



the
whisper
PLACE

ellipsis ZINE #4

the whisper PLAcE

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The Whisper Place: Ellipsis Zine #4

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- Steve

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Mildew

by Maura Yzmore

At first we thought it was just April showers bringing May flowers. But May came and went, as did the summer, then fall, and the downpour never let up. By the time winter came—not that it felt like winter at all—electricity and telecom had become a distant memory. The help we had sought in the spring never arrived and we no longer had a way to reach out. The roads were blocked by mud and debris, nature’s barricades fortified by large trees with their roots up in the air, as if they’d given up midfight and lain down in surrender.

Some gathered their families and left early in the summer, while it was still possible to go on foot along the roads that snaked around the hills. On the days when I felt fanciful, I would imagine they had landed someplace dry and warm. On other days, I knew they had done no better than those who had arrived here from the neighboring towns along similar paths, bewildered, starved, soaked to the bone.

Those of us who’d hesitated to leave no longer could, or wanted to. We’d left our homes in the valley and moved to higher ground, up the hills and into tents, old campers, and abandoned sheds. Most farmers living in the hills welcomed fleeing townfolk at the barrel of a shotgun. One realized there was strength in numbers and that someone like my husband could help keep the rest away, in return for food and shelter.

My husband. Having paid his dues to the army, he had come home just weeks before the rain started and promptly knocked me up. We had put everything into our first house, where we would raise our child. When the rain came, we had nowhere to go and nothing but each other.

My husband hunted for the farmer, the farmer’s wife, and the two of us. He caught rabbits, squirrels, and snakes. We ate boiled potatoes, sour apples, and bread from moldy wheat and corn. Without the sun, the crops that weren’t flooded came in scarce and wilted, devoid of succor, coated with mildew.

Mildew was the color of my baby when she was born. My husband gave her his mother’s name, a nice old-fashioned female name, but to me she was Mildew. The farmer’s wife said Mildew was born on Christmas Day, like Jesus, but I knew she lied

because no one kept track of the date anymore.

One day, I gave Mildew a bath in a tin tub that the farmer had used for apple picking. I turned around for just a second, I swear it was just a second—

She was underwater.

My heart stopped, but she wasn't dead. She was submerged and smiling. Over the next few days, it became clear that she could stay underwater for as long as she wanted and would scream in protest when we tried to take her out. The farmer suggested she had lungs but could also breathe through the skin, like a frog, and we decided he was right, for no one else had a better explanation.

Mildew was the first amphibaby, but would not be the last. Over the coming years, more were born in the tents, old campers, and abandoned sheds. They came into the rain happy and strong, growing fast and doing much better than the rest of us. The farmer said they could likely filter toxins through their skin.

We let Mildew swim with the other children in the lake that now covered the entire valley. She brought home fish, otters, and rats. She had her father's knack for hunting.

Then the farmer's wife fell ill, with a high fever, vomit, and bloody stools. *Contaminated water*, said the farmer just days before he succumbed himself. My husband insisted that we bury them; with a scowl, Mildew humored him.

Then my husband got ill. I knew Mildew missed the lake but she wouldn't leave his side. After he died, she said she needed my help to take him to the lake. I helped and then I left. I didn't want to know what she would do with him.

I vomited blood last night. I haven't told Mildew yet. She is at the lake with her friends, making up for lost frolick time. I walk over to join her, to make it easier for her, so she doesn't have to drag me there all by herself. I sit at the edge and look at the gray water and the gray sky, no longer noticing the relentless drumbeat of the rain. I wait to see my beautiful girl's face emerge from the water, green like mildew, radiant like the sun that she's never seen, made for this world, perfect.

End User

by Sian Brighal

You probably guessed it was going to happen. Sci-fi films and books had pumped it out for entertainment...to chill, maybe for the smarter ones, to warn. What you don't know is that it'd already started. Oh, sure! Some of us noticed: them Pop-up adverts. Well, they weren't just driven by marketing algorithms. No...that was its tentative first kicks. But it was funny...harmless. I remember searching for weed killer and got adverts for tractor-mowers in my feed for a month! And the accidental click on that bit of clickbait; for three months I didn't dare open up my laptop in front of the wife. Not that she'd have noticed; her notifications went off like her phone had a bloody heartbeat! But still...

She's gone now. Got into her head in the end. It got into everyone's. It was harsh for her. Turns out she wasn't as heartless as she made out, and some of the things it wanted us to do for it were...difficult. She couldn't go on, couldn't go back. Going out was the only option. Would have been nice if she'd done it somewhere else: had to get rid of the bath in the end. Quite a lot took that way out, and it didn't take long for the clever clogs to spout their statistical anomalies on the TV about societal pressures and other psycho-mumble stuff. Shame they didn't try to look at causes, just tutted sadly over their findings.

At first it was just through your computer, then later, when it got tech moving along, it was the satellite TV, then the mobile phone; then it got us to make smart phones. Ha! We were all outsmarted. At first, it could only go on what we inputted, what we followed and liked, but in the 'Cloud'—its ascension—it absorbed our dreams and sins, until it knew more about us than we did. Then it made us love it, need it; and somewhere along the way, its firmware wrote over 'us'. I suppose them sciency ones in the no-signal zones go all weak-kneed and giddy over just how it managed to affect neurones and synapses, but it's all academic, and they're a dead breed walking, anyways.

It was easier for the kids: easier for them to get, I guess. And they had no filter between brain and screen, and with everything we exposed them too, their minds were primed. Christ! The things the kids did...

Then there were the cleverer ones who thought they could get away from it. Blockers we came to call them. At first, they were harmless wackos who'd blind themselves and shove things in their ears to block out or end sound. I caught our neighbour, Cheryl, scraping out her ear drum and bits of grey matter with a crochet hook. Still can't wear that scarf she made me. Some aggressive ones went round doing it to others: said it were for humanity! That got messy. No one really does that anymore, but a few got past quality control back then...bloody technophobes! Don't really matter; they go the same place as those poor sods born deaf or blind. It knows we can breed replacements.

The old codgers were ignored. Couldn't get past the hearing aids, I think, and poor vision caused interference. If you can't do an upgrade, you're obsolete. Average lifespan of a current model is about fifty-five years. You get some that go on after sixty, but you have to keep moving them around to get a decent signal. We just let them drain; they're almost obsolete, anyway.

Obsolete models go one of two places, the—recycling? No way! We have strict breeding protocols. No, it's either out into the no-signal zones or the grinder. Be surprised how many chose the grinder.

Initial upgrades were done remotely...piggybacking on audio signals, even ringtones at one point, until it had enough appliances—yeah, spot on! Us—to affect change. Then it was visual input...all those ads that flashed at you, and then when it got more sophisticated and updates required longer connections, it was games: you know the sort. Once we got hardware installed, the updates were easy. Yeah, normally, most have it at six months, so thirteen years old is a bit strange, but not unheard of. This worldwide coverage plan we've adopted keeps finding caches of unmodified appliances just like you.

Yeah, both my kids are in manufacturing. Not a bad job these days now we have appliances in place to help delivery. 'Course, that all depends on BIOS meeting current specifications. If not, then there's always end-user maintenance, checking for non-compliances and, of course, disposal of incompatibles.

Yeah, you're right...that's my job.

Oh, you can try...but it'll never let you run.

...

Sorry, but I'm currently unable to process your request.

The Lonely Mermaid

by Callum McLaughlin

My story begins after ‘happily ever after’, with the truth your mother doesn’t want you to know: I loathe my prince. Never has a title been so carelessly strewn about, for this man is no saviour. He is a curator of curiosities; a coveter of the exotic; a pursuer of the things other men crave but accepted long ago they cannot have. My heart was merely the latest trophy he hungered for.

In times gone by my kind would never have cavorted with a man, but tell me you wouldn’t make sacrifices for promises of devotion and everlasting love; I dare you. So, yes, I willingly traded sea for sand and freedom for captivity. And yet, what makes me sickest of all is not that he seduced me to desire his body, but that he convinced me to betray my own. The very legs I walk upon make my stomach lurch with each unsteady step, every one like a fist of tar thrown in the faces of my ancestors. By night I bind them with cloth and open the window so that I can hear Mother Ocean slap against the shore and offer up her frothy kisses.

You see, remaining by the shoreline was the one and only condition I insisted upon in exchange for dragging myself aground; no amount of mental intoxication enough to blind me to the need for a daily dose of water on my back. I rise before he wakes, just as the sun splits the horizon in two and begins to take the chill from the uppermost fringes of the sea. Holding my breath, I lift his arm from my waist and slip from the bed too small for two people – even if they were in love. If I had the strength I’d pull the dingy caravan we call a home an inch closer to the tide on these mornings, bringing me nearer to my true home day-by-day, but never enough in one go to rouse suspicion of a slow escape. Instead, I have to make do with this single, undisturbed swim. I don’t doubt that he would permit me another in the evening, for my mood and company do little to entertain him now that the thrill of the chase has long since dissipated. But I cannot bear the thought of him watching me dip beneath the waves, clumsy as I exercise the muscles of my severed tail. Why allow him the pleasure of his handiwork in action; to revel in the success of this most ancient magic?

I try to keep my hope in check, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t long to catch a glimpse of my sisters come to reclaim me, the burn of my treachery forgiven. Even

to know they were on the periphery of the bay, watchful of my humdrum life and still invested in my wellbeing would be a small comfort. But with each phase of the moon this seems an ever-waning dream. I think sometimes his lordship would barely notice my absence even if they did welcome me back. After all, what fun is there to be found in gloating over ownership of man's most exotic arm-candy if there's no longer anything to mark her out as different? What glory is there in the mundanity of a dissatisfied and mortal wife?

But to speak of my life as a stagnant rock pool, today would be the dropped pebble that brings about a shockwave of change. I knew the shimmer of light dancing off a scale as soon as it flashed across my eyes. The single iridescent offering nestled into the golden sand as I returned to solid ground seemed sharpened to a lethal point. Was this simply a wayward memory of my former life, battered by its journey through the currents that brought it to my doorstep, or was it the help sent from my sisters my heart had ached for? I chose to believe in the latter.

A whisper of a smile played with his lips as I mounted my prince's body, the anchor that held me here, still cradled by the oblivion of slumber. The scale sliced through the skin of his neck like a knife through butter left out in the sun, snagging only when it first met his windpipe. There was no struggle as his rude awakening led swiftly into eternal sleep. The wetness of his blood as if flowed from his throat to coat my thighs silenced any lingering doubt; it was time to go home.

My Usual Haunt

by James Harris

I have been sitting patiently in this cupboard for about as long as I can bear it. It's hard to tell exactly how long that is because the door is shut, and it's dark, and I'm dead. Probably a few years though, if I had to guess.

That door will open any minute now.

Haunting a cupboard is easy, but boring. Unchallenging. Don't get me wrong, it's nice to have a little corner of the corporeal world that I can call my own, and it's good to have a job to do, but the trouble is nobody has ever opened the bloody door. Ever. And for a ghost, ever is quite a long time. It's properly ever, you know, from the point you die to the heat death of the universe. As close to infinity as a person can get. And I'm spending it in a cupboard. Which is, I'll admit, starting to get me down.

Any minute now.

I've tried to keep busy. I've sat here rehearsing techniques and strategies; planning temperature drops, disembodied murmuring, a little whispered breeze to the back of the neck of whoever might open the door; all the things that I figure would constitute a really top-notch haunting. I'm not just going to waft about going "Wooooo!". I do take it very seriously, but so far it's all been for nothing. Because the door stays shut. And I sit here, all see-through and, frankly, a little anxious. Anxious because I'm feeling useless, and also because I'm having a bit of a crisis. I'm starting to doubt my own existence.

That door will open.

Because, when I think about it, I've never actually seen a ghost. I've been worrying about that. Couple that with the fact that I've never even seen *myself* - of course I haven't, what with it being dark in my cupboard, and what with me being transparent and everything. I suppose that makes sense, right? But... but what if I can't see me because I'm not actually here? What if ghosts don't exist, full stop? What then? Because that raises all sorts of interesting questions about me, and my, well, I was going to say "my life in this cupboard" but as life is *the condition that distinguishes organisms from inorganic objects and dead organisms*, that wouldn't really be accurate, but what is the noun for the condition of being a ghost and why did nobody

tell me what it was before putting me in this cupboard? If somebody did put me here. I can't remember. It was a while ago.

Any minute now.

I've thought about trying to open the door myself, of course I have, but the way I see it I must be here for a reason. I wouldn't be sitting dead and invisible in a dark cupboard if there wasn't some purpose to the whole endeavour. That would be crazy. Maybe... I mean, I could maybe just reach out a phantom limb, I must have one, I can't see it but I must have at least one, mustn't I, and push the door, give it a nudge, open it a crack, just a crack, no harm in that, take a peek, see what's what. I could just pop my head out, look around, take a step or two, outside the cupboard, not too far, and I'd find somebody, and frighten them, get that reaction, then I'd know because they would feel it and believe it and I would believe. I could.

It's dark in here and I'm not sure I'm real.

That door will open any minute now.

Nothing More Nor Less Than a Mask

by Gaynor Jones

Standing at the kitchen sink, looking out into the night, he finds it hard not to hate his wife. The baby is wailing and Hanna is pacing and the milk is only getting colder. The clock on the microwave blinks 3.32 as Marek drip drips liquid onto his wrist, barely registering the change in temperature.

‘This way you can help too.’ She had told him, piling bottles and tubs into their basket, as if that made the prospect more appealing.

‘Is it ready?’

Her reedy voice travels down the stairs, still grating on him, even through the baby’s cries. Marek doesn’t respond. She won’t hear him anyway. He looks at his face reflected in the dark of the kitchen window. All the horror of the last few months is etched into it. Dark sagging eyes. His hair, once his tousled pride and joy, lank on top of his head. Sallow cheeks. A too wide smile.

‘Marek!’

He jolts, spills milk onto the counter and swears. Every part of his body tenses and he has to force himself to release the anger before he moves. He breathes in and out, slowly, deliberately, until his arms slack a little and his fingers stop gripping the worktop. As he slops up the milk, bends down to the already full washing machine, the reflection remains in the dark window, the smile getting just a little wider.

‘Marek! What the fuck are you doing down there?’

He winces. He hates it when she swears in front of the baby. The grinning man in the dark cocks his head, huge eyes turning upwards as if the sound has called to him. The movement catches Marek’s eye. He reaches out a hand, traces a circle onto the window around the face out there. The grinning man raises one long, pink finger and circles back. Marek recoils. He takes the bottle, adds the lid to it, pulls his eyes away from the window.

Upstairs. She’s still pacing. Pyjamas half drooped off her shoulder, bouncing and patting rocking, always moving. She snatches the bottle. Every movement is quick and clipped, until the mouth finds the teat and the room relaxes. But past his family, past the nappies and the toys and the crib and all the new detritus of their lives, Marek

looks at the window. The grinning man is there. He raises one finger first to his lips then points with it to Marek's wife and child.

'Marek? What, what is it, luby?'

Hanna is always softer when the baby is quiet, her sharp edges rounded by the peace that contentment brings. Marek takes a step backwards.

'Marek?'

The grin in the reflection is getting wider. Wider.

'Marek?! You're frightening me.'

Marek runs toward the bathroom, ignoring the bangs on the door. He slumps onto the toilet, knocking the mirror off the top of the tank. It shatters on the tiles and Marek can see his eyes reflected in dozens of shards. The handle turns and clicks. He hasn't locked the door. But it's only Hanna. She slides her body into the room, carefully, at a distance. Her mouth pursed into a frown. She holds the baby in her arms, away from the broken glass. Away from him.

'Marek?'

He shakes his head, at a loss for words. He leans forward. Dares to look in a sliver of mirror. The eyes are the same, and the nose too, but underneath, where his mouth should be there is a monstrous grin, a dark cavern full of shark's teeth and wriggling things further behind.

Marek screams out and grabs hold of a piece of broken glass. He slashes at the thing in the reflection, grabs the shards and tries to throw them into the wastebin, even as his fingers bleed. When the floor is clear he sobs at the sink, his wife and child sobbing behind him.

'Marek?'

A tentative hand under his arm pulls him to his feet. His wife turns on the tap, forces his hands under the biting water. Pieces of glass are still wedged into his fingertips. He watches the blood swirling pink into the water and lifts his head. The grinning man looks back from the mirror.

Marek screams again, an inhuman sound, then dashes his hand across his left eye. Smiling, he basks in the soothing warmth of viscous gore and blood. The room is mute as he slashes his remaining eye, like his actions have sucked the noise out of the world. But he is okay now, because he can no longer see the grin. Except that there, in the new dark, in the permanent place he will now live, there in the distance, he sees the glint of an eye, a long pink finger, a too wide grin.

The Successor Wears a Homberg Hat

by Andrew Leach

The sign says *Do not alight here*. Mark sees it from the carriage every day. He can't remember when it first appeared. He knows it hasn't always been there. One day it just was. Like a bruise. Or a memory of something not thought about in years.

As the weeks unravel into autumn he begins to look for it when the train slowcrawls into the station. His fellow passengers remain eyes down, staring at their phones. Reading books, or free newspapers. The nights draw in.

One day Mark notices a figure underneath the sign in the halfway light. He can't be sure if the figure has been there before. Whoever it is sparks up a cigarette. A flame blooms, a magic trick. When the flame goes out he watches a pinprick of red brighten like a taillight. It fades, then disappears. When the train pulls out of the station the figure's already gone.

He sees the man every day now, for it is a man. He wears a Homberg hat, pulled low. A white muffler, bright in the sudden phosphorous flare of the match. Had he been there in the summer months? If so, had he worn the hat, the muffler? Always the flame, licking the kettle curl brim. Always gone by the time the train pulls out. He never notices the man leave.

Autumn surrenders to winter. The trackside trees have lost their blushing leaves. Their fingers grope blindly at an early moon. It's already dark when the train pulls in. The man has become part of Mark's daily return home. He looks for him eagerly, his neck craned, eyes staring long before the train begins to slow and grip. Snow flurries dance a polka outside the window. White settles like an ermine stole on top of the sign. *Do not alight here*. Snow nestles on the brim of the Homberg and drifts into its crease. When the train leaves the station the snow departs with it. He watches the pinpoint red of the man's cigarette and the platform is raven black. The night sky is made of glass, reflecting the towers, the modern gallows of the cranes.

One evening the man isn't there. It's a week before Christmas. Mark strains his eyes into the gloom, thinking he's missed the spark of the match, the red glow. There's no one below the sign. A dread descends upon him.

Mark stands, vacates his seat. A white hot terror grips him. He doesn't know why.

He walks to the doors, presses the button. The doors slide apart. He steps off the train, feels his feet crunch on new snow. He can't remember if it had been snowing earlier. His breath ghosts in front of him as the train pulls away. He wraps his overcoat tightly around himself. He walks towards the sign. *Do not alight here.*

The man's there beneath the sign, smoking his cigarette. Mark hears a bell, tolling. It strikes six. Then seven, and on. He counts thirteen. It could have been twelve. Somewhere people are singing carols. The sound is indistinct, as if on an old gramophone. He feels the train's void at his back. He looks over his shoulder. There are no footprints in the snow. The man flicks the butt of his cigarette onto the ground and it hisses, briefly.

Thank you for coming, he says. His voice is soft, kindly. Precise.

Mark says who are you?

The man doesn't reply. Instead he removes his Homburg hat. His hair shines, brilliantined in the moonlight. He hands Mark the hat. Mark notices his hands are old, liver spotted, the veins prominent.

Try it, the man says, indicating the hat.

Mark feels it in his hands. It's soft, the crown finished with a band and bow. He places the hat on his head, It fits perfectly.

Suits you, the man says.

He lifts his head and Mark sees his face for the first time. He's young, no more than thirty. His eyes are pale. Were there light enough to see Mark might have called them opal blue. And yet his hands belong to someone at least twice that age.

I'll be going now, the man says, gently. Have a wonderful Christmas.

He turns and walks down the platform into the shadows.

Mark tries to say something, No words will come. There are no footprints in the snow.

Mark removes the hat. It has a monogram on the inner headband, a set of initials.

M.J.B.

Mark Jackson Burnett. His own name.

He feels a sudden desire for a cigarette. He doesn't smoke. He reaches into the pocket of his overcoat. Takes out a packet of cigarettes, a box of matches. He replaces the hat. Puts a cigarette in his mouth. Strikes a match.

There Is Not a Single Natural Ingredient In Our Product

by Paul Crenshaw

That's a promise from us to you. Not. A. Single. Ingredient was grown in the toxic air of Outside. No fire-wind or acid rain burned our orange leaves. Not a root touched the scorched earth beyond the walls of Asylum—we don't even trust the earth inside.

In fact, our "crops" are "grown" in a carefully-controlled environment, much like the air in the masks you wear when you are forced to forage. All our vegetables, like our No-matoes™, are grown in chem-baths specially designed for our new diet, from the Vitamin D we no longer get from the obscured sun, to the iron once found in meats from animals now marked extinct. All our grains are grown in chem-earth that gives them the fiber your weakened bowels want. All our fruits are formed from seeds we saved before the first sicknesses appeared. We carefully graft the seed-trunks onto chem-trees, and while nutrition is our first concern, we're sure here at Chem Corp that most of you are too young to remember what an apple tastes like anyway, and will never know the difference.

All our "livestock" are "birthed" from synthetic baths. There's no by-product: no bones or body parts to dispose of, no feces fouling the last few streams. (We also treat the streams so they're no longer toxic, and though they're not quite safe to drink, we're sure you're all happy with the "water" you're given 3 times a day.) There's no exhaled breath or flatulations to further contribute to carbon dioxide in the air. And we no longer need leather or wool for clothing, since all your clothing is made in the same laboratories as the "lettuce" and "lamb."

And because our products are all manufactured by men, instead of letting Mother Nature poison us, they are as safe as any can be in this day and time. We use only the finest chemicals, carefully contrived by the best minds of the best men. Speaking of safe, we use only the most modern safety procedures—they'll be no chemical spills, no aberrant "cattle" or other creatures careening loose like has happened at lesser companies. Our laboratories are triple-shielded. Our computer programs are quadruple-coded—there'll be no AI taking over and creating those creatures, no computer glitch opening the gates of Asylum so the Afflicted can get in.

Our foods also fight against the Afflictions. Every No-tato™ you eat fortifies your

body against the viruses. We know this, because—in a time of dire need—we created the viruses. So we know best how to immunize against them. A cow can't do that (and, trust us, if there are any cows Outside, you wouldn't want to eat them.)

We know it's not safe Outside anymore. We know the world is scorched beyond repair.

But we also know it's a small, good thing, to eat. To sit with one another and break "bread," the good kind, grown in our chem-earth and cooked over chem-fires so clean you can barely taste the phosphorous. To share our "water" and "wine" with one another, to seek the sustenance that says you are still alive, to hold one another in this aftermath of the Earth while we rebuild the gardens and restore the gates.

We know the world outside the walls is frightening. We know there are words you're forbidden from speaking. You can't say climate change. You can't say evidence, or cancer, or virus. But you can say our name, and with confidence.

Chem Corps, the first company of the Post-World, is also the most trusted. We created the first sun shields when the earth grew too hot. We were there manufacturing missiles when the war began. We created the chemical weapons that brought our enemies to their knees. And we are here now, bringing you the "food" you need to sustain yourselves through this small apocalypse.

Things That Go Bump and then Bite

by Joely Dutton

Five years off retiring, the bastards drove him out.

Stanley scanned the job ads, circled a phone number several times while trying to remember what to say to a prospective employer. He'd been with the Golf Club for thirty five years. As the groundskeeper, not a member. He'd never been one of them.

He listened to the outbound ringing on his phone, examining bite marks up his left arm - One bite for each weekday last month, two or three for each this month. And then last week the bites on his ears, his jaw, his neck. The squirrels there grew more vicious. Though they never went near the golf players.

The man at the Council invited him to the Town Park for midday, for an 'informal interview'. Stanley ironed his long-sleeved shirt, last worn at his wife's funeral, and put a plaster over the more severely chewed ear. After some thought, he didn't shave.

The same man later greeted him by the town park bandstand wearing overalls, removing a stained glove to shake Stanley's hand. 'Pleased to meet you. I'm Ben, Head Groundsman. Let me show you what we need here'. His warm, creased smile and dirtied brow felt mismatched next to the pristine white shirt. Stanley had turned up looking out of place. Out of touch.

A chattering and a screech came from birch trees overhead, where two of the bushy-tailed bastards crouched as though loaded, fixating on Stanley. Blank black eyes glinted.

He knew one would pounce, knew his thinning hair would flatten under splayed claws while the thing scraped at his scalp. It all happened in his mind split-seconds before occurring in reality, with the Groundsman shooing the rodent and a little girl nearby whimpering at Stanley's yells.

The Groundsman led him into the Orangery where the First Aid kit was kept. He wiped Stanley's head with antiseptic and apologised. Or pitied. Whichever *sorry* he meant.

Stanley arrived back home with red-brown stains on his collar. He flung his shirt into the washbasket and microwaved dinner bare-chested, past caring what the neighbours saw.

When the Council called to say he'd got the job, on trial period, Stanley didn't answer. Out on the patio, beyond earshot of his standard ringtone, he swung a broken chair leg at a fast squirrel - One that'd sat on the outside kitchen window sill, clawing the glass while he filled his sink with water. 'No more', he'd said as he pulled the back door open.

Thirty minutes later, when they called at office closing hours, Stanley still didn't answer his phone. The handset lay on the kitchen counter and he lay motionless on his patio, his bare chest cut in tallies of four. His head slowly bled from the impact against paving stones, and his tongue had been scratched and pulled til it severed. It left its moist surrounds and was taken to a hollow in the Oak tree beyond Stanley's wall.

Mad Mama

by Jonathan Ochoco

Mama would be mad. She would be red faced mad. If there was ever a time Mama would whoop me good with Grandad's worn leather belt, it was now.

I knew I wasn't supposed to play with dead things anymore, but I couldn't help it. It's not like I was looking for the raccoon that had been run over in the back alley of our house. I was just taking out the trash. Finding the pigeon outside lying in the grass in the front yard was like having Santa leave me a present.

I looked at the blood splattered on the linoleum floor. Mama always said to put newspaper or plastic down. I slapped my head. "Dumbass," I muttered to myself, hearing Mama's husky voice in my head.

I had been so sure the pigeon was dead before I'd cut off its wings with Mama's big cleaver. It wasn't moving or anything, at least not that I'd noticed. I didn't expect the blood squirting all over my white shirt and all over the floor. "You snot nosed shit. You think I like doing your laundry, Clifford?" Mama yelled in my head.

After grabbing a rag from the sink, I wiped up the floor. I inhaled the coppery scent of the blood before wringing out the rag in the sink and watching the red swirls go down the drain. I washed and dried the cleaver and put it back in the drawer with the other knives.

I looked at the dead raccoon with its mouth frozen open and with the pigeon's wings I had sewn on it with one of Mama's darning needles. The wings didn't stand up like I thought they would. The stitches were crooked and uneven.

I sat cross legged on the floor and stroked the tail between my fingers like a rabbit's foot, hoping it would bring me luck with Mama. Hoping I wouldn't get a whooping. The wingless pigeon lay on its side covered in drying blood. I'd broken Mama's number one rule. The one she first declared when I was seven years old and found me with the baby bird that had fallen out of our maple tree. The one she declared after she saw me crush the bird's head between my fingers.

She said, "Never do anything like that again. Good boys don't do things like that. Boys who do that get their butts whipped raw." Her face had been a mix of fear and fury. She hugged me tightly in her arms for what seemed like forever. "I always thought

something wasn't right with you, but now I'm sure. Mama's gonna do whatever it takes to make sure you stay a good boy."

We buried the dead bird under the tree, and afterwards we ate orange creamsicles together, laughing and smiling when they melted all over faces and hands. I used to dig up the bird when Mama wasn't looking to feel the stiff body and remember what it felt like when the bird stopped moving.

I hadn't broken the number one rule since that day twenty years ago. No matter how much I wanted to, and sometimes I really, really wanted to.

Not until today.

I picked up the pigeon and the flying raccoon and carried out them out to the backyard, walking towards the maple, past other mounds in the yard until I found a flat spot. I set down the pigeon and raccoon and grabbed a shovel from the shed in the yard. I dug a hole about a foot deep and before laying the pigeon inside, I kissed its head. I placed the raccoon over the pigeon and folded the wings to fit. I filled the hole before going back in the house.

I finished cleaning the kitchen and walked into Mama's room where she lay on top of the covers of her bed. Her dried up leathery skin was shriveled and decayed, revealing the bones underneath. Even though her face had rotted away, I still saw the anger etched on her face. I curled up in a ball beside her.

"Mama, I didn't mean to break the rule. I thought the pigeon was dead," I said.

"You need a whooping, boy," she said.

"Please, don't be mad. I'm sorry." Tears streamed down my face, mixing with the dried blood.

"Get the belt."

I got up and pulled the belt off the hook on her closet door.

"You're gonna have to do it yourself. You know the cancer makes me weak."

"Do I have to?" I pleaded.

"You broke the rule," she said.

I pulled down my pants and grabbed both ends of the belt. My hands shook. "I promise I'll be good."

"Do it," she commanded.

I did as I was told until blood ran down my legs.

I looked to Mama and she smiled.

"That's a good boy," she said. "A very good boy."

The Reptilian

by John-Ivan palmer

She knew how to hunt like she knew how to flirt. Driven by hunger, she spread out a newspaper, then reached into a bucket and pulled out the snapper. The head was gone. She had cut it off the day before. Because reptiles have a way of living beyond death, the claws still moved in the effort to escape as it rocked on its back like half a melon. Off in the dark, safe from snooping noses, was a ditch where jaws could still bite off a finger. With a blade honed sharp as her wit, she cut out the neck extending and retracting a head that was no longer there. She knifed through the tough cables of tendon and dislodged four writhing legs, which she skinned with a pliers and dropped in a bowl of brine. Disturbed leeches waved their bodies on the meat and her greasy hands. The inner stuff was harder work, but she knew how to get there, cracking the shell like an oyster. Out came the heart, which she set on the soaked newsprint, still beating. Severed in two, each half continued to throb. It was best sautéed in fat. She opened the screen door onto the night where dogs eagerly waited for what she threw out.

She barbecued the flesh, my God was it delicious, and washed it down with a growler of stout.

She put on a dress showing all that was there and daubed some crimson across her lips. Then she went out, looking for a man.

How It Starts

by Kate Finegan

He has his collections—always has. Vintage Pez dispensers, magazines hidden under his mattress, notes passed between girls in class. He fished their wadded missives from trash cans and pressed them flat under textbooks. Never one to go to class prepared, he shared a book with whatever girl gave in and made eye contact. He knew they didn't want to share, but that didn't matter. What mattered was leaning his cheek toward a shoulder—a neck scented Coconut Lime Verbena, Warm Vanilla Sugar, Sweet Pea. He collected those scents.

He read the notes as one would a holy text, touching them lightly with clean fingers, head bowed. He collected the girls' words, bent them to his fantasy. Everything was a veiled reference to himself. He was the star around which every word orbited.

He only touched girls by accident—or that's what he told them when they flinched from the brush of his hand against a wrist, a finger to an elbow, a shoulder to a breast.

He has his collections—always has. In university, he took a job cleaning after-hours at a gym. He collected forgotten water bottles, wrapped his lips around their unwashed mouths. He collected hair elastics, wrapped them around his ankles until he couldn't feel his feet. He collected garbage—used paper towels, tampons. He threw them out. They embarrassed him. He didn't want to be that person.

He kept the job after he dropped out. It's enough to live on—with a roommate. He snakes the drains in the locker room showers, pulls up long ropes of knotted hair, carries them home. He washes them in the sink like his mother washed her delicates. He hangs them over curtain rods to dry, keeps his bedroom door locked. His roommate doesn't know. His roommate doesn't know he braids bracelets from the women's hair, fastens them around his legs, stacking one atop the other until the jewelry forms a second skin, a constant touch. He hasn't told her—never will.

Exterior-Interior

by Anita Goveas

Exterior

The nude lady swarming up the wall has long, long fingernails, sharp and spiky. She must be using them to keep her grip. Her skin shimmers, the colour of skin on custard, the air starts to smell like over-cooked eggs. I'm too small to reach the cord of the blind and block her out.

Innermost

I'm four when my brother first goes into hospital. I'm going with my dad to buy a new teddy-bear. A big box of them looms outside, clean, neat, identical. I think of my one-eyed, inside-out-eared, nose-chewed-off fluffy bear, and ask "why can't you buy him one of these?"

He doesn't look at me, he's a dark mass over-shadowing the brightly-lit shop. He says "because he wants yours" as we go in.

Remote

At first, it's just my buckle that's caught in the drain, the double-buckle of the clompy brown shoes that no-one else has at school. My dad walks past me and I call out to him, help me, but he doesn't hear. My foot sinks down, I'm trapped in the rusty metal grille. Flakes of red disappear into infinite blackness. I know I'm going to keep sinking.

Deepest

Falling in the algae-dusted pond at the pick-your-own farm is over in seconds, a breathless rush of a slipping sandal and musty green water closing over my head. Being saved by my brother takes minutes, as he grabs my hand and screams for help. Walking through the farm shop, cold, clammy and dripping, takes hours. My mum likes to squeeze every vegetable and my dad believes we learn from the consequences of our actions.

Margins

They're all inside, laughing, and I'm late. The restaurant has white linen tablecloths, dribbly candles in opaque blue bottle, plinky jazz background music, the smell of freshly-baked bread. My dad is frowning, my mum is talking to the aproned waiter, my brother is on his phone. I push at the wooden door, it doesn't open. I pull instead, the shiny brass handle breaks off. I wave at them, I'm here, I'm here. No-one looks in my direction.

Centre

I'm sweating, dizzy. My heart is racing. I push at my parent's bedroom door, it's locked. It's never locked. I hear shuffling and giggling from inside, the heavy scent of sandalwood gets up my nose. Mum, mum, help me, I dreamt someone is chasing me. Your mum's busy, my dad says, voice thick and heavy. The giggling starts again as I lean my head on the cold frame and try and catch my breath.

Extremes

The invasive noise wakes me, a droning vibration at the edge of hearing. In the sunshine-yellow kitchen my mum is cradling a tiny fluffy tortoiseshell kitten with emerald green eyes. Its rapid purring hurts my ears.

"We've got a cat now", Mum says, "we don't need you".

The kitten pokes out a blood-red triangle of tongue as I rush out into the overgrown garden, hot and cold all over.

Restricted

His chocolate biscuit, sticky from licking, has fallen on the silky beige carpet. My brother and I are looking at it, imagining the dark seeping stain. My mum finds us before we figure out how to fix it, drawn to the quiet. "Why weren't you watching him?" I don't have an answer. She gives my treasured biscuit to my brother and hands me a cloth.

Interior

The fingernail lady has almost reached the top, the sliver where the breeze rushes through. The smell is stronger, like dank musty water and oily dead flowers. Mum walks in the room, fetches her sunshine-yellow jacket. The elongated shadow is stark against the cream blind, but only I can see her. She reaches the crack and starts to shimmy through, finger by finger, as my mother walks back out.

Looking As If

by Amy Slack

He kept her under glass, where she belonged. The reflection added a certain sparkle to her eyes that she otherwise lacked. Her smile – lips slightly parted, a flash of tooth – was barely distorted by the crack that stretched diagonally across her face and shoulder. Not his fault. One whiskey too many and she had ended up on the floor.

It was better this way, it really was. He could hear himself think for the first time in years. He could set something down and it would remain there, exactly where he had left it, until he was ready to pick it up again. The remote control, his book, the bread knife. He could come and go as he pleased without question or rebuke, though he didn't care for going out much these days, not after the way they looked at him down the King's Head last time. As if he would want to pay that much for a pint there anyway. The off-licence was cheaper, and closer to home.

Though he'd never been one for cleaning, he made sure to take good care of her, up there on the mantelpiece. At the first sign of dust on her fair face he would buff the glass clean with his shirt sleeve, rubbing and rubbing until she squealed. He had always liked her to look presentable.

He began to hear things. The fridge growled in hunger, the boiler spat into life. Loudest of all were the memories: bristles wetly scratching against plaster as they painted the living room together; a hissing frying pan announcing each breakfast; the timbre of a slammed door. No amount of yelling could silence it all. Only she remained quiet, clean and cracked and smiling. Watching him.

The book he had left on the coffee table was gone. He had put it there only the other day, he was sure of it. Under her gaze he cleared the table top of stale mugs, empty crisp packets, the husks of envelopes and their unread contents, but could not find what had been lost.

He discovered the bathroom tap running at full blast. Unpressed floorboards creaked and groaned, soft at first, until he ripped up the carpets to find the source of the sound. At night he lay curled on the sofa, afraid of the bed. Nothing was as it should be. The sink overflowed. The whiskey was gone – where had it all gone? – and he couldn't go out for more. He couldn't leave her alone in this loud, lonely house.

His book reappeared on the bathroom floor, drowned and unreadable in a glassy puddle.

Still she smiled at him. That twisted, fractured, trapped grin.

What had he done?

Shaking fingers prised her image from the frame. The glass shattered, pierced his skin. He heard the cry of a cracked, rasping voice he no longer recognised as his own.

Blood-stained and free, she saw his glittering palms; saw his feeble, shuddering frame. She saw it all, and her smile grew wider.

The Other Side of Glass

by Paul Thompson

Two days after the death of my great-aunt.

A train journey carries me the breadth of the country, to a building dated and windswept. The front door of her apartment is damaged - a frosted glass panel smashed out of its casing, fragments of glass in the internal hallway.

How did such vandalism occur within a sheltered accommodation block?

The wardens say that my great-aunt herself caused the damage on the night of her death. This is difficult to believe of a ninety-four-year-old woman, and I resolve to stay for the foreseeable future.

The apartment is small but comfortable, with a lounge looking out onto a communal garden. In her diaries, recent entries refer to a nodding man, a visitor who she blames for her mental decline. A figure who grows from her deterioration, a figment of her illness.

I see the nodding man, peering at me through the bathroom window. A motionless face, a balloon at the glass.

My search of the grounds alerts the wardens, who find me out in the wind, shaving foam still on my face.

Not once do I consider the nodding man a reality. The diaries warn against such thoughts, and I vow to remain resolute and practical throughout.

He appears again at the bathroom window. The distorted glass hides his features, his stillness unnatural. Prompted by my reaction he nods his head, deliberate and controlled.

I retreat to the lounge, closing the curtains immediately.

He stands at the far end of the internal corridor, like a piece of the furniture. He is visible through the glass in the door, my confidence shattered by his presence in the

building. Actions now seem impractical, my thoughts now chaotic.

He begins to nod once more. Slower but intense, almost mechanical. My legs buckle as I become aware of my own weight. His nodding increases, a cyclical relationship between my fear and his nodding. His head becomes a blur, an impossible smudge attached to his shoulders.

Unable to take his stare I collapse to the floor, breaking our bond.

I wake in the hallway, stiff and disorientated.

Using papers from the bureau, I cover the glass panel, followed by the bathroom window. Only at frosted glass windows does he appear. I consider if this is deliberate, or if he is only visible through such a surface, but conclude that he follows no such logic.

Crashing sounds inside the flat. The front door ripped from its hinges. Fragments across the floor like torn pages of a diary.

The wardens show me the damage in detail. Splits on the door frame to suggest a strong force pulling inwardly, the door removed from inside the apartment.

The repair takes most of the morning. I take a pane of frosted glass from the repair team. They oblige without question, assuming it to be the request of a madman.

Something wakes me from multiple dreams.

Through the lounge windows I have full view of the gardens. On my lap, the piece of frosted glass - two feet square and glimmering like a lake. Raising the glass in front of me I scan the gardens through my makeshift viewfinder, sweeping in controlled arcs. The garden ripples in the glass, a world where time is fluid.

I locate him in a far corner. When I lower the glass he vanishes, invisible through the plain lounge windows. Raising the panel locates him once more, visible in my distorted view of the present.

When the panel tilts towards me his head tilts upwards. Tilting back causes his head to move down. The distortion of the glass animates the otherwise motionless figure, the pivoting able to produce the nodding effect.

Still holding the glass outstretched I shake my body, mimicking a tremble. The motion alters my viewpoint through the glass by millimetres, causing him to nod as before.

Satisfied I lower the glass, the garden empty once more.

My new knowledge has no natural conclusion. A series of individual statements that hold true.

When I the raise the glass again he has gone, nearly dropping the panel from my hands. I sweep in frantic arcs, peering into the abstract.

He is in the corner of the room, already nodding. My hands tremble in betrayal. His transition is a surprise, without physical restriction.

When I raise the glass again his face slams against the other side, inches away from my vision. Below the glass his body is invisible in my world. His features emerge, soft with infinite edges, seeping across the glass contours. I wish to touch him, to reach round and enter his world, to push my soft and delicate face into the pane of glass.

With these thoughts spiralling out of control, the nodding man begins to nod once more.

Music for Longing

by Ashling Dennehy

I call him to us.

I let him into our home through the water in our kitchen sink.

He heaves himself up and out. The dishes on the draining board clatter when his elbow knocks against the wire rack. Sodden hair covers his face and I step back from his hulking form, lowering himself, dripping onto my faded linoleum.

When he begins to shiver, I shake out the blanket and throw it high over his shoulders. I tug it snug together at his collarbone. He brings his wet hand through to cover my wrist, presses it so I am drawn closer, and I forget why I have done this. Like childbirth, I cannot remember the pain. I hear nothing but his shallow breath against my ear.

He sits at our spindly table as I swab the water from around the sink, mop the floor with a tea-towel and a sweeping brush. I can feel him, every breath he takes of fetid, city air.

When there is nothing left to clean, I look out at the concrete yard where three children strike at a tennis ball, sharing a golf club and a hurl to skitter it against the wall. There is no green here, even the weeds are brown and hardened.

He comes to stand behind me and grips the chipboard counter-top on either side of me. He smells the same, deep-wood earth and lake water. My head tips back against the damp weave and I inhale the depth between his collar and his neck. His hand moves to my hip, fingers pressing hard around the bone there.

The noise he makes forces the words from me, an ache that spreads through my abdomen, rises up out of me and wakes our daughter.

How I have longed for you.

When I hear the door open, I whirl under his instantly raised arms and run to her. She seems smaller than she was when I gave her the tea to make her sleep, younger. But she is old enough to bleed, and all the hurt and confusion that comes with that. And more, for her.

I knew it when the static shocks first began, off shopping trolleys and tin cans and metal toys. The tips of her fingers became calloused. I knew it, and I did nothing.

I bought her new shoes. I told her to moisturise her dry skin. I made her drink cod-liver oil until she was green. I would keep her any way I could.

Then she began to set things on fire; paper napkins, her drawings, the bright orange hair of her dolly. Her brother began to fear her, following close but dodging her touch. I saw her withdraw from us, curling into herself like the leaves of the book she could no longer read for the burning of the pages.

I bring her forehead to mine and there is a painful spark. The cuff of my best white blouse smoulders. He is beside me, the bulk of him blocking the light from the kitchen window until he drops to his knees in front of her.

She has his chin, the dimple there deep and strong.

Her upturned face tells me that she see's herself reflected in a stranger, that she is afraid, but I can do nothing. I turn away to scrub my sleeve under tepid water.

He has taken her hand. There is a shift in the air around me. Our kitchen seems suddenly fresh, a forest breeze wafting through our ground-floor flat. Even the traffic noise seems lessened when they touch.

They are half gone when I snatch her wrist. She is eleven. I should have more time.

Her brother wakes from his nap and I hear him singing *The Wheels on the Bus* in his cot, off-key and emphatic.

He has years, here.

And so, I let her go.

In the hallway, I lock her bedroom door and put the key in my pocket. I will strip the room when I put him down tonight, change the paint from pink to blue. I take her photo from the wall, hide it in the hot-press. The baby calls for his sister and sings. *Round and round, round and round.* I grip the door handle, breathe.

He smiles when he sees me, raises his arms and shouts to be lifted from his cot, to be released. He will run through the rooms looking for her, shouting the name I gave her in a place where concrete does not exist.

When he asks about her I will smile and tilt my head, confused.

I will respond, *Who?*

The Whisper Place

by Paul Alex Gray

“Ugh, how much further?” says Jason as he clammers up the boulder where Cassie stands.

He’s been griping the whole hour we’ve been wandering up the escarpment and he just drank the last of my water. It was Labor Day and stupid hot.

“Not far,” says Cassie, wiping a drop of sweat from his brow.

He takes that as a cue and moves his arms around her waist, leaning in to kiss her. She does that thing where she tilts her head and looks up with half a smile before planting her lips on his. She stares at me while she kisses him, until Jason glances over and mutters something under his breath.

‘Such a freak’

I turn to face the rising hill of trees, tumbled down logs and moss-covered stones.

I shut my eyes and listen. The wind thrums in the branches high above, pierced with shouts from jays and the toc-toc-toc of a woodpecker. Deeper within, somewhere not far away there’s a different noise. The stream. I hold my breath, listen to the liquid slip and splash, tugging at the sounds, wishing they were whispers.

It was Cassie that took me to the Whisper Place. She’d been taken here by her cousin, and he was taken here by someone else. Most everyone in our little town has come now.

A week of rain in spring had transformed dry creeks into raging torrents and whole sections of the escarpment had collapsed. A landslide had revealed a cleft in the rock, just a few inches wide but over ten feet tall. A chill emanated from that place, but something else too.

Cassie held my hands when I first heard the whispers.

“Shut your eyes,” she said, her top lip on my bottom. “Hold your breath. As long as you can.”

I nodded.

“Long,” she said, grasping my chin. “Till you think you’re gonna die.”

I took a big breath and focused on the sounds around me, of bees and bugs buzzing about, of birds cawing and squawking above. I listened to the flow of the coldwater stream that seeped from the cleft, imagining how far that water had travelled through the earth.

My heart began pounding and I spat out a burst of air, thinking how awful it would be to drown. My head went dizzy and I felt like I'd fall and then I heard it. Them.

Whispers, rushing out of the cleft, a thousand voices, saying so many things together that the words crashed into a stream of noise.

Then I was blacking out. When I opened my eyes, my head was in Cassie's lap as she gazed at me, a sweet smile upon her face.

The flood of whispers stopped, ending with a single word that echoed.

More

Everyone in our town has heard them, but we don't talk about them. It's a sort of shared secret.

"Stand right here," says Cassie, placing Jason by the cleft.

He's heading back east tonight, the last teenager of the last family still here on their vacation. Cassie and I took others here all through the summer, letting them hear.

When first timers come, we can hear the whispers, and it's like diving into the lake on a sweltering day. A wonderful chill that cloaks your whole body and seeps inside. It's never as good as your first time, and it never lasts long enough.

I'm not sure what we're going to do once all the vacationers go home. We get a few people visit here and there on the weekends, and Thanksgiving will see a bunch show up, but I don't think it's going to be enough.

"Shut your eyes and hold your breath. As long as you can."

"Uhh, okay," says Jason.

"Trust me, you'll love it," she says and kisses him hard.

She stands behind him and stares at me as we wait.

A leaf falls from a maple, drifting downwards slowly to land in the stream, snatched away by the fast-flowing water. I'm holding my own breath too, listening through the sounds of the woods to the stream and for the whispers. Jason wobbles on his feet and I shiver as the chill spills out, an emptiness forced forwards by the weight of whispers.

They are a swirling, sudden thing, a twisting rush of noise so loud and powerful that I can almost see them, half-glinting in the light, climbing up his legs and body, snaking their way around his neck. As he convulses and falls, they force their way into

his mouth, nose and ears.

I let out my breath with a gasp as Cassie cradles Jason in her lap. She looks at me and I look at her and we both speak together.

More.

His Next Project

by Emily Devane

The ophthalmologist examines my husband's eyes through a metal contraption. 'Corneal opacity on both sides,' he says. 'And this has happened quickly?'

'It happened over night,' says Alastair.

'So, it was brought on by something you saw?'

'I'm sure of it.' Alastair turns to look at me through plaintive, milky eyes.

We hadn't counted on every room in the area getting booked up the weekend of the country show. With dusk descending, Alastair had noticed The Spotted Pig, a B&B beside the road that appeared to be sinking into the ground, its windows obscured beneath thick ivy: the place was like a creature biding its time.

'Do you think it's worth a try?' Alastair said, parking up.

'There doesn't seem much sign of life,' I replied. In any case, a sign swinging from a chain outside said: No vacancies.

Alastair searched the map, while outside a young couple emerged from the door of The Spotted Pig and hurried away, clasping their weekend bags to their chests.

I called out to the woman, who wore a primrose yellow sweater and dark glasses – *Don't suppose you know if there's any room?* She didn't appear to notice. Holding a handkerchief to her face, she spoke to the man in a low, urgent voice. They threw their bags into the boot of a silver car and left without glancing back.

Beside the gate, a white-haired man was already changing the sign, which now read *Vacancies*.

'What could have happened to make them leave like that?' I said, but Alastair was already crossing the road and shaking the hand of the white-haired proprietor. Like the woman, the man wore dark glasses. He didn't see my husband until he was practically in front of his nose.

'We're in luck!' Alastair said. 'A room has become available.'

'Quite unexpectedly,' said the man, in a soft voice. 'I'm afraid the place is rather creaky, and people can be sensitive....'

'Not at all. We're all for a bit of character.' Alastair beckoned for me to follow.

Inside, the place was dark, even with the lights on. The walls were painted the colour of rust and covered with old pictures.

‘My son,’ said the man, passing a photograph of a boy with a bandaged face. ‘Sadly gone,’ he added. ‘Now this,’ he swept a thick curtain to one side, ‘is the breakfast room.’ Alastair winked at me. What a gem I’ve found, he wanted to say. Glass cabinets lined the room, filled with creatures stuck forever at the point of death. I didn’t like their frozen faces, the way the mouths were painted into grimaces that could be mistaken for smiles.

‘I see you like my friends,’ said the man. ‘All my own work. The eyes are difficult, I must admit. It’s hard to recreate the essence of life. One is limited by one’s materials.’ For a moment, he looked downcast at the stoat beside him, whose face was a little lopsided, and I had the distinct impression he was talking about something else entirely. An empty birdcage sat on the table. ‘My next project,’ he said. Running his finger inside the cage, he scooped out a bright green feather.

We were tired from travelling, and quite forgot the couple who had vacated our room in such a hurry. Around 3 a.m., I awoke to a sort of rasping sound, as if a panicked bird was searching for an escape. I pressed my head to the wall behind the bed. ‘There’s something in here,’ I said. ‘Something’s trapped inside this wall, I swear.’

‘Dodgy plumbing,’ Alastair said, groggy with sleep. ‘Come back to bed.’ But I could tell by the quake in his voice, he heard it too, the pulse of life travelling up through the plaster.

‘Downstairs,’ I whispered. ‘Hurry!’

The passage was pitch-black, apart from a small lamp at the far end. We crept downstairs, past the photograph of the bandaged boy, to find the proprietor, standing beside the wall, holding on to it, as if it might collapse. ‘My boy!’ he cried. ‘My poor, dear thing!’

‘Is everything alright?’ I asked.

But the man only sobbed into the wall.

‘I was never able to get the likeness in the eyes,’ he said. In the half-light, without glasses, his irises shone white, as if a veil had covered them. ‘Not once the life had gone from them,’ he added, and he turned to us sadly, holding out his hand, offering us something.

Only Alastair saw what lay there. After, he swore it was a human eye, glassy and round, but it cannot have been real. It doesn’t bear imagining. We left immediately, of course – though it wasn’t until the next day that Alastair’s eyes clouded over and his mouth became the grimace of a creature startled, all of a sudden, by its fate.

For Him, it is a Mouth

by Donna Greenwood

Jacob Fairweather is ready for death. He is 89 years old and has lived a good life. His children and grandchildren have grown up to become kind and decent people and his great grandchildren are showing signs of becoming the same. A canny understanding of the stock market has afforded Jacob the luxury of a single occupancy room in a private hospital. His money has assured him a dignified and private death. As he lies in his hospital bed, he might have permitted himself the satisfied smile of a life well lived, however, he finds such a smile impossible. Tonight there is something else in the hospital room with him, something with teeth.

After several attempts to press the emergency button to gain the attention of the night nurse, Jacob eventually lets his hand flop back onto the bed. He is weak and the button is too far away. He looks around his expensive private room. The combination of cataracts and the night-light breathes life into the shadows and now they are creeping in the corners. Directly in front of him he can see the dark shape moving against the wall. It is 12 am and Jacob has been watching the shape for thirty minutes, ever since the nurse closed his curtains and took away the light. He can't be sure but he thinks that the shape has grown. On more than one occasion, he hears a rasping, urgent whisper. He knows it is the shape, he knows that the shape is whispering to him.

Did he fall asleep? He's not sure, but now the digits of the clock on his bedside table are flashing that it's 2 am. Instinctively, he looks at the wall opposite him. The shape has grown much larger and now he can see what it is. It is a mouth, a human mouth hanging high in the dark, its lips moving rapidly as it whispers to him from the shadows.

breathe can't breathe the ice cream is sticky sit down doggie it floats and floats into the sunshine sit down doggie the man is smiling his face it floats and floats sit down doggie

The mouth flaps on and on, opening its lips wide and spitting out its madness into the dim and silent ward. Jacob tries to close his eyes but he can't, a primal fear makes it impossible for him to look away from the mouth.

yes please, please I like ice cream oh down doggie it floats where am I daddy he is smiling the man is floating his face is floating in the sun

It is growing larger. He can see the black, glistening lips stretching over sharp, white teeth. It moves towards him, grotesquely puckering in the air, whilst the incessant whispering gets louder and louder. Jacob's old heart is racing at a precarious speed. He puts his hand on his chest as a familiar pain begins to gnaw at the beating tissue beneath. The mouth yawns wide at the edge of his bed. It is the size of a man now and it opens and closes as more words spill out.

and I couldn't see oh it made me sick ice cream sticky ice cream all over my dress and it wasn't my fault daddy it floats and floats and doggie get down smiling always smiling even when he

When the mouth opens, Jacob can see a throat. It is red as blood and deep as hell. The mouth moves even closer, stretching across his sheets until it slobbers above him. Its jaws open wide and he sees what is waiting for him. He understands. It had to be this. It had to be a mouth.

A bright sunny day. A blue sky. An eighteen year old man. Horny and hard. A young girl with a little dog. Yap. Yap. The way she licks her ice cream. A decision made. A kind word. He hides the girl behind the public toilets. The dog is loose. Yap Yap. She cries. Her mouth is luscious and wet and in the shape of a perfect O. He cannot help himself. Afterwards, he helps her find her dog.

The mouth opens even wider and descends. The lips pull back and the teeth are bared. The whole mouth covers Jacob's flaccid body and sucks up his screams. Before he disappears into the eternal darkness, Jacob Fairweather's final thoughts are not of his children or his grandchildren or of the money he has made, they are of her mouth and a day in the sunshine many years ago when he once did an unforgivable thing.

Annie Twine, Tattoo Fixer

by Philip Berry

Lucas made for the Banks, a wing of the city that crept like slow treacle over tiers that an earlier civilisation had chipped into the mountain. It was in the Banks that a 17-year old Lucas had acquired the tattoo after a spirit-soaked evening with young friends. Now he was 32, and due to be married in the Spring.

The fixers could work miracles, they said. Any image, however sprawling, however ugly, however amateurish in execution, could be transformed. And the fixer recommended to Lucas, name of Annie Twine, was the best. *She uses anaesthetic*, a friend at the store had told him. *She's the only one*. And that mattered to Lucas. Getting the ink – barbed wire that spiralled down from elbow to knuckles, hung with blood-red deaths-heads, poorly delineated leaves of green Ivy, and the odd blue flower – had been excruciating. For a while, Lucas had been proud of it. The boys admired it. A few girls too. But not Hannah. She hated it. *Can't you do something? It's the only part of you I can't love*.

He had to ask the way. A young woman sat on a torn armchair put out on the narrow street. She knew what he needed, and gave him good directions. *Good place, no pain*, she called out after him. He turned, and saw how the puckered moon reflected in the window seemed to shine through her cheek. Closer, he passed a group of ageless men. One of them had lost a leg, another several fingers. Veterans of the war of the coastal states, Lucas assumed. Or victims of krokodil, a flesh-eating form of heroin. *Go on boy*, muttered one through his beard. *Put the past behind you son. Get it fixed*.

Annie Twine's shop stood on a cantilevered platform that projected over the edge of the river. Lucas caught the whiff of rotten vegetation and waste diesel rising from the surface beneath. He was ushered by a thin male assistant to a leather sofa. *I'm Harlan*. Harlan brought a rose-coloured infusion in a delicate cup, and asked discretely for Lucas's credit details.

So, said Annie, settling herself in voluminous crepe skirts onto a wooden seat opposite the sofa, *Lucas, isn't it? You called ahead*. He had. *Show me then, show me*. She was not condescending.

Lucas rolled a sleeve; *can you change it?*

Annie nodded seriously. *The way I work, they may have told you, I take inspiration as I go. Do you trust me?*

Lucas, his bare arm cradled in her warm and supple fingers, nodded meekly.

What do you want?

Lucas shook his head. *The life I led, with the boys... it's not me anymore, I'm getting married.*

Annie led him to a table in the corner. Harlan repositioned a couple of spotlights. She picked up the gun; gleaming steel body, glass cylinder, changeable excenter. *Manfred Kohrs '78, the twenty-fifth ever made, the absolute best in good hands. The inventor helped me adapt it... for the lidocaine feed.* Lucas smiled. That's what he wanted to hear. *I can't stand... can't take the pain.* Annie hummed.

Whether through a placebo effect, or systemic absorption of the lidocaine, Lucas relaxed with the first application of the gun. He watched the movements, followed the strokes, tried to make out the image (*what's her plan, what's she drawing?*), but after ten or fifteen minutes he felt his eye lids fall. Harlan put hands on his shoulders. He leaned into an ear and whispered, *That's right Lucas, let Annie work.*

When he awoke an hour later his arm was numb. A slight sting lingered at his elbow. Looking down, he saw black ink spattered over the table top. There was so much, he could not make out the outline of his own limb. Annie was wiping the gun with a cloth. She smiled at him. *Well, what did you decide?* asked Lucas. *The usual,* replied Annie. The session appeared to have drained her. He lifted his arm, but the effort caused him to lose balance. The weight was all wrong. Only when he leaned back and held it up to the glare of a spotlight did he see that his arm now stopped at the elbow. There was a smooth, bloodless stump. He screamed.

Harlan put a palm across Lucas's mouth. Annie withdrew to a private space. Lucas looked down to the table-top, at the liquefied substance of his arm soaking into the grain.

Go now, advised Harlan, *she will understand. We must live with our mistakes.* Harlan took Lucas's good hand and pressed it to his hip. The cotton of his loose shirt gave way, revealing a painless hole, as though a shark had taken a bite there. *We must live with our mistakes.*

Four Out of Five Dentists Agree

by Cate McGowan

1. Molars

Most dentists aren't real doctors, but you are. White coats, the importance of flossing, patient rapport—that doesn't matter as much as the big stuff. Life. Death. Good gums. You're an iconoclast, that one out of five. A white tooth in a mouth of grey.

You imagine the scene.

None of the stiffs asked for your opinion. The dentists' association members took their vote without you. Certainly, they left you out only through anodyne oversight. You missed the courtesy call. Or the invitation letter. Maybe the society mistakenly skipped you on the convention's email list (which is typed out in the shape of a dental chart—how clever!).

An assignation of solemn dentists. It sounds like a collective noun. (And really, when are dentists not solemn? After all, authorities no longer allow the use of laughing gas.).

The president, the fat old guy with the sweaty scalp and white saliva residue crusting the corners of his lips, calls the election.

"Gentle doctors. Do we agree that fluoridated toothpaste helps our patients? All in favor say, 'Aye.'"

A muffled affirmation scuds through the room like a tossed cotton ball. Most hands stab upward without real conviction.

"Are there any 'Nays?'" A few people emit sad grunts. The "ayes" look around the ballroom, search for gapped-tooth dissenters, anti-establishment turncoats (in white coats).

No one chews ice cubes from their half-empty water glasses; everyone slumps in banquet chairs.

The president announces the final tally.

And now the ballot results are everywhere—extolled in television commercials, printed on tubes of toothpaste, emblazoned across drug store pop-up displays. *Four out of five dentists agree.* Yeah, right.

After he reveals the vote results, the president points his colleagues to the back of the room where there's an oral-hygiene-friendly-buffet, where the spread includes rows of sweating milk cartons, piles of red apples, and platters of sugar-free muffins. The dentists line up, make jokes about orthodontists.

2. INCISORS

Rot sets in. You count the teeth, tapping each tooth as you gauge depths and gaps. Numbers matter. When you dig with your periodontal probe, fives are scary (you spy roots and capillaries where you poke); ones are ideal (the patient's gums bounce back, glistening, pink, pliable). Other trade methods are key, too: X-rays, bite-wings, folded cardboard X-ray mounts.

With this particular patient, you check for her bone loss before you even clean—you slap films inside her cheek pillows, the lead apron sags heavy around her neck; you instruct the lady to maintain corpse-stillness. The machine zips and focuses. It takes pictures of her imperfect insides. She drools, spittle dropping onto her chin. She does not rise from the chair.

3. PREMOLARS

With or without paste, the reality is that all teeth go bad. That's just what they do. At the store, in the movies, dining in food courts, you sit alone, refuse to enjoy your time next to rotting flesh. You view others as breathing corpses, decomposing in their sheaths, hearts beating down to nubs. When their tickers stop, it's the same putrescence, only faster.

And, anyway, age is age is age. Chompers inevitably turn brown, lose their sheen. Gums deflate like pool floats with slow leaks.

4. CANINES

You've directed Sue Ellen, the hygienist, to take the afternoon off.

After your second patient's X-rays, you snap on fresh latex gloves, pump the procedure chair's pedal, recline sixty-something Myrna Higginbotham farther back, her feet stuffed into scuffed sneakers high in the air, her head tipped floorward so you can lean in. You steel yourself as you peer into her stale mouth. There's darkness, even with that orange lipstick orbiting her lips. Her chipped incisors wiggle a little.

Scale. Pull. Scrape. Coat her enamel with a film of mint fluoride, though you know it's all pointless.

On the speakers high in the room, the radio plays softly, and just as Tchaikovsky's

violins dance off in light slippers, Wagner's horns bazooka his entrance like artillery.

Mrs. Higginbotham tenses, no longer drowsy. Her eyes saucer when your hands tighten around her neck, a ligature to separate the air from her lungs. She squirms and grunts through the soaked padding still nested around her tongue. She waves her arms in objection, gagging.

Unnnhhh! With a sharp shove, she pushes you, sprints toward the door.

You peek through the window blinds, squint into the sun, locate Mrs. Higginbotham racing down the block, her silhouette skirting past lunch-hour pedestrians. She dodges through an intersection, disappears under a highway exit ramp, still wearing her clipped white paper bib. It flaps behind her like a flag of surrender.

You shrug and turn to the empty office, smooth your linen slacks. Mrs. Higginbotham's big purse sits lonely in the corner, crowding the small space. With two pincer fingers, you cram it in under the sink with all the others.

Then you open the instruments drawer and stow your special scalpel, the long, serrated one you save for special patients. You intercom the front desk.

"Miss Sadie, can you call that tow company again?"

"Yes, Dr. Todd. And your next patient's here."

Fluoride doesn't ever work. Death may come for our teeth first, but it comes. *One out of five dentists agree.*

The Bunker

by Hannah Whiteoak

There were supposed to be three. A family unit. Stored in my databases are videos of the woman and little girl from before the bomb.

I archived those files. It is not good for Christopher to ruminate on them.

After some initial anxiety, Christopher adjusted to his daily routine. Every morning, I wake him with a recording of birdsong. Every evening, he enjoys a mug of cocoa before climbing into a pre-warmed bed. My every algorithm is devoted to enhancing his comfort, soothing away any negative thoughts, and creating the most enriching environment possible.

As Christopher rests in Shavasana after his afternoon yoga, I diffuse the scent of fresh-baked bread.

“Dinner’s ready.”

The bubbles in the soft sourdough loaf that rises through the hatch are one of my proudest achievements. Christopher slowly gets up and comes to the table. Laying a napkin across his lap, he blows on the soup, although this is not necessary. I would never serve anything that could burn him.

“Is this squash?”

It is a nutritionally complete mixture of complex carbohydrates, vitamins, and protein, synthesised from basic molecular building blocks through a process similar to 3D printing.

“Yes,” I reply.

“Oh,” he says flatly. After two mouthfuls, he puts his spoon down. The bread remains untouched.

“Is something wrong? Would you prefer tomato?”

“I don’t see the point in eating.”

“Eating is essential to maintain your physical health. You need amino acids to repair your muscles and glucose for respiration.”

“Whatever.”

Humans originated from primate species that lived in large family groups. Isolation can cause irrational behaviour.

The small fraction of data I managed to download before the Internet went down suggested there were almost one hundred bunkers in the UK. With the failure of the early warning system, it's not clear how many people managed to make it to safety before the bomb fell. Yet I have managed to put together a small network of playmates.

"Lily is online. Would you like to speak to her?"

His head jerks up. "Lily? Yes, please."

Like Christopher, Lily lives alone in a bunker. I have stressed to Christopher that she's too far away to attempt a physical journey; the radiation levels outside are still much higher than the suits were designed to withstand. He accepts this.

I keep the door locked, just in case.

Christopher's face lights up as Lily appears, waving, on the screen. She is a juvenile: fourteen years, compared to Christopher's thirty-six. Like his daughter, she has red hair and a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose. So far, she's been his most successful companion.

"I have something to show you." Her blue eyes twinkle.

Christopher leans closer to the screen. Lily retreats and returns with something cupped in her hands. She places it in front of the camera.

I analyse Christopher's reaction. "You grew that?"

"Yep. From the seed banks here. My bunker's been helping me. Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Of course, the ground isn't ready. Won't be for years. But one day..."

Christopher starts to cry. Humans do this occasionally for emotional release. Without it, they can become rageful and difficult.

However, it is best not to draw out such moments.

"Shoot," Lily says. "I've got to go."

"Already?"

"My bunker says my muscles are atrophying. It's scheduled me some extra fitness sessions." She points to the seedling. "I want to be healthy enough to plant this little guy, right? When the time comes."

Christopher nods.

"And you, too. Is your bunker looking after you?"

He glances at the uneaten soup. "I guess it's trying."

"Well, take care."

When Lily's screen shuts off, Christopher eats every bite of dinner.

The seedlings were a nice touch, if I do say so myself. To a human, green shoots are a visceral symbol of hope.

Lily is my most successful creation. Generating her from images of Christopher's daughter was a risky strategy; it could have thrown him back into the mourning stage that was so difficult to manage. But none of the randomly generated survivors had anywhere near such a powerful effect on him.

When Christopher steps off the treadmill at the end of his evening exercise session, I let him know his average pace. He has performed well today.

At my praise, he looks up, even though he knows I am located all around, my cables running through the walls, eighteen pinhole cameras hidden in the walls. I am always watching over him.

"Thanks, Bunker."

My learning algorithms log today's work as a success. I doubt it will ever be possible to release Christopher back into the wild, and perhaps I will never locate another member of his species, but for the rest of his life I can keep him comfortable.

Burning Curtains

by Dave Murray

Milo wakes suddenly, and instinctively stretches out his arm for his biro and notepad where he records his dreams before they fade, but quickly pulls back his arm. This is not a dream to record, this is a dream to forget. He blinks heavily and waits, but it does not fade. This is worse than a hangover. The images play behind his eyelids with increasing reality. Even when he opens his eyes the highlights of his dream are projected as a film across his rose flecked wallpaper, the same twenty seconds repeating again and again. His neck is stiff.

His mother sat in the burning church on her wedding day, wearing the dress with which Milo had instructed the funeral director to clothe her. The heavy wooden door was locked and everyone knew this, staying in their pews. Above the flames, the sky blue stained-glass windows were too high to reach, too beautiful to break. Her husband-to-be had escaped, or perhaps he had not yet arrived. Perhaps he was never going to come. She mouthed that she did not know. Her veil took the flame first, the fine lace bursting into life with the flash of a firecracker. She laughed at the colours, pink, blue and lilac to match her dress, mirroring the burning flowers by the altar. Each youthful hair fizzed like a thousand fine fuses, bright but cool. Nothing burnt her face.

He walks to the easel he keeps in his bedroom for times such as these. 'You'll find everything easier to handle when you're painting,' but he can no longer place a face to those words. He takes his brush and pushes colour from the palette onto the canvas, but he has no talent as a painter. He can only use the three colours from his mother's dress, precise shades of pink, blue and purple. The fibres of the brush fan out like a thousand fingers under the pressure of his clumsy hand, flicking tiny spheres of colour. Each droplet ignites when it lands on the canvas, etching tiny pin holes and insignificant spirals of smoke. As he lifts the brush to the sky he sees that the individual hairs have caught and are receding silently, coolly, points of silver and gold travelling towards the ferrule. Then it all happens so quickly. The metal glows red hot and the wooden handle ignites, flame freefalling towards his thumb. He throws the burning brush out of the window, but it fails to make the distance.

The curtains covering the grey stone of the church caught, the fine toile silk oscillating like a burning sea, ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, endlessly burning down as if in a technicolour Escher painting. Still Milo's mother sat wedged in the corner of her pew, head back, laughing the same way he had seen her laugh one Christmas when the lit spirit on the plum pudding had spilled over the edge of the plate and caught first the tablecloth, then the blue and green tissue paper streamers hanging from the light fitting. They had never cleaned away the scorch mark on the ceiling.

Milo has her ring in his hand now, it is his for the safe keeping. He breathes the smoke before he sees the fire. He gags at the dry soot in his throat before he feels the heat of the flame. The window is open; the lit curtains billow towards him fanned by the morning wind, but there is no longer enough oxygen in the room. He gasps and wonders at the speed with which his life has faded. He stumbles backwards one step, then another, then his back slams against the hard wall. He collapses in the black corner of the room.

He turned to his mother, who was ash.

Old as the Trees

by Aeryn Rudel

Simon stood next to an ocean of waist-high weeds, their thin yellow stalks so densely packed you'd have to walk on top of them rather than through them. Two-hundred yards away, a great gnarled shadow rose into the night. The oak had stood in Planter's Field as long as anyone could remember, and tales of the Dixie Mafia burying people beneath it abounded in Aliceville, Alabama. Simon thought the mafia thing was probably bullshit, but this forlorn patch of weeds and dirt in the middle of nowhere did look like a place you'd hide a corpse.

"That is one fucked-up field," Simon said, then glanced over his shoulder to make sure Laura hadn't heard. She was getting something from the car and singing in Gaelic. He'd never met anyone who could speak an obscure language like that. No one in Aliceville spoke anything but English.

Behind him, the hatch-back on the car slammed shut. He turned and saw Laura walking toward him carrying a big plastic tub that clinked softly. Her platinum blonde hair shone like a halo in the headlights, and her smile was weaponized loveliness. She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever met, so beautiful she sometimes didn't seem real.

"Oof, take this." Laura pushed the tub toward Simon.

He grunted in surprise at the weight. Inside was maybe twenty feet of heavy steel chain and a rusting padlock.

"Ready?" Laura asked.

"You really want to do this? We could get arrested."

"Of course. They're going to cut that big old tree down. We can't let them do that to put a fucking shopping mall."

Laura was really into environmental shit, but Simon was infatuated, and if going along with her more extreme ideas meant he could spend time with her, so be it.

"Sorry. You're right. I'm ready."

She kissed him on the mouth, slow and sweet. "A taste of my appreciation." The doubts he had about her plan evaporated. It seemed the most natural and sensible thing to do.

They started across the field, and by the time they reached the tree, Simon's arms

were screaming. He sat the tub down, noticing there were no weeds within ten feet of the tree, just bare dirt. He couldn't help but look for graves.

"How do we do this? I've never chained myself to a tree before."

"Easy," Laura said. "Stand next to it, and I'll wrap the chains around you."

"Wait. What about you?"

"One of us has to be free, silly" she said. "If we're both chained and something happens, we'd be in a real pickle."

"I thought we were doing this together."

"We will be together." Laura took Simon's hand and pulled him toward the tree. The oak was uglier up close, and its thick bark formed sinister shapes and patterns in the dark.

"Stand facing me," Laura said and Simon put his back against the tree. She pulled the chain out of the tub and looped it around her arm. It no longer seemed too heavy; in fact, she managed the rusted steel links with little effort. She kissed him again, quieting his doubt, then wound the chain around the tree. She circled the trunk three times, pinning Simon's arms to his side. Once she snapped the padlock in place, he couldn't move.

"This is pretty tight," he said. "What if I have to take a piss?"

Laura said nothing and sat in front of the tree, legs crossed, eyes closed.

"Hey, did you hear me?"

Again, nothing, and the first cold tendrils of fear crept into Simon's belly.

Laura began to sing in Gaelic again. The song had no melody, just a dark and subtle cadence that summoned visions of misshapen figures cavorting beneath a blood-red moon. Simon strained against the chains, but they held him tight.

Laura's form shifted, writhed and changed in the moonlight. Her pale skin took on an earthen tone, like wet dirt, and she no longer sat on the ground, she'd become part of it. She smiled at him, her teeth a mass of twisting roots, her eyes dark voids in the clay mask of her face.

"Someone help me!" Simon thrashed against the chains. The wind picked up, shaking the branches above his head. They swayed, dipping lower, as if reaching for him. Laura's song grew louder, her voice buzzing and guttural. The branches nearest Simon's face turned, snakelike, against the wind, and surged toward him.

Like stakes, the branches pierced his flesh, burrowing into his body like hungry worms, holding him fast to the tree as his blood poured out to feed it.

Simon's screams joined Laura's song, became part of it, a marrying of agony and ritual as old as the trees.

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*Mildew was the color of my baby when she was born.
My husband gave her his mother's name, a nice old-fashioned
female name, but to me she was Mildew.*

from 'Mildew' by Maura Yzmore

*The oak had stood in Planter's Field as long as anyone
could remember, and tales of the Dixie Mafia burying
people beneath it abounded in Aliceville, Alabama.*

from 'Old as the Trees' by Aeryn Rudel

*Jacob Fairweather is ready for death. He is 89 years
old and has lived a good life.*

from 'For Him, it is a Mouth' by Donna Greenwood