



LOVE | PRIDE



Ellipsis Zine #5



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LOVE | PRIDE, Ellipsis Zine #5

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- Steve

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Deadname

by Alison Woodhouse

I know you read the baby books and chose the perfect balance of syllables and strength. You took your responsibility seriously and I thank you. You scribbled it on scraps of paper over a hundred times before I was born. You posted the announcement in *The Times*. You understood the importance of a name and you wanted mine to be singular, definitive. I'm sorry that's not the person I turned out to be.

I've chosen my new one and it has a perfect balance of sibilance and rhythm. I've taken my responsibility seriously but I know you won't thank me. I've scribbled it in fear and secret over a hundred times before I dared to claim it. I posted the announcement on Twitter. I understand the importance of a name and I want mine to be loving and open. I hope that's the person I can learn to be.

You taught me how to write that straight-backed A, shallow-bellied D, the first A again, then an upstanding M. You rapped my fingers when I went outside the lines you drew for me.

Let me teach you how I write my new name with a long loping L, an undulating U, a curvy C, a narrating I and an arching A. I hold your hand and trace my letters on your palm and hope you will try to understand me.

First Catch Your Hare

by Sharon Telfer

Michael sees the skin first, hung up like a lost glove. Then the body, red as hawthorn berries. The cat sits watching the blood drip with its peat-pool eyes.

Mammy smacks his head for lateness, sends him back out for herbs to stew with the hare his brother has caught.

There is a hollow in the herb patch where Michael had seen it lying, ears flat, as he stole past at dawn. Tracing the curve, his hand lifts the sharp scent of vervain. He rubs his bruised lip and thinks of what he and Fintan have done.

He passes Fintan at the communion rail. Their eyes do not meet. Kneeling, Michael can smell vervain on his fingers. As the chalice presses his lip, Michael winces. Above Christ hangs, suspended in glass.

Outside, Donal O'Casey catches Michael's brother by the arm. Their heads draw close, turn back towards him.

Mammy serves the broth first, then says grace. A sharp pain flicks Michael's eyes open. It is the cat, its claws in his thigh. Across the table, his brother's stare is fixed upon him.

His first spoonful stings with salt, the second is a grassy burst of vervain, the third rich with iron blood. Michael's ears fill with the remembered tug and hush of the waves; he feels again Fintan's mouth, rough and sweet on his. He wishes himself away from the dark kitchen, back with his love on the tide-washed sand.

The cat spikes, hisses. Spoons stopped, mouths gaping, they see the hare rise from the pot, pull on its pelt, dash into the midsummer evening with a shake of golden fur. A chair crashes to the floor as Michael follows, leaping across the peat, racing westward to the shore, towards the glittering sea.

Strong Like Bull

by Martin Cloutier

I'm watching Betty from my grandmother's window. She's running to her car – her beauty supply case bulging in one hand, a ring of twenty keys jangling in the other. I know she's forgotten where most of these keys belong. On the ring is a flat silver band with blue stones on each of the fingertips. She sometimes lets me play with it.

Betty is our next-door neighbor and my BEST friend. Grandma says ten-year-old boys shouldn't have forty-year-old women friends. But she's too busy watching her stories, having her card parties – I do my own thing.

Betty holds her platinum blonde hair in place with Aquanet; it smells like metal cans dipped in applesauce. She wears Tigress perfume which smells like baked beans and flowers, or Jean Naté After Bath Splash which smells like lemon dish soap. The sun glares off her white Pontiac Ventura throwing sparks in my eyes. She's beautiful. And she's leaving me.

She's going to make the rounds of the beauty shops, selling shampoo and permanent wave solution. Sometimes she invites me to come along and carry the boxes. She wants to open her own shop someday. She'll call it Betty's Beauty Boutique.

Betty believes "Men should be men, and women should be women." Still, she lets me wear her jewelry: colorful plastic beads and clip-on earrings of rhinestone crosses. When we go to the shops, I sell the jewelry and get commission. All good salesmen work on commission. She tells people that I'm her nephew, even though she doesn't speak to her sister, even though she's never seen her grandson who is just about my age.

"Strong like bull," she calls, and raises her fist to the window. "You come from tough German stock." Betty loves the German people. She's German; my grandma's German; so I guess that means she loves me too. I press my forehead to the glass and twist Grandma's lace curtains around my wrist. I am a bull. I am a German bull. I am a man.

Later that night, we're in her living room playing Neil Diamond records on the stereo console, the kind that looks like old furniture with big doors that open out. She's finishing a six pack. I'm taking sips of her beer and dancing, strings of beads twisting around my neck, bouncing off my face. Betty jangles her keys to the music, holding the silver hand and waving a cigarette: *on the boats, and on the planes...*

Finally she stubs out her Kool Light and says, "You know something Marty, I'm half Jewish. We got out just before the war. Don't tell nobody."

I keep dancing. Pulling down my Spiderman T-shirt like a dress and kicking up my legs. I loop the beads around my ears and let them hang like curls. I decide then and there that I will be half Jewish too.

The Weight of Jewels and Promises

by Lucy Grace

“Did you stay at Amina’s house again last night? She is such a kind friend.” When I arrive home in the cold morning my mother is busily stating one truth and one untruth, a knowing and a not.

I lie.

Amina has a dark silken rope of hair, longer than mine. She smells of another place. We sleep warmly, curled like winter animals and wake with the light, faces creased and pale as the sheets. In a cave of bedding we are our secret selves. Afterwards, when we rise and dress, I reach out to tuck escaping threads softly beneath her hijab.

“Goodbye,” I say. Our fingertips touch lightly in a moth murmur, whilst our eyes speak of the love we cannot live.

We do not make plans to meet again, although we will. We will be the same in late summer after the shining reds and golds of my marriage, after the solemn jewelled promises and the many relatives with their gifts of weighty expectation.

My mother strokes the hair from my eyes.

“You will make a good wife, child,” she says, sadly. “Remember this.”

Give it Time

by Danny Beusch

The park is full of happy children with their proper parents. They're wrapped up in bobble hats, knitted mittens, fluffy ear muffs. He looks at Sophie. Thick snot trails from both nostrils and her bare fingers are blue.

'You're useless,' he says to himself.

At university, aged nineteen, a boyfriend told him that gay men shouldn't be fathers.

'It's cruel. Selfish.'

Still sore from schoolboy bullies, he'd agreed. But times change. Minds change. Two decades later he invited a social worker into his living room and told her, again and again, how much he wanted this; how good he would be at this; how ready he was for this. Seems like a lifetime ago. Before breakfast, Sophie smeared shit over the toilet walls and blamed the Gruffalo. Maybe the boyfriend was right.

When they met, Sophie didn't run into his arms. There were no kisses. No hugs. Not even a smile. But he felt something; a breathlessness, a lightness, a quickening of his heart. Love at first sight, he thought.

Sophie's shrill cry rises above the roaring wind. There is a stain on her dress even though he just changed her nappy. He must have pulled it up too high. Again.

Last night, his best friend asked him a question. 'Do you love her?' He stared back, unable to lie, ashamed to tell the truth. He must be a fucking monster.

He carries Sophie to the car. As her ice-cold fingertip traces a line down his nose he remembers that today marks three weeks since they met; and he realises that this is the first time he's been able to pick Sophie up without her screaming or running away or hitting him; and there it is: that *something* again. Perhaps it's hope. Or relief. But not love: he understands that now. Not yet.

How to Love Your Child Without Your Neighbor Reporting You to Child Services

by Christopher Allen

Til has just fallen asleep when an elderly woman bends down to the stroller and gushes, “What a putty baby. Dat a putty baby.” He’s asleep, I whisper, and could she please just fucking move along, too low for her to hear the violence in me I guess, because she’s just getting started. “Putty putty baby. Putty, putty putty baby.” I need Steve, but he’s in the haircutter’s a few shops down, getting trimmed for our appointment with child services in twenty-seven minutes. Some neighbor reported “inappropriate sexual behavior from homosexual dad” when she saw me do a raspberry on Til’s belly—his favorite thing in the world. The guy at child services laughed about it but also said he followed up on all calls. “It’s more common than you think,” he said.

Maybe I’ll dance for him; maybe I’ll howl like a dog. The one thing I won’t do is slap him till he’s sullen and ruined. I will never do this, I tell myself. I won’t do to him what my mother did to me. But I’m scared shitless that some rabid gene, some violent little protein, will make me hurt this bundle of noise.

“Putty putty baby. What a wittle worm. What a ittle bittle worm.” If Steve would get out here, he could remove Grandma kindly. As she’s reaching into the stroller to put her hands all over my child, this quiet corner screams to life. A load of scrap roars down a chute from a construction site, Cannibal Corpse blasts from a second-story window, Til wakes and wails, and Grandma walks away in a huff.

My one job was to produce a baby content as a tick for our interview. And I’ve blown it. There’s a stack of unread baby books on my bedside table—*So You’ve Adopted an Ulcer! Two Million Factoids You Wish You’d Read Before Becoming a Dad! How Not to Kill Your Baby in Fifty Incomprehensible Lessons! How to Love a Little Boy!* The titles all end in exclamation points to prove love is frantic. When I ask Steve what parents did before baby books, Freud and Melanie Klein, he reminds me that Victorian children were treated like bugbears and

doorstops. Infant mortality, he says, was like 110%, which seems unlikely.

Death metal, construction workers, and Til are full-throttle now, so I scream too. Which feels great. Passersby grin like I'm a savvy, well-read parent who knows what to do when their child won't stop screaming.

Maybe I'll dance for him; maybe I'll howl like a dog. The one thing I won't do is slap him till he's sullen and ruined. I will never do this, I tell myself. I won't do to him what my mother did to me. But I'm scared shitless that some rabid gene, some violent little protein, will make me hurt this bundle of noise.

Passersby frown now, eyeing me like Do something! Do that thing on page twenty-seven of *Seven Billion Ways to Love Your Child without a Neighbor Reporting You to Child Services!* Advice darts holes in me. "Hold him. She's hungry. Don't you have a pacifier? You have to rock her. He's bored. He wants his mother."

I bury my face in the stroller because I'm crying, which means I'm broken, no good at this and never will be. They'll tell me this at our appointment in thirteen minutes. Less now. I need to get Steve, but it's soft and heady down here. Til has shit his diaper. Stinker, I say and laugh—it's Steve's turn—as a puff of little hand pats my cheek. "Hey," I say. My son is all screamed out and grinning like Where've ya been? Do that thing you do with my belly. That loud, silly thing.

The Full Circle

by Die Booth

“Ruth,” says Ruth. She holds out her hand.

The woman looks at it, then looks at her, and takes it. Shakes. “Coleen.” She has a nice smile that jumps into a dimple at one corner.

They’re the only people on this track that climbs, winding, up the hillside. It’s only too obvious why they’re here.

“I don’t actually expect to find, you know. A pot of gold.” Coleen says, as they walk. The dewy grass sequins her boot toes with raindrops.

Ruth looks up, at the arc of shimmering colour pouring itself onto the summit above. “Then why did you come?”

“For shits and giggles.”

“You brought a spade.” Ruth says.

Coleen shrugs. Looks a little sheepish. “Doesn’t hurt to be prepared. You know, the closer you walk to a rainbow, the further it recedes? So it’ll always be in the distance.”

“This one isn’t moving.” Ruth says. “I can see where it ends.”

“You can see where it goes behind the horizon. They’re not really arches, they’re full circles. Only pilots usually get high enough to see the whole thing.”

“So, you’re telling me the rainbow never ends? It’s infinite?” A full, unbroken circle. Coleen nods. “Maybe this hill is high enough to see the full thing.”

“No two people can see the same rainbow, apparently. Because of the angles of the light on the raindrops.” Coleen says, quietly.

The top of the hill beckons, washed in coloured light. “Seems like we’re both on the same page right now.”

Ruth’s so caught up with watching her footing that the summit surprises her; over the next rocky outcrop, a grassy flat of land up there in the sky.

“Holy shit,” Coleen says. “This ain’t possible.”

Towering over them, still visible against all the laws of physics, is the rainbow.

Ruth laughs. Breathless. Puts out her hand to dip fingertips into stained-

glass blue. She steps into it, like entering a spotlight. She spreads her arms and spins. The colours strobe, bright and undeniable, the full circle of the rainbow. Coleen catches her, all the colours raining. Treasure seems, not impossible, but inevitable. When they stagger to a still, Coleen pushes back her hair and says, “Should we dig?”

Ruth shakes her head. “There’s nothing here. Nothing here except us.”

In the Shadow of the Oak

by Callum McLaughlin

It's twenty years to the day since they killed him. I'm not sure they even had the term 'hate crime' back then, but it certainly caught the media's attention. Two young lovers taking an evening stroll, hand-in-hand; a mugging most brutal, and only one survivor. The added perversion that the lovers were both male merely stoked the flames. And though the attackers' lawyer claimed the choosing of victims was random, I knew otherwise. The words they spat with each kick still echoed through my bones. Their disgust still shone in the bruises on my face as I sat in court, imploring them to look me in the eyes.

His parents banned me from the funeral. I don't tell you this to elicit sympathy, and maybe you won't blame them when I tell you that I broke into their home. 'Stares and whispers,' his mother said. 'I can't stand the stares and whispers.'

This exchange took place in his bedroom, wrapped in the chill wind that blew in through the open window. It had been my entry point that night, as it had on so many others before it. Knuckles white under the strain of my grip on the box I held, I was already prepared for a fight should she try and wrest it from me. I saw her eyes move between the various objects inside, the jumble of seemingly random items that included a battered old copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a jumper worn so many times that no number of washes could coax his scent from its fibres, Annie Lennox's *Diva* on vinyl, a signed *Star Wars* poster taken from the wall and carefully rolled up, the stuffed bear called Ted that he still adored despite his nearly eighteen years and about which I teased him relentlessly, a half-eaten bar of Cadbury's chocolate still in its foil, and a framed photograph of us together, retrieved from its hiding place beneath the bed, safe from the scornful gaze of his parents.

It's unlikely that she understood my intentions, but upon explaining that my battered face should not be seen at her son's funeral, she didn't ask that I return his things, nor did she raise the alarm to her husband that I was there. I wouldn't go as far as to call her silent retreat an olive branch across the chasm

of disapproval that had lasted years, but you have to take small victories where you can get them.

I carried the box to the local woodlands and made straight for our favourite oak tree, the shadows of which had been privy to our secret meetings, clumsy first kisses, and a final night of ignorant bliss. His voice was my soundtrack as I dug through soil and scraped against roots, the words of a previous year's school philosophy lesson replaying on a loop in my mind, like the needle of a turntable sunk into a groove. He had been singled out during a debate on the nature of the soul, the teacher asking for his thoughts on what a physical manifestation of the human lifeforce might look like. Palms rubbing together, brow furrowed with nerves, he stood before the class.

'I think our favourite things are like the pieces of our soul. It's why we're sentimental about old stuff. Like, there's a little bit of you in everything you love, and as long as those things are still around, no one's ever really gone.'

When he took his seat beside me again, my hand found his beneath the desk. 'That explains Ted,' I whispered.

His laugh drew the looks of those around us, but for once we didn't care.

And so, I sit now with my back against our mighty oak, earth beneath my fingernails, tears on my cheek; his soul in my arms, and his name on my lips.

Solar Eclipse

by Ruth Joffre

When the moon slid in front of the sun, Tia was in the middle of her shift at the bookstore downtown and didn't immediately realize it when the Earth stood still. Her co-workers had all stepped outside to watch the eclipse from within the path of totality, but Tia stayed behind because their manager Adele was running late and she hoped to be alone with her in the shadow of the moon. After nine months of watching Adele out of the corner of her eye, memorizing every flick of her wrist, every second spent languidly tucking a curl behind her ear, where two tiny freckles dotted her skin, like the fixed focal points of a digital camera, Tia had finally admitted to herself that this was love, so while her co-workers watched the eclipse she lingered by the counter, pretending to shelve books she had just stickered. She was alone in the bookstore except for one elderly gentleman browsing the novelty socks display. It was his stillness that tipped her off. His stiff glare when his eyes met the rainbow-colored crew socks Tia knew and loved so well. At first, she thought that he was just lost in thought, but then the street outside didn't brighten, and the clock didn't tick, and when she held her hand in front of his face and waited for that puff of life it never came. Time had stopped. Outside, a traffic light remained stuck on green. Cars stood frozen mid-turn. A cat sat perched on a windowsill, preparing to pounce on a bird.

While the rest of the world stood still, she went looking for Adele. When she first stepped outside she thought she saw her halo of curls frozen just out of focus on the corner, but upon closer inspection they proved not to be Adele's. Her curls were looser, wider; in the light, streaks of soft gray glimmered in her hair, like silver threads in an ornate tapestry. Tia wanted nothing more than to weave her fingers through them. Many nights while closing the store with Adele Tia had thought of what she would say to explain herself to Adele. Walking through the stacks, running one finger over the spines of all the books, she rehearsed, *This is the path in which I've loved you. These are the spots where*

my socks have worn thin with worry as I debated what to say. This is the corner. This is where I wait for you to lock the doors and shut off the lights. Just once, she wanted Adele to emerge from the shadows and understand.

She looked everywhere for Adele—down side streets, across thoroughfares—until finally she spotted her suspended mid-stride as she stepped out of a park eight blocks away. Her head was thrown back, her hair tossed over her shoulder, her bright smile trapped on her face like the animated, expressive features of a statue. She had been waving farewell to someone when the Earth stood still. One hand was still up, hanging in the air, while the other dipped slightly into her purse, depositing her phone or perhaps retrieving it. It was difficult to tell in this light, which reminded Tia of an old black and white movie where all the night scenes were shot on brightly lit sound stages with backgrounds painted shades of black and gray to dim the shot; the audiences were never truly fooled, but sometimes, when the light was just right, the eye could be tricked for a moment into believing that night had fallen, that stars were shining, and that the distance between two hearts was not impassable. Adele was just feet away, already stepping out of the park onto the sidewalk diagonal from where Tia stopped, but those feet felt like light years. Tia knew that, if she crossed the road, she would have to admit that Adele was out of reach and that sometimes love is like the moon—suspended in space—so round and unknowable that one dares not look directly at it for fear of being blinded by what's hiding hidden behind it. All her life, Tia had been told not to look; but God, she wanted to. She did.

To Brighton Pier

by Tomas Marcantonio

The sweat made a safflower-powdered paste on his cheeks and caught on the tips of his lashes like miniature balls of fire. The rainbow that chalked into his brows cracked when the crowd roared, and his mouth of youth and un-kissed passion opened for the world, tongue vodka-wet and rolling out into the depths of the parade with words of long-holstered love dribbling from its tip and out into the streets.

The whirlwind that swept him towards the pier was all colour and flames and tassels dancing like windswept petals; white teeth panting, shoes clapping to the drum, bare buttocks and breasts lobstered by the midday sun; glittered thongs and bubblegum wigs, flamingoes spinning in front of bronzed fireman floats; flags whipping against the poles on the glorious promenade, toothpaste-striped deckchairs pointing to France; the smells of vinegar and burned chip fat, and embryo prawns breathless under peach dollops of Thousand Island, and the damp plywood of the fishermen's hulls left out to dry on the shore like wet-feathered gulls; the shining bodies of the pimpled paddlers and buoy-dared sea dippers tiptoeing back to plastic beers balanced on the salt-crustured pebbles; every gold molecule of the seaweed breeze pulsating with a ferocious summer pride.

He carried his father's morning grin on a banner in his mind and projected it with eyes that looked upon a new sky, years of anguish squashed away under the hard, musky inner elbow that had wrapped around his neck and told him that it was okay: he'd always known.

Pacific Highway

by Len Lukowski

Martin moved to Portland and into the best life ever. He declared himself bankrupt within a month but his MySpace page was always full of joy. 'Every day I feel blessed,' his 'About Me' section read. At court, filing for bankruptcy, he passed a note about abundance written in Spanish to the trustee presiding over the case. She looked at it, and him, with contempt. Martin didn't care. He told me the universe would take care of him.

When I visited him, Martin introduced me to the original incarnation of *Four Loko*, the version which is now banned. Caffeine, guarana, taurine and alcohol all mixed together and sold in big, fun, brightly coloured cans. After two *Four Lokos* I blacked out; the next day I could barely stand. Martin was not a drinker.

We found a ride to San Francisco on *Craigslist* with a woman named Wendy. Wendy worked in a strip club and was disappointingly conservative. She loved God and had a bumper sticker saying so. We ended up talking about sex on the ride. Wendy could not say 'sex'; it was always 'p to the v' or 'p to the a', the latter to declare she would never do it. She adored Martin but had no patience for me and my English awkwardness. We stopped for food at a Taco Bell and somehow I got talking about how reserved I'd felt since being in the US, how difficult I found it to talk to strangers. I hoped this would elicit sympathy for me and excuse my social shortcomings. Martin nodded sympathetically; Wendy just gave me this look like *get over yourself*.

After we left the Taco Bell it began to snow heavily. Our progress was slow against the whiteout. We were still in Oregon by the time it got dark. The moment seemed to come out of nowhere when our car skidded and spun on the snow and ice and turned to face an oncoming lorry. I heard myself shout 'fucking hell!' as we continued to spin, feeling the jolt of my heart thumping, heavy and quick. I felt like I was in a film. Everything was happening in slow motion to a cacophonous soundtrack of car horns. Eventually Wendy wrestled control. Her face was calm, but her body was shaking.

We decided to stop for the night after that. We'd been playing a game earlier where one of us would ask the other two a question. We took it in turns. They'd been mundane getting-to-know-you type things -- 'What was the name of your first pet?' -- interspersed with the sex questions, but in the hotel bar, bonded by the near miss with the lorry and the stiff whiskeys Wendy and I downed as soon as we could, they became more intimate. 'When was the last time you felt alone?' Martin asked.

I don't remember what Wendy said, only my answer: 'An hour ago when I thought the lorry was going to hit us.'

Wendy looked unimpressed and Martin looked concerned, but what they didn't know was I misheard the question. I thought he'd said, 'When was the last time you felt alive?'

Korean Knife

by Charlotte Wührer

There are shootings near our flat. My wife clings wide-eyed to my arm. She has baby Alba strapped to her belly, on the outside where she was once on the inside. There is a photo of me holding Alba that day. What you can see is that I am smiling down into her hair and Alba has her ice blue eyes open looking at something beyond my shoulder, probably Cleo. What you can't see is that Alba's hair smells of milk and that in less than an hour we will be as close as we have ever come to dying.

Less than an hour later, other mothers cradling other babies come running and screaming down the street. "What happened?" I ask several of them, but they can't stop running and screaming for long enough to answer me. It's Sunday, four o'clock, cake and coffee time across the city. The sun is shining, and we've come from a market where I've bought a knife imported from Korea. The man who sold it to me was shot through with piercings, and he was just packing up when I came. He offered me a chopping board with half a white onion on it. "Go on," he said. "Have a go." The knife sliced the onion like it was butter and my eyes watered.

Police with machine guns stalk through the playground that forms an island separating one side of the street from the other.

"What happened?" I ask a policeman, but he either doesn't hear me or doesn't want to answer.

Cleo thinks we should not walk back against the tide of screaming and crying people, so we wait for a while at the corner until they've all passed. Then we wait ten more minutes before we set off. Alba has started mewling. I'm clutching the knife in the hand furthest from Cleo and Alba, and the crisp white tissue paper the man from the market had wrapped it in is wilting.

Our street is barricaded by police cars. The scene has something of everyone watching News Year's Eve fireworks together, or of waiting at the sidelines of a marathon two hours after it's started.

“What happened?” I ask a man who is telling a woman the unfolding of events, and he starts again.

“It’s a drug thing,” the man says. “Clan warfare.” The only drugs I can conceive of are the tiny amounts I’ve taken in club toilets. The man says there was a shooting just two days ago, two blocks down. In two weeks there will be another one in the park at the end of my road, and this time people will die. But we don’t know that yet.

“There were two men from two different clans, and they both had a gun.”

“Where did they get their guns from?” I ask.

The man telling the story seems irritated, as if it’s irrelevant. “You can get them online,” he says dismissively, “and there’s a gun shop just down the road.” I don’t believe him, but one weekend I will walk past it and an icy thrill will flash through my body. “Anyway,” he continues, “a man from one of the clans was being harried by several men from the other clan.” He actually uses the word harried. “The man who’s being harried, his clan comes to his defense. One of them has a gun. And one of the harriers has a gun. The first man shoots at the second man and misses. The second man shoots back and also misses.”

Some people listening to the story interrupt at this point and say it looked like the second man who shot missed on purpose. “But that really is irrelevant,” Cleo says, her voice an octave higher than usual. “Point is, shots were fired.”

The man who shot first fled towards the bridge over the canal. Someone called the police and all the while, people were running away, moving in the same direction as the shooter. Like they were all going to meet on the bridge for a showdown, among the buskers and swans and beer bottle lids stepped into the black tar-like substance between the cobbles.

“We could have died,” says Cleo when we finally get back to our flat. She is breastfeeding Alba at the kitchen table when she says this.

“We could have,” I say, “but we didn’t. And I had my Korean knife at the ready.”

She lays Alba down in our bed and we chop red onions with the new knife for a Bolognese. That night, we sleep the sleep of the dead, not a single dream between the three of us.

She's Not There

by Rosie Garland

At break time she orbits the perimeter of the playground. Three careful revolutions before the bell rings and it's time to return and breathe the uneasy atmosphere of the classroom. She sits at the back, below the teacher's sightline. Never raises a hand to answer questions. Keeps her head down, curtains her face with a fringe of dark hair so that she doesn't snag the corner of anyone's attention. They can tell by the look in her eyes that she is not like them. Not quite human.

In the corridor between lessons they bump into her and say *oh, what was that? I didn't see anything*, in loud, surprised voices. But sometimes they decide she is visible after all, and steal her possessions to prove it. They force her to watch while they break them, in an experiment to see if she will cry. On the whole, she prefers it when they act like she's not there. It's quieter; hurts less. She can hang on to a pencil for days without it being stamped into splinters.

She watches them. Observes the way they eat a sandwich, sprawl across a desk. She calculates the precise angle of foot on chair to indicate correct human looseness; tries to duplicate the gesture but is always a degree out of alignment. She would obey the rules if she could be certain what they were.

A wall of words shimmers between her universe and theirs. When she rolls the sounds around her mouth, they shift. However carefully she speaks, they sound different when they scatter from her tongue. And different is always wrong. The names they call her: weirdo, creep, bitch. Spat in her face by people who don't understand their own edges and batter against hers. She slides away from conversations, shuffles further into their margins. She holds up her hand. Some days she can see through to the other side.

At the lesson's end, she packs her bag: slow, careful slide of textbooks, neat arrangement of pencils. Alone is preferable, but she's intelligent enough to know that preferable is not the same as happy. She would like to look into another's eyes and recognise herself. She believes she's not the only one, but

it is a faraway faith, like trusting that life exists on other planets. When she is old enough, she will set out and find kinship, far from this solar system. In the meantime, she will be small, but not less. She will cup a hand around her low-magnitude blur, patient as the distance between now and future.

In the middle of the night, she gets out of bed and draws back the bedroom curtain so that the light of her home star knows where to find her.

Repetitions

by Laura Clay

You step inside, the icy air hitting you like a punch to the gut. You've spent twenty minutes pacing the pavement outside, trying to quell the panic attack you knew would come. There's a thrumming in your chest, the familiar signs of anxiety. You gulp it down, fumble for the door code, step into the crowds. Faces turn. You keep your eyes on the floor, try to hide your body as you change into your exercise clothes. It's been decades since you've set foot here. This isn't a place for you. Neither, you realised months ago, was the other changing room. It was a birthday present to yourself. Self care. A fresh start. Getting in shape, or trying to get a new shape. You're not sure which one to settle on yet.

You try out activities scarred deep by years of school PE classes. You stumble in step aerobics, you pull muscles swinging weights around. Your jaw tightens and your fists clench when you're dripping sweat onto the studio floor after that last repetition, arms trembling, heart sore.

Your week fills up with classes and familiar faces. The cheery housewife, the college student, the chatty American lady. They're not the scornful girls you remember. You sweat off your anxiety with every dance move. You get better. It's June. You arrive in the studio and your heart soars. One wall is a riot of colour, every Pride flag hanging from the weights you struggled with nine months before. You explain to your classmates which flags are yours – the bi flag, the genderqueer flag, the trans flag. You wait for the abuse, but it doesn't come. All they say is 'oh right, so are you coming to the next class?' Suddenly, the sneering gym-goers peering through the door don't matter. This space is yours too. This space can be queer.

Then one day, it happens.

You stare at the vein on your arm as if it's an alien life form. It curls elegantly along your wrist, lifting the skin as it goes. Underneath, you can feel the

tough fibres of your forearm muscles. This, you learn, is what's called 'getting shredded'. It means you're doing something right.

A week later, you pluck up the courage to talk to a personal trainer, the one who leaps into classes wearing rainbow trainers and eyeliner flicks to die for. When you notice the flash of yellow, white and purple on their wristband, you know they're the right person to ask. You also know this will be the most important decision you'll make.

You're sitting on a cheap plastic chair, watching the alpha males work the machines, the air thick with testosterone. The trainer's asking you what your goals are. You give them the practical, boring answer you've prepared, but it looks like they're expecting something more. There's that tremble in your chest, the one you usually get when you think you're about to be humiliated. You decide to tell the trainer your whole truth anyway. You say your exercise is closely bound to your body image, your gender identity.

They understand.

They know you want to look more masculine, just like they want to look more feminine. There's nothing else to discuss. They pencil you into their schedule. Ten hours of training to build as much muscle as your body allows. The terrified pounding in your chest is as fast as the weights clanking down around you.

The weights room is busy when you walk in with your trainer, two queers in a space you thought too toxic for you. You get some confused looks, but there's no aggression. In fact, when you sit on the bench, the men next to you noticeably try harder. Maybe they don't know what to make of you. Maybe they don't care. It's the best hour you've ever spent in the gym. You do lifts named after Hollywood muscle men. You tackle equipment that looks like it belongs in a dungeon. You learn moves with frightening names like Skullcrusher. You lift weights heavier than you thought you could cope with. You sweat. You nearly pass out when that last repetition makes your arms burn and a frustrated roar bursts from your mouth.

You get even better. Hitting every goal shrugs a years-old weight from your heart. You stride into the room by yourself now. Other men nod in

acknowledgement, the same men you thought would push you from their space. You take a look at yourself in the mirror one morning. Now, you can see the small details once buried under the skin: the taut sinews, the bright veins, the strong curves in the biceps. There's a flutter in your chest again, but it's different. This time, it's pride.

Wreaths

by Nikki Donadio

Daph and I stood in the park. What used to be the park. Stumps lined the meandering pathway towards one leafless maple in the center. No buds appeared this spring, same as last. We visited her every night to look, just in case. The leaves stopped growing back around the same time my period disappeared and Daph's nails stopped growing. Everything, everyone, was dying.

I made wreaths from the leaves I'd collected last autumn, gluing them onto wire frames and hanging them on the only branch I could reach, an offering, a mirror. If I could coax this one tree to remember, maybe we could turn the whole thing around. Daph lit a cigarette and stood under the maple, drawing a row of circles in the dirt with her toe, then drawing an X through each one. "Feel like we should say a prayer or something," she said.

"Go for it."

"I dunno. Oh goddesses of the Earth, you know who you are, up there riding on clouds or beneath the sea, we call on you to return this tree its life. Make the buds appear again this spring. Amen? Amen."

We walked home, hoods pulled tight around our faces to protect our skin from the wind. Electronic ads blipped everywhere. They warned, among other things, for everyone to stay completely out of the sun, to perform regular skin checks for end marks and to never drink the water, no matter what.

Daph and I took turns examining each other every morning, searching our naked skin for pin-sized holes, marks of our devolution. The pin-sized holes, "end marks," would eventually stretch over our bodies, leaving our insides exposed. Most people opted for suicide instead.

We checked each other's skin as sunlight gleamed through the edges of our drapes. Only in this light did Daph's hazel eyes appear more green than brown, more virile than doomed. I kissed her, hardly brushing my lips against her nape, afraid my affection might somehow accelerate our erosion. Since the leaves stopped growing back, we'd become afraid to make love.

“Again,” she said. I kissed her once more. She turned and met my lips with hers, pressing against me with a force I hadn’t felt in months. I met her fervour, running my hands against her breasts, the sunbeam stretch marks. We danced our hands over each other’s skin and I cried with relief and worry, our fingers exploring the tender of our insides.

Two days later, Daph didn’t take off her shirt for me to inspect her for end marks. She lit another smoke and held my hand against her face. She drew in slowly, shutting her eyes.

We visited the maple tree when it was dark. The moon hung low and fat. My wreaths had blown down and sat against the trunk. I lit them on fire. Daph and I stood back as the flames crawled up the tree trunk, the smoke obscuring the wild look of grief in each other’s eyes, crackling and burning. We waited until the fire turned white, until the tree became light and heat, and walked into the fire together.

Stealing Bicycles

by Sonja Murphy

Our streets were too narrow for cars to drive. Nothing so trivial has impacted my life more. For a start, we all knew about the plans to build a bypass through the village. So, each day was spent waiting for a government official to materialise and tell us that the whole village was going to be demolished so they can widen the road. More significantly, our narrow streets forced us all to cycle. I wouldn't have met her otherwise.

At nine o'clock, I waited at the main window of our family antique shop. The same time as always, Lucia cycled past. I always heard her before I saw her. She found her bike on the side of the road. Because of this, I heard creaking like clockwork whenever she was around. No matter how often I told her that it needed oiling, she never listened. What time she could have spent fixing it, she spent painting it. It was bright yellow, like the sun.

After a few months of watching her cycle past the store each morning, my phone screen shattered. When I arrived at the tech repair store, which was little more than a shed, I saw her bike propped against the wall. She sat behind the counter, watching world news on her monitor. I handed her my phone, and she said I'd get it back in a week. I lingered for a moment. Then I asked her why she insisted on owning the ugliest bike I had ever seen.

"No one would steal something so hideous," she said.

"Do you think about that often?"

She smiled at this. It was the same kind of smile I'd often given young children because there was so much about the world they did not understand.

We became inseparable after that. One night, we walked before sunrise, holding hands in the cover of darkness. She pushed the bike beside her. At the end of the street, she climbed onto it. I was ready to watch her leave, but she nodded at the bike next to me. It was tied to a signpost.

"Steal it," she said.

"I don't need to."

She slung her arm on my neck and cycled in a slow circle around me. “Of course you do. You live here, don’t you? If you don’t have a bike, you’ll never get anywhere.”

“I have a bike.”

She stopped cycling. “Oh really?”

“Well. I had a bike. Several. They got stolen. That’s why I won’t steal it.”

She laughed. “That’s why you should! They stole from you, so take something of theirs.”

She pressed her feet against the ground. Her gaze bore deep inside of me. “You don’t understand the tradition. People buy bikes to get somewhere. Then once it’s stolen, that freedom is gone too. You have to steal someone else’s to get it back.” She paused. “It’s a cycle.”

I didn’t laugh at her joke.

She gestured at the world. “All of these bikes are ours.”

I stared at the abandoned bike. Some primal part of me itched to take it. My fingers shook. “I wouldn’t even know how.”

“It’s the most natural thing in the world. You just act like you’re doing nothing wrong. Like it already belonged to you.”

Another while after this, she brought me to the shed behind her house. It was filled with bicycles, all clumsily stacked on top of each other. Some looked familiar to me.

“Why do you need so many?”

“Nobody’s had more bicycles stolen than me.” She kicked her yellow bike. “These are pre-emptive.”

I sat in the antique shop, still gazing out the window, though Lucia was gone. I longed for a strawberry blonde glimpse of her. My lungs filled with the dust of the antiques. I considered what my life would be like if the roads were wide, instead of narrow. If I had to go beyond the walls of the village. If my legs could carry me.

Sometime in the future, I will close the antique shop early. I will walk to her store. Her bike will be resting against the wall, like it always is. I will grip the handlebars, climb onto the seat, and rest my feet on the paddles. She might even

see me do this. I will exhale. Without looking back, I will cycle until the narrow roads become wide.

But that wasn't now, when the roads only grew narrower and each moment was identical to the one that came before it. Every day was coloured by Lucia. A burst of yellow. She became like the sun to me. It was only the image of her passing that informed me of changing days.

Saturday Nights

by Diane Simmons

I almost don't mention it at school. I don't want a repeat of the piss-taking I got for liking Wings. 'Did you see that John Curry on the telly yesterday – winning the gold?' I ask eventually.

Sandra grins at me. 'It were brill. The three of us should go!' she says, flicking Pat's arm to get her attention. 'They have a DJ at the ice rink, Saturdays.'

We're not there half an hour before Sandra's off up the back seats snogging some boy with dirty fingernails. I glare at any other lads who look like they might approach and Pat and I have a right laugh trying to stay upright, clinging on to each other for support.

I'm soon tons better than Pat. I love it. I don't even mind the cramp in my toes or the manky café that smells of stale fat. And I manage to get round the rink on my own, even get to the centre where all the posers are hanging out doing spins and jumps. I don't abandon Pat at the barrier for long though. I take her hand and guide her round the rink, will her to enjoy it as much as me.

Sandra decides to go to some nightclub the next week, but Pat and I don't miss her at the rink. I have more fun than I ever would at any disco. As usual, there are boys eyeing us up, but Pat doesn't bother with them and keeps ogling some guy with David Essex hair.

'Will you chase after him for me?' she asks. 'I'd never catch him.'

It takes me four goes round the ice and two falls before I crash into the barrier next to him. 'You need to learn how to stop,' he says, and winks at me. 'I can show you, if you want.'

'My friend wants to know if you'll go out with her.'

He looks me up and down, slowly moves his eyes away from my bust. 'Which one's she, then?'

'Over there – the pretty one with the blue jumper.'

‘Perhaps? Send her over.’

I skate slowly. I can feel him still staring and I’m desperate to stay upright. I shake my head at Pat. ‘Sorry, he’s already got a girlfriend.’

At registration on the Monday, Pat picks her nails, shrugs. ‘Me and Sandra thought we’d give that new nightclub a go next Saturday. You up for it?’

I feel like I’ve been slapped. I get why they want to go, of course I do. I can picture them next week dressed up in their black stilettos and the slinky dresses they bought from Miss Selfridge, dancing, scanning the room for boys, plotting who they’ll get off with for the slow dance in the dark. I envy them the dark. But I’d rather be at the ice rink, gliding along to a soppy song, having the chance to hold another girl’s hand.

I couldn’t do that at a nightclub.

Home Game, 8th December 2018

by Dave Murray

The two men in their padded jackets walk side by side across the turf, prodding periodically into the perfectly cut grass with their weathered garden forks.

‘And the words built of age are a stage where we act out our lives,’ says Josh.

Mike does a double take, for they never normally talk.

‘Pete Shelley,’ says Josh.

‘Don’t know him,’ shrugs Mike.

‘Buzzcocks.’

‘The band?’

‘Yes. The band called the Buzzcocks.’

‘Ah, now you’re talking,’ replies Mike. ‘That was our first dance. Ever fallen in love?’

‘With someone you shouldn’t have fallen in love with,’ adds Josh.

‘Yes, but my wife was the woman that I should and did fall in love with.’ Mike pokes his finger into the soft flesh of Josh’s shoulder. ‘Mary and me, we’ve been married twenty-four years and I love her like the day we first met. You know, I couldn’t imagine any other life. Don’t know what I’d have done if I hadn’t never met her.’

Josh presses on his fork and lifts the turf where a footballer’s boot has ripped through to the dark earth below. Mike retrieves a divot close by and eases it back into place.

‘Ten minutes ago,’ says Josh, ‘eight thousand supporters were staring at this exact spot, screaming at the ref to give a penalty. Now they’re away to get pies or go for a piss. Do you suppose anyone in the ground even notices us out here?’

‘Can’t imagine what it’s like to have all those people watching,’ replies Mike. ‘I’d fluff it under that pressure.’

As if in perfect unison they scan the terraces, but nobody is watching them.

‘It’s from Homosapien,’ says Josh.

‘What is?’

‘The lyric. Just Pete, not the Buzzcocks.’

‘Don’t know it.’

‘December ‘81,’ says Josh. ‘He couldn’t just come out and tell everyone, so it’s a play on words.’

‘What is?’

‘Homosapien.’

‘Don’t get it.’

‘Homo-sapien.’

Mike pushes his fork into the turf and places both hands defensively on the handle. ‘That foul, that was disgraceful.’ He looks up to the grey sky beyond the metal lattice of the floodlights. ‘You’re saying the man who sang the song that I had my first dance with my wife was gay?’

‘And the words in the script seem to fit ‘cept we have some surprise. He was bisexual.’

‘Same thing,’ says Mike, turning away. ‘My wedding song.’

‘Shouldn’t matter.’

‘Does to me. My marriage built on a lie.’

Josh laughs.

‘I’m serious. That song spoke to us. Me and Mary. We thought it’d been written just for us. Man and wife.’

‘You do know that no song is ever written just for you.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘He said he sang about the universality of love,’ says Josh. ‘I mean don’t quote me but why shouldn’t your wedding song work for everyone, regardless. I mean love is love whichever way you slice it.’

Mike looks up at the clock. ‘Two minutes. We’d better get back.’

‘81,’ says Josh. ‘Times change.’

‘They certainly do. Still had communal baths for one thing.’

‘True.’ Josh absent-mindedly pats a small divot.

‘Long gone,’ replies Mike. ‘They’re all individuals now. What about the rest of the band?’

‘The Buzzcocks?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I told you, love is universal,’ replies Josh.

‘Are you?’

‘What?’

‘You know.’

‘Would it make any difference?’

‘No.’ Mike lets out a slightly embarrassed laugh. ‘No. It doesn’t make any difference.’ He places his hand on Josh’s shoulder as they walk back to the tunnel. ‘No idea why we’ve never talked before.’

Kaleidoscope

by Hannah Austin

‘Ladies, gentlemen, and everyone in between,’ my wife Faith hollered into the microphone. The small crowd gathered around the makeshift stage she’d set up for karaoke at the centre of our patio. Credit where it’s due: our friends had donned their best drag tonight. From my vantage point – perched uncomfortably on a kitchen chair at the edge of the garden – they looked like a gorgeous flock of birds of paradise, scattered liberally with Elvises (what is it with lesbians and Elvis?).

‘I know Clare doesn’t want all the attention on her tonight, and she’s gonna hate me for this, so I’ll keep it short and sweet.’ I could feel everyone’s eyes on me. I tried to smile. I’d bloody kill Faith. ‘But at the end of the day, this party is for her – and we’ve got her a little surprise, haven’t we Mitzy?’

Mitzy, who must’ve sneaked into the house when Faith was crooning ‘Fast Love’, tottered back to the stage on her six-inch heels carrying a huge gold piñata. She grabbed the mic and turned to face me.

‘Well what are you waiting for, missus?’ Mitzy said. ‘Get your pregnant arse up here!’ Everyone started applauding. Blushes scalded my cheeks, my throat. Faith and Mitzy (Mark, by day) were born performers, but I’ve always hated the limelight.

‘This better not be what I think it is,’ I hissed at Faith as she helped me to my feet. Earlier that week Mum had been waxing lyrical at us about gender-reveal parties, which apparently had made it across the pond to England and were all the rage among her friends’ (hetero) kids. We’d watched, horrified, as she’d shown us YouTube videos of pregnant women cutting into cakes decorated with piped-icing slogans (*Guns or Glitter? Tutus or Touchdowns? Wheels or Heels?*) to reveal pink or blue sponge, or bashed piñatas stuffed with pink or blue trinkets – pink for a girl, etc. etc. ad nauseam. After the big reveal, the women shrieked and cried while the men high-fived and swapped aggressively no-hip-contact hugs. I’d refused to throw such a stereotype-endorsing crock of shit, but

I'd allowed Mum to talk me into having a drag-themed party – a gender conceal party, if you will – on two conditions: I'd be exempted from drag (too hot), and there'd be no actual revealing of the baby's sex.

'It's not what it looks like,' Faith said. 'I promise. Come on.' She took my hand and led me over to the apple tree, where Mitzy was tying the piñata to a branch.

'Reckon you can reach that, darling?' Mitzy quipped when she was done. I gave her my best evil look. She winked and handed me a stick. 'Come on, queers, gather round!'

Our friends closed in around us. I could feel the heat of them, the weight of our shared history. Mum pushed through the crowd to position herself just beyond the piñata, where she stood filming on her phone, no doubt desperate to upload the video to Facebook. Spreading my legs a little for balance, I held the stick over my right shoulder with both hands like a baseball bat, took a deep breath, and braced myself.

'What's with the radio silence, people?' Mitzy cried. 'You're looking at a pregnant lady with a stick! You don't see this shit every day!' The cheers started back up in earnest.

'Go on, Clare!'

'You can do it, baby!'

'That's my girl!'

I flexed my fists around the stick and focused, narrow-eyed, on the slowly spinning piñata. I took a deep breath, swung, and brought the stick crashing down on its shell. The crowd erupted. Buoyed on by their cheers, I hit it again and again and again. Blood thumped in my temples. Beads of sweat gathered on my forehead. I felt primal, animalistic, like I was leading some kind of ancient bonding ritual.

Cracks soon appeared in the papier-mâché. With each hit the cracks got deeper, wider. Finally, there was an almighty ripping sound and the golden fabric tore apart, spilling its guts all over me and Faith and Mum and Mitzy and our friends' laughing, upturned faces. The piñata was stuffed with streamers and glitter, feathers and lollipops – but instead of the pinks or blues I'd feared, its contents were red, orange, yellow, green, violet, indigo – the full, glorious

pallet of the rainbow.

Wrapped in Faith's arms with our chosen family cheering around us, I felt a bizarre sensation beneath my belly button. I guess it could've been excitement, or relief, or too many Virgin Mary cocktails. More than anything, though, it felt like a fluttering of wings, gentle but insistent – like a kaleidoscope of butterflies, freshly hatched.

You Can Never See the Stars in this City

by Rupert Dastur

We sit in front of the muted TV watching the pictures flicker, our bodies pressed close, my lips resting against his left temple. Hanif tells me that here the men are soft and sensitive, like lathered soap. Your white skin, he says, lacing his fingers through mine.

You fight over cakes and toilets and pronouns, he says, pointing at the screen where two miniature bow-ties rest on white icing. He shrugs, as if shaking off shame, as if he cannot believe the world contains such difference.

I ache to tell him it's the same war, that lips whispering *him* not *her*, that have tasted *him* not *her*, that dream *him him him* can bleed, even here. That a parent's rejection can hit as hard as rock. No, he'd reply. It doesn't.

Deeds follow words, I say. My only defence.

He nods slowly, undecided.

And then: There's a difference between watching it and living it.

I remember his description of the man pushed from the ledge; the way Hanif had said the word *friend* and then turned his head away so I couldn't see his eyes. We'd spent the morning walking along the Thames and had escaped the cold January air, finding refuge in a too-pink café in Chiswick. We're always seeking shelter from something, he had said, as we halved a flapjack. I sat there chewing honeyed oats and raisins while he told me about his journey here, the images he could not forget.

There are things he shares, and those he does not.

Hanif pulls away, stands tired on his feet, walks towards the window. He ties the cord of his dressing gown tight. I follow him, wrap my arms around him.

You can never see the stars in this city, he says.

Later, when we're in bed and the moon is high above London, he has the look of a ticking clock.

What are you thinking about, I ask.

I hear the hands wind back, back, back.

And then: Home.

I turn on my side and close my eyes. I listen to his breathing shallow. Alone in the darkness, I wonder how many times a heart can beat before it hits the ground.



