she sits back up.

I wipe away the bits of dirt and grass clinging to her. The Band-Aid on her elbow flaps open, and I press it back in place. I want to tell her that I will wish him dead, but there’s a yank on the line and the words freeze on my lips.

I stand up. With a two-handed grip I hold tight to the rod. Lucy wraps her arms around my waist.

“Magic fish, Magic fish, here is my wish....”

I stop her before she can waste it.

“We only need one wish, Lucy,” I say to her. “We only need the one.”

...

Paternity Test

by David Alexander

It was the first time that the two of them had been left alone together. Karl leaned over the cot, looking down at Jack like he was a distant planet, making the precise calculations it would take to reach him. You’ll be worth it, Karl thought. I don’t care what anyone said about your mum. That Niamh. That

pregnant girl. Jack gurgled and bubbles bloomed from his mouth. Is this what babies do? The foam grew and spread over his chin. Karl pulled out his hanky and held it tentatively. The sputum multiplied, threatening to take over Jack's nose. He wiped his face but Jack squirmed, a snail retreating into its shell, as if he knew there was an incompatibility between them. He gave the first hiccups of a cry. Ssh, ssh. Karl picked him up, Jack's head falling back, choking his cries for a second. It's okay, Karl said, holding him the way Niamh does, it's only me. Imagine if he wasn't here, rocking the little thing in his arms, letting Jack get used to him, to his smell and the sound of his voice. Come on mate, work with me. We are a team, he thought. One whole. A family. Jack grumbled into silence and gave a fierce yawn as he rested back in his cot. See, we're fine. Your mum was right to leave us together. As Jack's little chest goes up and down in the slow tempo of sleep, Karl thinks he could probably sit down and watch a bit of telly. But he doesn't. He stays leaning over the cot, watching this little boy like he knows he always will.

...

The Basket Case

by T. L. Sherwood

I made a basket for you. Let me place among my woven wicker and osier those parts you hate to carry around. I want to hold the fear you have of your enemies, sniff a swatch of your second grade footrace defeat, dissect that iota of uncertainty I know must be in there. I need to meet that one small doubt. It was so mean, leading you to believe we wouldn't work out. I want to rub that untrustworthy, jagged piece of you, the one you watered, pruned, let grow madly like a cackle of hens. From it, an unfertile egg sprouted wings. It took my heart, left it rotten and slain, dyed in unnatural hues. I want to show it how I've also woven a tackle box laced with shells. It holds delicate casts of characters I've unmasked in order to try to please you, though I never could. Laugh-too-loud girl, pre-period psycho, cried at the end of Sleepless in Seattle

woman - every single one is in there, comfortable in tight compartments, waiting to be fingered, adored, worn again perhaps, and then discarded. I'm not mad, it's just that the older I become, the more I see how that small part of you was right. Somehow, it knew. If you'll let me, I want to kiss it and say thank you.

...

What's in a Name

by Lucie McKnight Hardy

Maureen had always hated her name; those two long vowel sounds that pinned you down and whined in your ear. So when Hazel started at her school in the autumn that Maureen turned twelve, she'd been grateful for the new girl's insistence on a change of name.

'I shall call you Moo,' Hazel announced, and the girls quickly became the best of friends, spending long hours discussing the intricacies of their friendship, making pacts and promising undying devotion to each other.

Puberty descended like a judgement. Moo grew chunky and thick-ankled. Hair sprouted from unexpected places. Hips swelled and breasts hung low in the ill-fitting bra her mother bought from Littlewoods.

Hazel, by contrast, grew willowy and tall. She was whippy and lithe and excelled at running and jumping. Moo felt the distance growing between them and her enormous brown eyes dripped with sadness.

The new girl who started in the fourth form was called Alison, but 'you can call me Al,' she said, 'like the Paul Simon song'. Moo hated that song. Moo also hated how Al was tall and carried her head high, despite her sloping shoulders. She was aloof, like she was holding something back; with her you didn't quite get it all.

The Christmas card was the final straw, the two of clubs stuck carelessly onto a scrap of sugar paper. All Moo could see in the shape of the two symbols that lined up vertically on the playing card were her own fat buttocks, heavy

breasts and thick ankles.

Inside the card was written *Much love, Haze and Al.*

‘Haze,’ thought Moo, and already she felt alone. She could see her old friend vanishing, her outline becoming fainter and fainter until she was just a gauzy shape hanging in the air.

...

Dog

by Jason Jackson

When Jack was fourteen, a stray dog bit him in the groin, severing his left testicle and changing his life. Jack and his mates had been throwing stones at the dog when it ran at them, its hackles raised.

Jack just hadn’t been able to get out of the way.

There was a short stay in hospital, where doctors talked Jack and his parents through the rehabilitation process, and Jack was soon home. When he met up with his mates again, they immediately asked for a look.

“No way,” said Jack.

“Way,” said his mates, and they held him down.

After that, he didn’t go out much anymore.

In his early twenties, Jack spent a lot of time on specialist internet dating sites. Molly8 had been born with one leg. CrazyGail had lost a breast, not to cancer, but when a lorry crushed the side of her car. JenJen had one eye, the left. Jack read more messages than he posted, and eventually he weaned himself off the sites. The people there were just looking for something, the same as everyone.

As his thirtieth birthday approached, Jack was still working as a coffee-shop barista. He lived in a small flat and he kept himself to himself. Occasionally, he would visit a prostitute called Angelina. He wasn’t embarrassed about his one ball; he just liked having sex with someone he could walk away from.

Just before his fortieth birthday, Jack suffered severe head trauma in a

car accident, and as he lay dying in the road, a dog happened to pass by. Of course, it couldn't have been the same dog that took his testicle and - as you might expect - Jack was too caught up with his own meaningless death to take much notice anyway.

...

Day One

by J. S. Chlapowski

In Oxford, in August, stood condos half finished, fresh clay on their side and back and all around them, sticking to our sneakers and coming with us into our own homes, laying marks on cheap carpet we were too poor to replace. We used to wear socks on the carpet and skid across them to the closest doorknob, and then to the closest body, the shock for a moment making us feel magic, like we were more than we were, until we found carpet tacks too many times. So we tracked mud from our sneakers on a carpet we didn't care about, and learned not to care about the house we lived in, or the things we owned.

We weren't the first to live in the condo, and we didn't know if the carpets were always like that. We didn't live there on day one. When we were around the muddy half condos we could pretend that we were there for their day one, and live in our heads with a garage that didn't smell like spilled oil and used toys, with closets that weren't filled with musk and wear and smells not our own, with a carpet thicker than our thumbs, without thick tacks to stick our feet, and we could be children there.

Months went by and the clay didn't fill with grass, and the half finished condos didn't become more than half, so they had time to imbed themselves in our memories, in my memory, of what day one could be. We left for Virginia before we could find out how close our thoughts could match what the condos became, and we never returned, and we never found out.

Out of All of Us

by Yael van der Wouden

Out of all us there was only one I hated.

We were sixteen put together, spread out over four mothers and decades punctuated by nights spent in maternity wards, days doing homework while holding someone's baby. I was the oldest, which meant I was always holding someone's baby.

My father's second wife fed me a lot. Nervously, would always have something cooking when we came around—would fuss about the kitchen, wipe her hands, clatter with the plates. His third wife didn't care much either way, let me smoke in the back yard. The fourth welcomed me like a witch into a coven, put me to work, said, "Could you just stir that while I—" within my first hour of meeting her. She would have three sons. He was the oldest.

Once I heard him raise his voice to his ma. Through the door—I was outside, smoking—and the sound of it caught me like a sleeve hooked on a door handle on passing.

You don't like me very much, he asked me this one time. I'd dropped by to get back a dish his wife had borrowed. His daughter was wild at my legs, holding on, shouting *auntie stay auntie stay auntie*.

Well, I said, and then had nothing else to add. I recalled a time of loving the babe. How can you not, a wee thing with sick on his collar and eyes that barely open. I cooed him to sleep just like I'd done with all the others, fed him in the crook of my arm with the phone wedged between ear and shoulder, talking to a friend about her boyfriend, or my boyfriend, or someone.

I walked down the path of his home, dish heavy in my grip. My elbow caught, and angry, and empty, somehow, still.

...

The Museum

by Bibi Hamblin

It's two months since Mum died. Dad's having one of those moments when the strongest man in the world chooses to crumble right in front of you, just when you've managed to stick your own shattered pieces back together with skinny sticky tape. Usually I tell him it'll be okay, though I know it never will be, but today I bottle out. In my hurry I nearly knock my neighbour over. She's carrying a canvas bag that reads 'Britney Spears Saved My Life.' I wonder if she knows who Britney is.

"Sorry to hear about your Mum," she says softly. "she was a lovely lady. Him upstairs seems to have his on eye the good ones."

I nod. I'm still working out how I feel about 'Him upstairs.'

"I'm going to put the kettle on. Why don't you come in?"

I say nothing but follow her into her clean uncluttered house. Not what I expected of an O.A.P.

"Sit down love," she says, opening a cupboard and reaching for a biscuit barrel. She places a perfect steaming cup of tea in front of me, and smiles. "Your Mum used to pop by regular like. Check to see if I was alright." She lays a veined hand on top of mine. I bask in its warmth and comfort. I begin to cry.

"I know it seems impossible to go on. I felt the same when my Stu went." She gestures to a moustached man in a frame. "What you need is a museum to keep everything you loved about your Mum in, then you can pick a moment to savour. I do it all the time."

She hands me a tissue and I wipe my eyes. I sip my tea and slowly being to catalogue my memories.

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Desperate Teething Tumor

by Noa Sivan

It is noon when we enter the classroom for our last period. We try to avoid the surgical mask of our math teacher—she probably has mouth cancer, a desperate teething tumor, we suspect, although she explains she’s afraid of our germs. The headmaster comes in right after us and whispers in the teacher’s ear. So close to the mask it gives us the chills. They both approach Gali, the tuna-sandwich girl who always smells like tuna. We all guess what this is about. We all know she won’t cry. None of us do when they tell us our daddies have crashed.

Gali nods. She picks up her backpack and leaves. We imagine she will go straight home; a two-bedroom air force base standard house. It’s the same model house we all live in. Only hers is now full of quiet uniformed men. “He did everything right, it wasn’t his fault”; “We will help you get through this”; “We are here for you.” Their wives are there, too. They glare at the young newly-widowed being comforted by their still alive husbands, surrounding her, squeezing her shoulders. They all guess what this is about. They all know it doesn’t matter. None of them stay in the base after their pilots have crashed.

After school—math teacher releases the class early—I go to the eucalyptus grove behind the pool, where the desert meets fenced base limits. I find the most peculiar things there: used condoms, a dream catcher, a burnt car, a burnt bra - but today there’s nothing new. I slide into the car when I hear footsteps on dry eucalyptus leaves. I look through the scorched review mirror. It’s the math teacher. She takes off her mask. There is no teething tumor, just a red mouth. She’s crying. I guess what this is about. I know she was not afraid of his germs. I hold the wheel tight, pretend I’m driving into the barbed wire fence.

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...

There's a blooming in my chest that spreads like calla lilies clutching at sunlight. The change is underway.

From 'Calla Lillies' by Stephen Jackman

Outside is black, the blackest we've ever seen. We look out the window for any lights that aren't the moon, aren't the stars.

From 'Girls' Night In' by Cathy Ulrich

I've drunk too much. I don't usually drink. Vodka veiled in orange juice.

*'Let your hair down, it's a party,' a stranger says.
We share more than just a dance.*

From '1 for Sorrow...' by Lee Hamblin

Yesterday you were still zero, a not-person, a tiny ghost made of promises, human in the making. Today you are one.

From 'Scar' by Victoria Richards