two

A flash fiction anthology

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Ellipsis Zine: TWO

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- Steve

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Dummy

by Alyson Faye

Hannah could pinpoint precisely when visiting Myrtle Woods had become a daily pilgrimage. It was the moment they'd found her lost girl. When autumn stripped off in its annual seduction. When the woods became a tomb.

Atop the humpbacked bridge hidden in the undergrowth Hannah could pretend her little girl was playing hide and seek. Not the 'gone forever and I'm never coming back' version.

An alien splash of Barbie pink caught her eye and made Hannah's guts churn. She raised one skinny leg over the top strut of the fence. The pink beacon was calling her, tormenting her. She pushed the mulch aside and cried out when she saw it was a dummy. It was so innocent. So abandoned. It could have belonged to Daisy.

Hannah lifted the dummy to her mouth before carefully inserting it between chapped lips. She craved its comfort. She sucked on the rubber teat, tears dripping down her face.

A spaniel, all russet ears and tail, bounded onto the bridge. A small girl followed. On seeing Hannah she stared open mouthed. Gawking. Fascinated.

Removing the dummy Hannah whispered, 'Watch out for the troll.'

The girl nodded. Still and serious. A female relative burst from the guts of the shrubbery armed with immaculate hair. She stared with open hostility at Hannah.

'Come here Poppy.' She commanded. At her words, both girl and spaniel came to heel looking contrite. Eyes lowered, ears down.

Fury and grief battled inside Hannah. She jammed the dummy into her mouth again. The mother recoiled, but the little girl laughed, 'Funny lady.'

The little girl waved goodbye as her mother arm tugged her away. Hannah raised her own hand in response and whispered 'Bye bye Daisy. Come home soon.'

•••

Bow and Brush

by Sandra Chen

Low notes and soft strokes.

A flurry of fingers against strings, across canvas.

A sweeping bow, a drifting brush.

This is June's favorite version of them: fading on opposite ends of Lyra's bedroom, closer than two bodies can be. Escaping the boundaries of form, spilling into wine-rich tones and myriad shades of blue. The air between them saturated with melodic color, doused in vibrant legato. Waves of sound, of hue, of light and electricity. To breathe is to be drunk off of beauty.

On these days, no words are spoken and everything is said. Rosin and oil soliloquys. Warbled trills and rose tones exchanging I love you's. Poetry transcribed in allegro and asymmetry.

Theirs is a language that carries.

From four walls to the stars themselves, basking in dream-lit grazioso, in lines flowing from paper to planets.

From the sky to the sea, to the rolling waters and their metronomic murmur, adding dulcet melodies and gentle glides to kindle a symphony.

Theirs is a love that knows no speech, only art.

So June will never stop painting this Lyra, this girl with eyes closed and everything else splayed open, carving out shards of herself with every curved draw of the bow. The measures rising out of her like ringlets of smoke, a body on fire and yearning to burn.

Here, in this state, is the most intimate painting can be—more so than any nude portrait or figure study—because to witness a bare soul is to see beneath exposed skin.

June has seen it all, but for a second she chooses to see nothing, just lets her own hand flow with the current of soaring notes. In this moment, they are four eyes blind and two hearts ablaze, leaving behind themselves to find each other instead.

•••

Bruised Fruit

by Adam Trodd

He sits down. Takes a break from dancing. His shirt translucent with sweat. The string-skipping intro of "Sweet Child o' Mine" rends the hot air. Those already sitting or standing at the bar punch the air and whoop before joining their partners on the dance floor. A dropped pint of stout explodes like a foam octopus. Air guitar ensues. The fire escape door is propped open by a chair. He takes his cue. Nods in her direction. Seconds later they are sharing a cigarette on the cool steps in the moonlight while the wedding rages colour and sound behind the glass of the hotel ballroom.

'So this is it?' she says, sitting on the steps.

They are in the shade of a yew tree. Squashed berries make of the ground a vermillion slick. He rests beside her. Passes her the cigarette. The thin dry sound of the tobacco catching fire as air is sucked through is clearer than any sound he has ever heard. His bare forearm touches her warmer skin as he sits and electricity is borne through them both by synapses alive with possibility. She shoots smoke in a thin jet. Her lipstick imprints the cork-coloured filter, sweet and waxy smelling. That scent. Her skin. The clotted mascara on her eye lashes. Her pupils are black glass moons embraced by rings of mottled amber.

'This is it.' he says.

It is like crushing a flower in his mouth. Delicate of stem. Swollen pistil. A whisper of tobacco taints her tongue and mingles richly with her perfume. They separate, breathe. His heart tolls in the belfry of his ribcage. She smooths her hair. Doesn't smile.

'You'd better go back in. Your bride is waiting.' she says.

...

Seven Hundred and Thirty Days

by Susan James

Days since the last accident: seven hundred and thirty. The number is wrong. Someone should wipe it off the board.

Rob curls his fingers into his palm, tapping his knuckles against the cladding of Mike's portacabin. The older man calls him inside and nods to an empty seat.

'Jesus, Rob, what happened, mate? HSE will have my bloody arse for this.'

'Peter? Is he—'

'I gotta ask it. You hadn't been drinking, had you?'

Rob shakes his head.

'Of course, you bloody weren't,' Mike leans forward in his chair; the castors cracking, popping, 'but they'll ask, and they might have to — you know — check.'

Rob slides one knee over the other. The weight in his pocket drops, cupping his hip. He nods.

'Right, well, wait here a minute. I'll keep them talking, take them over there.'

Rob lets him go. He counts to two hundred and then gets up, walks to his car and gets behind the wheel. His hand twitches over the ignition. He'd put the pennies in his pocket, and he finds them now: the copper coins. Slipping them between his lips, one after another, he holds them thickly inside his cheeks and retches, tasting the thunderstorm under his teeth. He doesn't know if this will work.

There's a half-bottle in the boot, and he could pour it. He could spit the pennies out into his fist, curl bourbon fingers down his throat instead. He could make his hand steady, steadier than Peter's before the saw, before the ribbons and rivers of copper and tissue and the severed peaks of white bone. Seven hundred and thirty days, Rob thinks of the number on the board. It sounds longer than two years, and he swallows around the coins.

•••

Today, I Die

by Maura Yzmore

The Javaah burned four dozen villages and slaughtered thousands in the days before they descended, like a swarm of bloodthirsty locust, upon the eternal city of Qizaar. My city.

My archers and I are the last stand of our civilization.

The carnage-laying savages, their teeth sharpened into fangs, are the last of their kind, too.

The Javaah were once a proud and peaceful people. We robbed, killed, and tortured them for generations. Their children were born disfigured as we poisoned their water, their crops. Those among them strong enough to survive were bound to lose their minds. No one lives through the horrors they faced without growing to crave the smell of human innards, slithering out of a freshly slashed gut.

Today, Qizaar, a callous beast, falls under a siege of its likes.

Today, I die, ashamed of what I am sworn to die protecting.

•••

Mythological

by Sophie van Llewyn

When you stood with your forehead pressed against the window, watching the pouring rain outside, hoping for your husband's ship to park in front of your house so that he can come to you, wrapped in sunshine and hope, just like you saw on the TV in that perfume commercial, nobody called you Penelope.

When you gave up the job at the newspaper, the writing, the tennis and all your other hobbies, stayed at home to pour him wine and one child after another, nobody called you Hestia.

When you took care of the flowers and other arrangements at his funeral, so that the others may be blinded by their own tears and claim you weren't mourning, nobody called you Antigone.

When you wake up every morning, three mouths to feed, two bosses to please, kids to drive to swimming and football practice, homework to help with, a house to keep, accounts to do at night when everybody's sleeping, so that you can start all over again in the morning, nobody calls you Sisyphus.

And yet, what you do every day is mythological.

•••

The Snake and the Red Silk King were Framed

by Alva Holland

It's the essence of him. He used scraps of fabric, mostly blues, to create an ocean.

On top, he placed the first letter, a capital 'S' - a yellow and green striped snake.

A thick scrawl of brown crayon formed the 't' – the second letter of his name. The remaining four letters were scrawled - various shades of green against an array of blues.

In the bottom right corner, he drew a sun. In the top left corner, a piece of purple lace hung against the aqua.

'Seaweed,' he said.

When she questioned if the locations should be reversed, his quizzical look lasted a full minute.

'No,' he said.

A scrap of red silk sat alone, bottom left, as if abandoned in the ocean's vast blueness.

'What's that?' she enquired.

'Neptune,' he replied.

'Does he need a trident?' she asked, 'for identification.'

Another full minute.

'No,' he said.

He stood back, nodded.

'I'm finished.'

He was eight years old.

Twenty years have passed.

The framed picture of the snake forming the 'S,' the sun rising from the seabed, the seaweed hanging in mid-air, Neptune's powerful red dot with more oomph than a six-foot-tall sea king with a gold trident, hangs on his bedroom wall.

Brimming, she studies it, the essence of him, his imagination.

He's visiting for the weekend. Pointing to the picture, she smiles.

'Remember doing that?' she asks.

'Yes, for the Grade 4 Art Show. You thought I should reverse the sun and seaweed. I couldn't understand why.'

Billy

by Jack Somers

Barefoot, hunting for sparklers in the back of the garage, I stepped on the upturned blade of my great grandfather's scythe. The blade slid right through my left foot, poking out between the bones at the base of my big toe and pointer. I didn't know what I'd done at first. In the darkness of the garage, I thought I'd just stepped on a sharp screw. It wasn't until I emerged into the sunlight that I got a good look. Blood welled up from the gash and ran down the driveway in ghoulish rivulets. I didn't feel any pain, which I knew was bad.

My dad heard my cries and came running. He scooped me up in his big, sunburned arms, carried me to the lawn chair in the side yard, and wrapped my foot in his beach towel. Gradually feeling began to return to the foot—a soft pulse that grew stronger and stronger. I counted the beats while Dad rushed inside and called 911.

When I got to beat fifty-nine, he reappeared with a fresh towel and a bottle of isopropyl alcohol. He unwrapped the blood-soaked beach towel and tossed it aside.

"This will sting a little," he said. He poured the isopropyl alcohol over the wound with a generous hand.

It stung a lot, and I yelped and gyrated in the chair. He tightened his grip on my ankle and steadied my body.

"Hang in there, Billy," he said. "You're going to make it."

At first I was confused. Who was Billy? Then I remembered what Mom had told me about the friend Dad had lost in Vietnam, the friend he'd tried to save. I realized that it wasn't just the two of us in the yard waiting for help to arrive.

•••

Man Diet

by Michael Hurst

To have and to hold. The breath is the worst thing.

It started out like pear drops but now it's deeper, ranker: the dirt from a thousand chemical reactions. If people don't notice the weight loss, they notice the breath.

What diet are you on? Calorie counting, 1500 a day. *Oh.*

I split the calories equally across breakfast, lunch and dinner. No one can say that any meal looks too small.

Turns out everyone's on a diet.

I listen to them talking about their sins.

I listen to them talking about their free foods.

I listen to them talking about their weigh-ins.

Too much information. The comments are the worst thing.

1500 calories aren't enough for a man.

Why don't you do crunches to get rid of your gut? (Say the ones with huge guts.)

You weigh everything? Isn't that a bit spectrum-y?

Would you like a cake / burger / fruit juice? No, no and no.

I don't tell them I weigh myself every day.

I don't tell them about the 10g of margarine on my sandwich.

I don't tell them I wipe every crumb from my plate with my finger.

Two potatoes and a turkey burger. The hunger is the worst thing.

My body doing its job. Really, hunger is something to celebrate. I slap my stomach and say, 'There's plenty of food for you right there.'

Before the morning weigh-in I expel every ounce of spit, snot, wee and poo.

On the plus side turning on your mobile phone is no longer your first act of the day.

On the plus side the scales go down to tenths of a pound.

On the plus side you get to choose how much of yourself is left in the world.

Reunion

by Helen Rye

That evening, when the black sky touched the sea and made it raging tear up stones as big as fists and hurl them at the seafront, town lights drew in behind us as we ran across the pier's length, the roaring of the waves so fierce we could not hear us screaming in each other's ears. But in the spindrift moonrise your wild laugh like a fey thing gleamed, your hair like wracks sea-born streamed out in the gale. We clung together else we'd fall, felt the voltage in our pores as lightning broke the sky apart around us, tasted iron in salty air, our shirts so wet I did not know where your skin stopped and mine began, until, recalling other skyscapes, we danced the wave-beat of a moment ten years lost, till whitecaps tall as buildings threw us roughly down and dragged us grit-chafed to the pier's edge. The void below us filled my stomach as I gripped rimed, rusted railings. You climbed up to shout and wave into the storm like one unmade.

Later, as, dripping in a dog-pissed shelter, I saw my fingers bled where that corroded metal tore and broke my cold-numbed skin, you rolled our cigarettes with hands unblemished.

...

Grammar Lesson

by Angela Amman

She tried to organize her grading system, but Laura's freshman essays ended up sprawled across the dining room table each time she took a breath. Her husband's job came with shortfalls, but none of those involved nights spent combing through sentences to discover if her students absorbed anything discussed during their classroom book clubs.

"I'm not sure why you end up with four trees worth of paper when you could have them submit online," he said.

Their home contained three computers with the fastest internet speed available.

"I like grading on paper," she said.

He crinkled his nose if he looked too closely at the reams of paper spilling onto the floor. He worshipped precision, data reviewed until margins of error existed only in the most abstract sense of the words.

"You missed one," he said tonight, finger gently resting on a grammatical misstep, "to" instead of "too."

"I didn't," she replied. Her voice smoothed the roughness of the language on the pages, if not the creases in her forehead. "We'll get to grammar. I want to see their ideas, what they think of what they're reading."

"Janis," he said. The name crawled into the corner like spider legs, small and cramped on rumpled paper.

Named for the singer, she could have said. A mother with a habit just as bad.

But she could have said something similar about most of the names sliding in and out of her chairs each day.

"Read what she wrote about *Speak*," Laura said instead. "The part I underlined."

"Maybe Melinda doesn't talk because she's scared no one wants to hear. Maybe it hurts less to be quiet."

He leaned his cheek against her hair, but she remained with Janis, worried her encouragement could never be enough to make the lost teenager feel heard.

Interest Free

by Ed Broom

He clears his throat as if expecting an “ON AIR” sign to illuminate.

“Zoe,” he says, looking up, “I’ve been thinking. About the two of us. What we’ve done. Where we are now. What happens next.”

Perched on an old coffee crate in the fireplace, one of Zoe’s plants catches his eye. Everybody thought that Somebody would water it. Anybody could water it. Nobody has watered it.

“Funnily enough, Zoe, I was stuck in traffic outside there on the way home tonight. Next, that is. You ever noticed the way those units are lined up? Argos, Boots, then Costa and DFS. Should be Evans next but it’s actually Next next, which is kind of fitting.”

Zero response apart from that wretched spring poking his left buttock.

“Anyway, Zoe, you were on my mind like always when I saw this big pink sign saying “Two Years Interest Free”. ‘Cos the years we’ve had have been amazing - the ice hotel, that power station in Lithuania, the skinny dipping, you name it - but you’re two-thirds my age and it’s starting to tell.”

He sips his tea, now lukewarm.

“These days, Zoe, when I reach the end of the working week, I don’t always want to go clubbing or geocaching or bat-hunting. Sometimes I’d just like a piping hot cup of PG on a big comfy sofa with a huge great flatscreen. All on two years interest free. How does that sound?”

Footsteps along the hall and a head appears around the living room door.

“Hey, old man,” says Zoe, “you coming up? I’ve been reading about this new technique I thought we could try. If your back’s up to it, that is.”

“Zoe,” he says, “I’ve been thinking. About the two of us.”

•••

Divisible by Two

by Paul Thompson

We emerge from hibernation in the spring, having missed the first term of school for the benefit of others.

Everyone assumes we are related. Parents and pupils pretend not to watch as we pull each other upstream through the school gates. Comments are made behind our backs, a wake of glares as we walk.

How unfortunate, people say.

How unlucky, people say.

Yet for us the luck is a blessing. Every cruel word disperses between us. Every glare is divisible by two, to be shared later and scrunched up with the others.

We spend our first day playing with the reception children. To them we are fascinating, as pretty as the pictures they stick on their fridges.

A party invitation comes from a stranger, and encouraged by our parents we attend as requested. We bring with us a birthday card, our saliva on the envelope, and a sack full of blossom collected from our many occasions sent home from school.

In the garden, other children play on a trampoline wrapped in bunting. When we approach the bouncing stops, our presence putting the party on hold.

Be nice, the adults say.

Play nicely, the adults say.

They watch as we drag ourselves onto the trampoline and tip the bag of blossom onto the canvas.

Bounce, we say to our classmates, our first words spoken in public.

They follow our instruction, causing the petals to lift and swirl in a snow globe of blossom. Together we bounce in the blizzard, warmed by the laughter and howls that engulf us.

•••

Rubies

by Rebecca Williams

My mistress has a necklace of rubies. The stones wink at me in the candle-light, fat and wet like drops of blood. She has other necklaces - of pearls, of emeralds - but none as fine as this. I covet it, covet her skin, the velvet whiteness of it.

My mistress sits at her mirror, corsets unlaced, her marble-smooth breasts plump and glossy as a swan's wing. A scent, musky sweat and sweet vanilla, weaves a gossamer fine web between us; I crouch behind, attending.

I unpin, unpin, unpin each gilded coil. I brush, brush, brush each shimmering strand. The heavy silk of her hair traces a line of beauty down her back. Her eyes in the mirror, meet my eyes in the mirror. How big the pupils seem; I am drowning in pools of ebony.

The pull in my belly is so strong, setting fires burning through my bloodstream out to my fingertips. The room closes in around us, pulsing with every heartbeat. I am done brushing. I pick up her scarf, it is water in my hands, fluid and slippery. It slips around her neck.

My mistress had a necklace of rubies. She had other necklaces - of pearls of emerald - but none look as fine on me as this.

•••

First Untruths

by Tomas Marcantonio

The thurible swung from its gibbet chains, releasing a heavy cloud of hallucinations to the rafters, and the purple tang of incense tickled in my nose and throat like a mouthful of fizzy petals swallowed right off the forest floor. I was seven, suffocating beneath the pew-side paintings, the long pale portraits of tortured faces with golden plates behind their curls, rib cages crushed under the weight of crucifixes. I followed the priest into the box, knelt, and thumbed the sign of the cross onto my forehead.

I smelled the damp-iron poison of the grate that separated us, the stale wooden air, and the priest's loud breath of cardboard and nuts. I stared at his berry-blotched face, the thick black ropes in his nostrils, and his cold, wet, cow eyes that stared dead upon the opposite wall. His cheeks sagged about his mouth when he spoke, like great saddlebags of sour milk.

I recited the Lord's Prayer, a whisper, and the priest requested my confession. I swallowed, my mouth still dry after the first deluge of wine. It had coated my tongue in an acrid film that was spiced like an old man's blood, nothing like my own sweet red-black honey that I would suck dry at first sight. My knees ached, and my skull was a cavernous vacuum of sins, full only of the scents of damp oak and yellow piano keys.

'Sometimes I forget to say my prayers,' I admitted. The priest's boiled-pink crown leaned forward into the grate, asking for more. Nothing came to mind. Wild visions punctured the perfumed silence of our cell: the gorilla-haired fingers ripping through the screen to wring my wrists like wet cloths, until the skin crinkled like a fried pig's and blood oozed and dripped onto the cushion.

That's when I began to relay a list of imagined crimes, and that is my earliest memory of being untruthful.

•••

Spliced Alike

by T. L. Sherwood

We aren't the kind of sisters who plan trips together. We won't visit relatives on the same day if at all possible. At the very least, we choose different hours to stop in at Gran's for Christmas.

Strangers remark this is odd behavior for twins. I inform them it runs in the family.

"Identical twins?" they ask.

"Well, those, too."

Pressed on why she and I don't communicate, I recite the brothers' Medford silent treatment of 1915-1945. Great Uncle Paul disagreed with William, our grandfather, so vehemently he refused all offers of reconciliation for thirty years.

People ask, "Was it because of the World Wars?"

"Like those minor disagreements mattered." I'll snort. It's then that they'll back away.

"You're a twin?" Boyfriends with glee ask with bare teeth, skin mag brains calculating on the idea.

I'll ask, "Aren't you?"

"No."

"Oh." It's annoying they don't fathom the insult before delivering it. I lick the tip of their nose, tsk, and put my bra back on. "That's the only way this ever would have worked."

Lacking family and romantic interest, my sister and I study, prepare, defend multiple theses. She becomes a pioneer in nano-medication delivery systems. I develop a genome specific chemical synthesizer. There are huge differences between the two medical advances but not to the committee. We are classified as one, both achievements equal, and we hate each other more than ever at the ceremony for the Nobel Prize we share. I'm certain Sweden has never been colder.

Our parents send us the same congratulatory email: We are proud of all your work to heal others, perhaps it's time to mend yourselves.

I respond: Once split...

She finishes...forever a rift.

Oh, You Foolish Man

by Lorraine Wilson

'Too much,' we say, you and I. And how can it be that we speak the same language, the same words, when we are telling such different tales?

'Too much,' you say with your eyes dense with razor wire and barricades, you see axes of colour and stamped papers folded until the creases are a skin-soft lexicon. I see all the walls you build around your heart and I think you truly believe, don't you, that if they keep out the multitudes then they will keep out your fear?

'Too much,' I say and I see slipshod boats on cantilevered seas, black eyes white-rimmed, white-rimed, bruises that do not show in the way our cameras were built to see. Grief made invisible by slant-blind pixels. I see demons manifested and the crumbling of ourselves and you see these things too, don't you? You see the seas rising and the sands consuming and they are what turned the muscle of your heart to ashes, they are what laid the foundations to your walls.

Oh, you foolish man. Do you think your barricades can stop the sea? Mad king of your own dream-islands, do you think the storms will falter at your puny walls? Oh, you cowardly man. It is not courage to let your veins pump anger and brutality. Do you think anyone cares at all for your hate?

But still you stay quivering behind your flags, so I will take your painted cloth and wrap it around shoulders ocean-frozen and alone. I will tear it into bandages against the bombs we drop until my fingers are stained with blood and tiny kindnesses, and I will tell you this one truth. All our many hands might save us, and the ocean pities no walls.

...

Oil & Sawdust

by Richard de Nooy

You died while I was dodging rolling dustbins, falling branches, rising rivers driven by a storm. I'd been sent to fetch your glasses, so that your feeble eyes could see their final ceiling and the holy trinity of fluorescent tubes on high, one of which had flickered to the rhythm of your failing heart.

Because I knew you would be angry that you had died alone, I waited for my brother, so that we could share the blame, as ever. I made the first move, but we drew back the sheet together and stood there staring at you, relieved but slightly disappointed that for the first time in our lives you did not wrap us in your arms and attempt to hug us to death.

Not sure what to do, I took your hand, which was soft and cool yet firm, like when it guided my saw-hand through a plank or my hammer-hand to a nail. It was still your hand, unlike your face, which was like a big, pale prune, wrinkled and angry, wrapped in a towel.

"To keep his jaw shut," said the nurse.

"That'd be a first," quipped my brother.

I almost expected you to leap up roaring Donderjagers! (thunder-chasers) in mock anger. But you kept your cool, Daddy, as you'd always advised us to do.

And so I leaned in and kissed the light band where your wedding ring had been. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I'd seen it in a film or I'd read it in a book. Maybe because I hoped to catch one last whiff of your scent.

Your fingers smelled of unfamiliar soap, but as I type these words, I see you leaning over your circle saw, the scent of oil and sawdust alive in my nose.

•••

The Revision

by Kelly Griffiths

I write great swaths of rage and delete them.

Later, after many such deletions, our reality may make the cut.

Draft number one begins with me throwing rocks at the screen. Freewriting, it's called. Free of artfulness, free of merit, free of organization. Draft one is mind vomit, raw soul with high notes of prepubescent girl who asks, why? Look, I wear steel-toed boots and reflective clothing to work. I don't shave because it gives me a Clint Eastwood don't-fuck-with-me look. But I fervently believe, when I feel like writing bad poetry, which is to say, when I've had my heart cut out and delivered to me on a platter, I fall back young. When I feel like throwing something over the balustrade or putting my fist through a wall, I've fallen all the way to age two. I break glass when you leave. The tinkling, striking shards are musical anarchy. When I feel like listening to breaking glass, I'm exactly seventeen.

Draft number two comes later and can only be written by the oldest me there is. Draft two recognizes: silk is just spit that hasn't been refined. Give it a chance, says draft two. (Incidentally, caterpillars destined to become butterflies—not silk—must first digest themselves. If you cut open a cocoon at just the wrong time, out will flow snot. Draft one = snot.) In draft two I think rhythm, voice, tone. I think, thesaurus. I get high on metaphor and the way language is a file, an adze, paint. I take the raw emotion and apply literary devices until the bleeding stops. In draft two our breakup becomes #fiction.

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The Oversharing Omniscient Narrator

by Caleb Echterling

The alarm clatters for two minutes before it rouses Dave's hangover-addled brain, the wages of an evening, by himself, slugging vodka straight from the bottle. He glares at the light fixture. "Cut that out," he snaps. "This is a story about robbing a bank. Stay focused on what's important."

Dave has been snippy ever since erectile dysfunction ruined his ability to perform in the bedroom.

He flings an empty vodka bottle at the ceiling. "Dammit! Don't tell them that. It's embarrassing, and it's extraneous to the plot."

Dave heaves his belly flab out of bed, and wobbles into a pair of underwear, the ones with the giant skidmark that Dave hasn't washed or removed from the undergarments rotation, since no one sees him in his underwear, now that his wife left him.

"You know what? Fuck you. I'm stuffing my head under a pillow until the story's over. I've got better things to do with my time than advance your stupid plot."

Dave crams a drool-encrusted pillowcase over his unwashed hair. He counts the seconds until the denouement, and freedom partake in his only hobby: posing gummi bears in pornographic positions.

"Gaa!"

•••

On the Bough to Perish

by Jad Josey

There was blood on her hands, sticky beneath the noonday sun. She rubbed her palms together, smeared them on her denim skirt. We stumbled through the chaparral, through tall grasses bobbing with ticks on every blade, through poison oak that nicked our ankles.

"Water," she said.

"We have to keep moving."

"To wash my hands," she said. We stopped and flies were instantly upon her palms and knuckles and wrists. She smelled like old pennies.

I found a tall lilac covered in wispy flowers like tiny blue pom-poms, and I pinched them off until her palms were full. "The Chumash called it soap bush," I said. Turkey vultures turned in slow circles high above us. I spit into her palms, into the blue flowers cradled there like snow. I spit until my mouth was dry, then closed my eyes and thought of vanilla ice cream until I was able to spit some more.

"Rub them together," I said.

Soon her hands were oozing a sky-colored lather. She worked the foam into the creases of her knuckles, up the bony part of her wrists. The vultures circled lower, descending upon a shallow grave dug in the sand. After some time, her hands were cleaner. After time, they would be clean.

•••

Two Minutes

by Luke Richardson

You switch on the radio, the news is on. You've missed the start, but it doesn't matter, you wouldn't remember it anyway. You're not sure why you've switched it on, but it just seems normal, instinctive. Possibly it's a habit, but you're not sure. You're wet, it could be raining, if it is you should close that window.

You're home later than usual, you would be frustrated if you realised.

"Now with the development of mind control we are pushing the boundaries of thought up to the ten-minute mark," a familiar voice talks from the radio. It's kind, but not friendly, informative, but particular.

You're wet, is it raining? Close that window.

"Although the average person enjoys concentration for up to six minutes, with these new developments we have almost doubled…"

Six minutes seems like a long time, you think. Why would anyone need to concentrate for that length of time? What could possibly take you more than six minutes. You remember something from years before, the memory is vague and crackly, maybe from childhood. It comes back to you slowly. Insidiously. You think about how, before computers and machines completed complicated tasks, people had to concentrate for as long as an hour. You'd seen pictures of them driving cars and trains, operating machines, reading books. You think about what that could have been like.

You notice you're wet, it's raining outside. The window is open.

You wonder why the radio has been left on.

…

Backyard Rites

by Kurt Hoberg

I had to join the firing squad when I was thirteen. My dad, carrying a .12 gauge and a green shell, walked beside me. The weeds prickled through my funeral pants. We stopped just before the family gravestones, 1917 and 1941 at the center. I knew then to put out my hand, and I cupped the plastic casing he gave me, afraid it might blow away in the wind.

"Set'm free," he said, holding the gun out by the barrel.

At my grandma's funeral four months before, I'd seen a similar thing: one by one, my aunts and uncles had taken their mom's .16 gauge, loaded a shell filled with her ashes, and shot the woman at the greasy sky. I hung back between the stuffed deer, stealing cigarettes from purses. My dad was the next-to-last, Uncle Barrett the only one older. But now that his heart'd quit, the order shifted.

Barrett's gun was dense in the back end. Lemme get back to the others, my dad told me. He was a large man and slow. I counted to thirty and tried situating the shotgun into the pocket of my shoulder. I lifted the sight from woods to overcast. The hell was I aiming so carefully for?

My eyes closed as I pulled. The sky bristled, silencing the flapping wings. My arm was tingling when I passed the gun to Aunt Jackie. She slipped me a cig.

It wasn't until the next day I realized I'd shot the gun left-handed. A purple bruise appeared where the butt kicked back at. The shade spread toward my heart.

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Flamingos and Ham

by Judy Darley

I was 12 when the ruling came in, banning certain words, colours, and clothing. It seemed farcical at first. My mum and dad laughed in disbelief as they watched the news.

"How can they outlaw pink?" Dad hooted. "What about flamingos and… and, ham?!"

Mum grimaced. "How can they forbid hats, and wool? What are they afraid of?"

Neither mentioned the words considered inflammatory. I think they understood even then that to utter them aloud could be dangerous.

At school the next day the new uniforms were revealed. The boilersuits came in pewter-grey or beige. We giggled as we slipped them on over our regular clothes, teasing each other that we resembled an army. Suki was the only one straight-faced. "We look like clones," she said. "No boys, no girls, no personalities."

"What are they afraid of?" I agreed. I spoke the words softly, already wary of being overheard.

No one knew who might be listening with intent, ready to share transgressions. Some instinct was taking hold, making us discreet.

On the first day of winter, I saw the old man who ran the art shop arrested for wearing a knitted cap. He was seething as he went, snarling about infringements of human rights. I jolted to hear the prohibited words ring through the icy air.

His eyes met mine as he entered the van. "Don't forget," he said, "Don't let them make you believe that this is normal. You wore pink once, and ran for the hell of it. Don't forget those…"

The door slammed shut and he was gone. I watched the van disappear around a slippery corner, and tried to remember the differences between then and now. It felt like two lifetimes ago.

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A World Not Watching

by Jason Jackson

She still learns her lines while driving, the text open beside her, its spine cracked from pressing down hard. Sometimes she'll hold the wheel in one hand, the book in the other, dropping it, laughing, windows down, the wind rushing in. She'll mutter and mumble, looking for the right voice, and once she has it, the car will fill with words. She recites the other parts too, because she knows them, she's learnt them, because - she tells herself - she's that bloody good, and outside the world is a just stage-set.

She's been a lover on the floor, begging her boyfriend to take her now, now. She's been a convict in a fat-suit with a shaved head, and for that they said her eyes even changed. She's spun around in circles and balanced one-legged on a box for six long minutes every night of a five-night run. She's worn a black wig which smelled of vinegar, a corset which almost killed her, and a dress which was so loose on opening night her breast fell out. She's smiled through licked lips, kissed closed-mouthed with men who hugged her too tightly, and she's laughed like the world was ending, but she's never sang, because she cannot sing, and she knows she never will.

The end, she hopes, will not come on stage but in the car, script in hand, the words on her lips, windows down, and the wind...

But until then she'll feel the heat of white lights, the hush of half-full houses, the relief of curtains, and - always - the stage-sickness, that sharp proof to hold against the emptiness of a world not watching.

•••

Diptych

by Lucie McKnight Hardy

We take a different route today, forced to take a detour from the dual carriageway by the scattered scars of metal made pretty by the sun. Heat-prickled, bickering, we shrivel to a rest in the wake of black, smooth-shadowed dignity.

'Mother,' bright carnations scream, their incandescent pinks more giddy than their scent.

What old lady would want that when laid to rest? What would she think? Would she approve, her sweet octogenarian scent more sickly than any of these blooms?

And then outside the church we slow, and two young boys are dressed in Sunday best.

They stand just inches from the rest: alone, unheard, untouched. Heads bent and shoulders shrunk. Bewilderment filters through, intensified by silence; a diptych carved from grief.

Did she see them off, sun grasping at her hair, cheeks scorched with youth and love and there but out of sight the fact that this would be the very last time, their scent by then a memory she'd hold just half the day?

A crowd of mourners churns, not waiting for the bride, the sun low now and setting.

There weaves a silhouette, pale jaw set in resolution. Firm hands clasp tiny shoulders from behind. The diptych becomes a triptych and they walk towards the church.

And then the traffic moves again and we slough on, prisoners to our own experiences.

•••

The Space Between

by Christopher M Drew

You sit on one side of the sofa and the man who is your husband sits on the other. There is a space between you, a space filled with magazines, an ashtray, mobile phones. It also holds other things. Things unacknowledged, buried between the cracks.

A tall shaded lamp hangs over you, its light soft and pale and perfect. The light is not strong enough to reach the man who is your husband, but you see his face, a mask, flickering in the artificial strobe of the television.

He reaches over and crushes his cigarette into the cut-glass bowl, leaving a tiny pink finger sticking up from the embers. A fragile stem of smoke unfurls from the ashtray and scatters white petals across the ceiling.

He does not look at you. If he did, he would see your shadow angling away from your body toward him, a monolith.

In the furniture store, the salesman offered his hand and lowered you into the seat. His skin was cold, his pulse barely beating.

Take the weight off your feet, he said.

You remember the weight floating inside you. A moon revolving, your heart a tide.

Reaching behind the armrest, you pull a hidden lever. The sofa tilts back and the footrest elevates. As the seat reclines, you raise your pelvis and arch your lower back.

The man who is your husband glances in your direction. He sees you push your fingers into the crease between your thigh and groin.

Another place for secrets. For silence.

Another place for things buried.

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The Other Half of Pain

by Janelle Hardacre

An invisible hand crushes my insides, steals my breath. Another surge. I grip the bench to steady myself, the sea's gust stroking my damp face.

I wait. Tense. I beg furling waves to soothe me, but they say what I know. More to come.

Again. Tighter now. A gnash of teeth digging to a place which cannot be soothed. My legs buckle and a howl escapes with a white plume.

There is only me, but I am not lonely. I stare towards infinite water and as habit dictates, picture my sister. Is she still out there?

It comes to me. The vision of the first time, when she skidded on the rock and her knee was a mess of red, gravel and see-through flaps. I felt the sting of every stone in my own knee. When she lost her first love, my heart ached like it was my own that had split in two. Her pain was my pain.

The day she left, my sister never wanted to see me again. She even hated mirrors because she saw me looking back. That's the worst agony of all. The constant underache of my missing half.

For a little while I still felt her. When she had a symbol inked on her ankle or when she gashed her arm. But then, nothing. In dark moments I feared she had left this earth.

But now, it makes sense. Standing on this cliff edge, consumed by pain, there's laughter in my cries. My darling is well and is surely bringing her own sweet offspring into the world. Our blood.

As I reach the ultimate peak of our pain my cry is so piercing I know mother and babe will hear me. They will hear the love of an aunt who is sorry.

•••

May / December

by Christina Dalcher

Her former lover died in full winter and, after so many years, May could only see him as perpetually sixty-something, older but not old, not brittle-boned and soft-minded. If she thought of him, she thought about his mouth that, even in a kiss, had never said I love you. In her stupid youth, she mistook absence of sound as absence of feeling, and the words she remembered him saying seemed hollow, as she imagined his heart was. He spoke of love just once, of another girl in another place. “She sounds like me,” May said. He only laughed.

At the best of times, May imagined age had robbed him of ability, that cardiac muscles grow tired as they enter a marathon’s final stages. At the worst of times, and at that single worst time when he shed himself of her and walked away, when his shoulders seemed to straighten, reach back, and scream I don’t love you, May hated him for refusing the gift of her body.

But age is a skilled tutor, and when her husband tosses their boy high into the air, when years stretch out before them like infinite roads toward happiness, May remembers how a moment’s pain forged her future. And she smiles a thank-you to this former lover, thinking of that day when he took her fishing, when his patient fingers dislodged barbs from the smallest fish’s jaw, when he let the creature slip into the creek, listening to it plop softly before watching it wriggle away. Why did you put it back? May asked. He only laughed, as if she were too young to understand.

•••

Boyfriends

by John Holland

Her two boyfriends looked the same. Greg and Joe, they were called. They never met, but knew of each other.

When I saw her with one of them I would ask her, “Is that Greg?”

“Joe,” she’d say.

Or on another day I’d ask, “Is that Joe?”

“Greg,” she’d say.

To look like them I started to brush back my hair, cultivate a goatee beard, lose weight, wear John Lennon glasses.

Soon I was in a relationship with her too, although I knew she was seeing Greg and Joe. But I felt jealous – especially when we made love and she called out ‘Oh, Greg’, or sometimes ‘Oh, Joe’.

I told her she had to choose. It was Greg or Joe or me.

She chose Joe, because, she said, he had more individuality.

I know Greg’s still seeing her though. As am I.

...

Follow the Lights

by James Turner

I walk in through the front door, muscles still throb and ache. Throw my keys on the hall table. Empty chocolate wrapper falls out. Mustn't exceed RDA of sugar and salt. Quickly put it back. Must concentrate on my actions, mustn't let mind wander. Take off jacket and feel my back pull but can't show any sign of pain. Smiling wife rubs my neck, the muscles so sore but I flex them for her. She asks if I went past Sharon and Neil's. (Why aren't I more like him?) My mind goes blank, can't remember the drive. Where was my mind? How did I get here? Was I just following the lights in front? I say yes.

In our approved lounge, like the one on TV, wife's magazines open on the coffee table, showing how we must live. Always more muscles, though feel I'm losing others constantly. Go into kitchen, open fridge. Automatically check the nutritional ingredients on everything. I don't know why. Wife knows what will kill me, knows everything. Son appears and grabs the juice, asks mother what he's going to do. Can he get some new football boots or what? A new bag or what? A haircut. The bullies at school ridicule him. He's not going in tomorrow. Wife looks at me.

I smell the milk. I could tell him it doesn't matter what they think. I could lie to my own son. I could aggravate the bullies who will become the managers that my son will encounter after University. How will he ever get a job then? What would he even do? Even I don't know what I want to do. Do it anyway though. Must try to think less. Just look good. Just do it.

...

Just a Casing

by Gaynor Jones

She closed the front door. If only it were that easy to shut out the words. Two months. Two months. Echoing in her head like a relentless bell ringer, fresh pain with every dong. She took off her coat, then her jumper, then her bra. She removed her trousers, her tights, her underwear. Left a pile of herself behind the front door.

She walked up to the bathroom, naked but for the marks, the pocks, the bruises - the evidence of everything she had put her body through since her diagnosis. And for what? Two more months.

She drew a hot bath and lowered herself into it, pinking bit by bit - a willing lobster being dipped into the pot.

She sat in the heat, tears in her eyes. Until she saw the razor. And decided to make a choice.

She leaned forward, stretched her steady hand out and carefully split open her big toes at the tip. Then she peeled the skin back from her feet and legs, rolled up layers of blemished flesh, curling them up her body as she'd seen her Grandmother rolling a pie lid into a tin many years before. She reached her breasts and took care to keep the nipples intact, popping them out like jelly tots. Her neck came away easily, then it was just the face. The eyebrows weren't a problem - they'd already left weeks ago. Eventually she climbed out of the rose-tinted bath and pulled the plug. Her skin drained away with the water. She couldn't close her eyes without lids so she turned to the mirror and admired her new self. Glowing.

...

Gemini

by Elizabeth Ruth Deyro

Stories often speak of how an invisible link that binds twins forever: what one feels, the other experiences. The Gemini sisters, however, are an odd pair. The two cannot feel the same emotion at the same time.

When Doreen grew up to be a hyperactive bag of sunshine, Dana was set to become the opposite. Doreen was addicted to the limelight as it was to her; she was a friend to all, except her sister who kept her distance from everyone. In PTAs, teachers noted how Dana seemed to always be sad, but she knew she wasn't. When she learned what "hollow" meant, she thought she found a word to describe herself. In high school, Dana was diagnosed with major depressive disorder. What she couldn't tell the therapist was that the problem wasn't her brain, but her twin sister—a human vacuum sucking the life out of her.

Summer after high school, Doreen got heartbroken. For the first time, Dana felt an unfamiliar feeling of relief, maybe even glee. But it did not take long before Doreen got over it, pulling out Dana's short-lived happiness from the empty vessel that she became.

The two entered the same college. Doreen found herself fitting in well, while Dana felt worse. As Doreen gathered praises from her peers for her performances in school plays she starred in, Dana collected failing marks from her courses, slowly losing motivation until she stopped attending classes completely halfway through third year.

When Doreen died in a car crash, Dana was the happiest she has ever been. Unapologetic. Guiltless. She takes the condolences as congratulatory greetings. On the day of her sister's burial, she woke up excited. Finally apart from her twin sister, she knew that she now has something to look forward to.

...

Overspill

by Rachael Dunlop

IV

The sway in my back gets deeper with every passing month of pregnancy. I feel like a curlicue, some exotic punctuation mark, undulating, in and out, in and out. This ripeness is one of the few charms I have left. In every other way I've never felt less like a woman. And yet I've never been more a woman than now. But we must push these babies out and push our bodies back in, shrink our fecundity back to an acceptable place.

III

Your face is set like stone. You are protecting me from your thoughts, but the stone tells the story all the same. How many months? you ask and I say eight weeks. Weeks are less than months. Eight weeks, I say, it's hardly anything at all. In and out, quickest of procedures. No, you say. The mask hasn't slipped, there is no mask, the stone is you. No, you say again, I don't want you to terminate this pregnancy. It's my body, I want to say, but now a part is yours too.

II

You can't control how fast fruit ripens, you tell me. I press my thumb into the side of each unyielding wind-fallen pear and cup one in my hand. The breadth of it overspills my palm with a welcome weight. I should tell you. I need your permission. Want it. The planet turns around us, turns around the pear tree my parents planted twenty years ago. I miss them.

I

I miss my step and you catch me by the elbow. I anchor myself in your eyes and think, hello, these are eyes a girl could lose herself in. Or find herself, if she were already lost. I avoid checking your finger for a ring. I'm ready for the ride.

Split

by Charles Allison

He did the natural thing: he tore himself in half length-wise. It seemed like a good idea.

"About time," said the other half through its whiskered jaw. He gave himself a wink, left red footprints in a half-moon on the ocean ice around him.

"I could say the same," he rejoined. They compared eyeballs, red water that dripped from them across the ice. One half gestured to the ice.

"Two is better than one," he said to himself, who nodded agreement.

They danced against the ice of the newborn world. No matter how they struck or swore, nothing changed. The sky remained overcast.

As he had done for days when he was whole, they kicked their heels. They drummed feet against the sea ice—clack clack clack— hoping the vibrations would stir something, any change would do.

The ice didn't crack.

They decided to stomp harder.

The two put all their weight down, as if to dare the blending of ocean and land and sky—all heavy grey, to dare to try and swallow this riot of sound. They tried to break the spine of the world with their hopping kicks, to sunder ice and splinter clouds.

The ice reddened. The sky stayed overcast.

"No use," one noted, panting, breath misting the air.

"Two is not enough."

They split each other in half again—now he was four-fold. They argued and flirted and came to blows—so it was inevitable that fourths became sixteenths, then thirty-seconds. He became smaller and smaller, blood grew thick across the ice, its heat cracking and crusting rime.

Soon, they were too plentiful, too small to see: there was only an empty world again, as the trickster's particles continued to tear at each other, ever dividing, certain that this time it would be enough to change the icy world.

The Power of Three

by Annie Percik

One… Two…

Tears fill my eyes, obscuring my vision. I scrub them away, flicking my fingers as if I can dismiss the accompanying feelings with such ease. I take a deep breath, closing my eyes on the inhale, opening them again as I breathe out in incremental stages.

One… Two…

My breath hitches in my throat. I feel my heartbeat begin to quicken. I turn my face away, fists clenching. The wall in my mind grows taller and thicker. I can't see over it. I remain, fixed in place, roots plummeting into the earth through the soles of my feet.

I force myself to look again.

One… Two…

Their tiny bodies flail amongst fluffy blankets. My love reaches out to them, fingers splayed against the glass. So recently a part of my flesh, so newly expunged. But more than glass separates us. A gulf, a void, an insurmountable absence my mind refuses to acknowledge. Blood, pain, a terrible, unnatural stillness.

One… Two…

They lie there, unknowing, unable to share in my sense of loss. Two hearts, two faces, two unformed minds for me to nurture. They are innocent of blame, deserving of everything a mother can provide. But how can I give them what they need, when looking at them will always remind me that there should have been three?

•••

The Strike

by Victoria Bird

He closes the front door, swallows more of the dark silence Martha left behind. There are three people who know his real name. She isn't one.

A noose hangs in the hall, the rope yellow in the street light.

He always gets home too late – in the aching hours that belong to those who don't belong to anyone.

Thousands believe in him, or they wouldn't sleep open-mouthed while he turns in his sheets like the cylinder on a loaded Webley. And the more he fails in this morbid whack-a-mole – the greater the spate of attacks, the higher the body count – the more they cling to his ankles.

The scent of gunpowder is always in his nose. It's nothing to do with the revolver on his desk, safety off, trigger hooked up to the door handle. A nod to the Le Carré on the shelves – a little joke for his fifteen-year-old self.

He pours whisky. Loosens his tie. Drinks the hours deep into the shadows beneath his eyes.

He stands behind the men in the darkness – row upon row of them.

He's the final pin that ruins the strike.

There are pills in the cupboards, knives wedged blade-upwards between floorboards. Razors on door handles, begging for his wrists. He has only the bathroom and kitchen left. A sleeping bag beneath the counter. Suits hanging in the hall.

He didn't think the gun through. What if it takes a leg or his gut, leaves him in tatters?

If he does it, will they have won? He's been tired for decades. He needs an eternity of sleep.

He takes the stairs two at a time and barges the study door, ashamed at his cowardice, overjoyed at his bravery.

The steel kisses him between the eyes, as his mother used to do.

•••

The Hills Above Sabinas

by Elisabeth Hewer

The day we killed our father was the hottest we'd ever known. We were no strangers to heat, my sisters and I. We'd been in the hills above Sabinas for five years by then, and we'd shed English paleness for hardy Mexican tans long ago. But that day—oh, that day was hot. Hot enough to send the catfish burrowing into the mud at the bottoms of the ponds, hot enough to slick us all over with sweat, hot enough to make Ginny's lipstick smudge and smear at the edges of her mouth.

We stood over the body, all five of us, and I glanced around the small circle we made. Gaby's eyes were fixed on mine, the hazel almost orange in the bright afternoon sun.

"Well," she said, voice church-low, "what do we do now?"

There was a beat of silence. I had nothing to offer. I had made all the suggestions in the build-up, of course, since none of them liked murder mystery novels the way I did—but now? Papa on his back in the dust with five bullet holes in his chest? What was I supposed to do with this?

"We should bury him." That was Grace, the oldest, a cigarette shaking between her lips. Her expression was as blank and inaccessible as a safe door. It didn't change as Gaby shook her head, long plait shifting over her breast.

"No. He doesn't deserve it. Not after—you know."

Lally pressed forward, twelve years old and knowing with it, and prodded at Papa with one bare dusty foot.

"Let's leave him." She looked up at me, fierce and sure. "Let's just go."

I hesitated. They were looking at me, all of them, waiting for me to decide. I took a deep breath, and—

"Yeah. Let's go."

•••

Birch Fort

by Virginia M Mohlere

There is a patch of forest in which I keep my heart (if you have wondered why I seem cold). In my childhood – in my father's childhood – it was a circle of paper birches, *Betula papyrifera*. My father, my uncle, their cousins long ago pounded a nail into one of the trees. The tree's flesh surged out around it, a rust-colored wart surrounding the rusty nail.

All the old birches are gone now. Just in this little human lifetime, how do I have to say goodbye to trees? One summer to the next, they fell. One March, in mud and snow, the last old one was a newly fractured stump under an infant slash of sky.

But the spot remains. The trunks of each of the old birches soften, splinter. Rot.

My heart still rests under the moss-covered piece of granite that once marked the center of the Birch Fort.

Oak saplings, maple, and new birches grow there. The new configuration will not be a circle: maybe a pentagon, maybe a maze.

The old ones re-become soil.

The new ones are becoming.

•••

Snow Hill

by Alanna Donaldson

Jeannie rode her bike into the bright silence of the morning. Around her the town was still sleeping, but Saturday had woken her early and she had put on her new dress and come out here to meet it, telling her mother “Just out”. She stood on the pedals and pushed, feeling the bike work as if it was part of her, as if her blood ran through it.

Behind her, a car began to accelerate with a thin hysterical whine. Over her shoulder, she saw the low bonnet and the face made by the lights and grille. The horn sounded long and loud as it weaved towards her, and four boys looked out, their faces twisted with the words they shouted. Her front wheel slipped on the gravel and hit the kerb, then her hands were spread out on the grass in front of her. The car jeered and swayed away, swerved onto Snow Hill and out of sight.

Her finger shook as she lightly touched the graze on her knee, the skin curled up like frost. She took out her water bottle and ran some over her knee, over her hands, and drank a little. She saw there was only one cloud in the sky. Then out of the sky, out of the air, from Snow Hill came a terrible sound.

Riding slowly now in the beating sun, she saw the bonnet folded up and the tree growing out of the metal. She saw three boys asleep inside and the fourth on the road further up, whose hand flipped like a fish as she passed. She saw the crest of the hill unfolding up ahead and the smooth black tarmac of the downhill slope. She let the bike coast, and a new breeze moved her dress around her.

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•••

Hannah lifted the dummy to her mouth before carefully inserting it between chapped lips. She craved its comfort. She sucked on the rubber teat, tears dripping down her face.

from 'Dummy' by Alyson Faye

We stood over the body, all five of us, and I glanced around the small circle we made. Gaby's eyes were fixed on mine, the hazel almost orange in the bright afternoon sun.

from 'The Hills Above Sabinas' by Elisabeth Hewer

The void below us filled my stomach as I gripped rimed, rusted railings. You climbed up to shout and wave into the storm like one unmade.

from 'The Reunion' by Helen Rye

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