



# LOTUSEATER

ISSUE 15

# LOTUSEATER

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# Prose



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## *Contents May Vary*

It wasn't until the third time the fence got kicked in that your mother started to worry. That kind of thing was normal where you lived, and easier to fix than a keyed car, especially since Mr. Brown three doors down was a builder and had been doing you favours ever since your mother defended him that time Mr. Robertson down the road accused him of stealing his garden furniture. Everyone knew that was Mrs. Wilkins next door. In the end, Mrs. Wilkins left the furniture to Mr. Robertson in her will, which even he thought was funny, so that was the end of that.

The third time was different because of the way the wood fell. The first couple of times you found it in the front garden, and that was okay, that was fine, because that just meant somebody had kicked it in on the way past. The third time, though, you found it splintered all over the pavement, and that meant that somebody has come into your garden and kicked it out from the inside, and that was too close for comfort.

Your grandmother had said that you should ask the CCTV Man for the footage so that you could catch the person or people who did it, but your mother wouldn't hear of it. The CCTV Man lived on the corner of Birchwood Close, and you couldn't let that lot get involved in your business, broken fence or no broken fence. That was the way things worked around there.

You never went to the police with that sort of thing. Not since they took Tom from number 10 in for questioning when one of the Birchwood lot told them he was acting suspicious when all he was doing was smoking in his own garden, but when Mrs. Brown called about the brick through her kitchen window they didn't show up for a week. Margery from number 7 was pleased about that, because she'd always said the police were No Good and now everyone believed her, and she liked being believed.

*We have got to move*, your mother had started saying then. *We have got to move away from here.*

Your mother told you not to tell anyone you were moving away, and you didn't understand, but you did as she said. You didn't tell Tom or Margery or Mrs. Brown or your best friend Lucy. You didn't even tell your gran. You didn't get a For Sale sign in the garden like other people did, and you were excited because you were in on a secret. You left in the middle of the night and drove for hours and hours and hours. It was far too hot by the time the sun was up, but your mother wouldn't

let you roll the window down. She was sweating, yesterday's makeup running off her face. She turned on the radio and sang along with songs from before you were born. You knew one or two and sang along too, and your mother smiled at you and squeezed your hand.

You moved into a flat in Hulme in South Manchester – a tiny flat in a city much bigger than you were used to. The flat came with furniture that smelt like strangers. You felt like you were in somebody else's house, sleeping in somebody else's bed. You still had your special tiger to keep you company, but it wasn't the same. You didn't have a garden anymore, but you had a little balcony where your mother grew herbs to use in her cooking until the boys from the flat opposite started squirting them with stale urine with their water pistols.

You joined your new school halfway through year five, two years after everyone had made their friends. The people spoke differently there and made fun of the way you said *ask* and *dance* and *bath*. You liked the way they said them, but they didn't like you, so you never said so. When you had a supply teacher for English and she asked Jamie to hand the books out and everyone laughed, nobody explained the joke to you. You laughed too so that you didn't feel so left out, and then they laughed at you as well. You asked to go to the toilet and cried in a cubicle like they do in films, and when you went home with bloodshot eyes you told your mother that you thought you might be coming down with hay fever. You could tell that she didn't believe you, but she knew that you didn't want to talk about it, so she pretended to.

When you were in year six, your mother found a job on the other side of the city, so she sent off an application to a secondary school for you that she could drive you to with only a small detour on her way to work. You got a place there even though you lived just outside the catchment area because it was a religious school and your mother's new job had something to do with the Church, and you were relieved because hardly anyone from your junior school would be going there and you'd have a second chance to make friends.

You were determined to be liked at your new school, so you decided to try to look like the popular girls on TV. On the last day of the summer holidays, you went into your mother's room while she was at the supermarket and took the tweezers from her make-up bag and sat in front of her mirror and plucked your eyebrows. You were surprised that it hurt and wondered for the first of many times why it was considered so normal for women to injure themselves to make themselves look good.

You persevered anyway, because now that you'd started you thought you may as well finish, but you didn't know what you were doing and plucked much more from one side than the other, and then plucked too much from the other side when you tried to even them out, and ended up with almost no eyebrows left at all. When your mother got home you tried and failed to hide your face and she tried not to laugh until she realised how upset you were, and then she didn't have to try. She

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told you not to worry, and before school the next morning she spent fifteen minutes carefully drawing your eyebrows back on, and laughed when you said that you looked like the middle-aged lady who lived next door. She plucked your eyebrows for you for years after that. It didn't hurt as much, the way she did it.

Whether it was your pencilled eyebrows or something else you'd never know, but you made friends just fine at your new school. Your form tutor sat you next to a girl called Anna who showed you photos of her puppy and liked you because you said he was cute. After a week you started calling her your best friend, because she was your only friend in Manchester, which, since you'd lost contact with Lucy, made her the only person in the world who could fit that description. The two of you made other friends during your first half-term, too, and when, a few months later, you had to go to the doctors for your HPV vaccine and the nurse talked to you to take your mind off the needle and asked you where you were from, you said *Hulme* for the first time since you'd moved away from the town where you had grown up.

When you were old enough to go to school by yourself, the tram lines confused you and you somehow ended up on your way to Rochdale and the ticket inspector accused you of fare evasion and you cried in front of everyone. You got off in Oldham and phoned your mother and she met you there and took you out for ice cream. While you ate yours, she called the school and told them you were ill so that you didn't get in trouble. She said *I can't take you anywhere, can I?* and looked younger than she used to, and you told her that you loved her for the first time in years. She cried on the way home.

You were fourteen when you decided that you wanted to be an actress. Your drama class went on a school trip to see *Les Misérables*, which you realised you'd been pronouncing wrong for years, and everyone, even the boys and the teachers, left either crying or laughing that too-loud laugh that people do when they don't want anybody to know that they're really upset. Your teacher told you that it had been running since 1985, and you borrowed a book about it from the library and found out which theatres it had played at and when and tried to work out how many people must have seen and cried over it, but maths was never your strong suit. You knew it was a lot, though, and that was enough. You wanted a job that would make people cry and laugh too loudly and borrow books and attempt maths they couldn't do.

When you told your mother that you were going to be an actress, you expected her to tell you not to be silly, that acting was a job for people who don't have to worry about money, because that's what the mother had said in a book you'd read years ago when her daughter had told her she wanted to be an actress. Instead, she told you that you'd make a wonderful actress, and you weren't sure if she was saying that because you were fourteen and nobody expects dreams to last when you're that age or if she really meant it, but when you put drama, dance and music down for your GCSE options a few months later, she called you her little star and seemed to mean it.

When you were fifteen, people from colleges came to your school to talk to you and what they said about employability made you nervous, and you began to understand why the mother in that book had said what she did and wondered why your mother hadn't said the same. When you started sending off your applications and had to choose your options, you put down French and psychology along with drama and music, because they were Real Subjects that would help you to get a Real Job if acting didn't work out. Your own pragmatism irritated you, because you were determined for it to work out and it seemed pathetic to start to give up on a dream that you hadn't even had for a year, but that was life, whatever that means.

In your first year at college, you turned around in the lunch queue and knocked your food all over a girl two inches taller than you. You paid for her food to apologise, and she sat with you because you were wearing a Fight Club t-shirt and Fight Club was her favourite film. You didn't tell her that it was an old top of your mother's and that you'd never seen Fight Club. You pretended to know who Marla Singer was and agreed with her opinions. She invited you out for coffee on Friday after your classes had finished and you said yes. She was very pretty.

You watched Fight Club when you got home and decided that you didn't agree with all her opinions on it after all. It annoyed you that you'd missed the chance to debate with her, because she was passionate and clever, and you wanted to know how she argued. You met her on Friday and argued about the government instead. You pretended to understand what she was talking about and she laughed and told you that she studied politics and you said that she was cheating.

The first time she said *I love you*, it reminded you of your mother. She said it too fiercely, as if you needed each other to survive. You thought of when your mother would say *girls need to stick together*, and you would say *yes*, but think *why?* There were girls you didn't like, girls you hated. You didn't want to stick with them. You told her that you loved her too a week later as she licked strawberry milkshake from her upper lip in a café near Manchester Cathedral, and she looked too happy and you wondered if you meant it.

She was really very very pretty.

She invited you to her house and you went because you wanted to know how much money she had, and it was impolite to ask even though you knew she would have told you. It really didn't matter to you, but your mother hated people with money and that made you curious. You rang the doorbell and she opened the door and kissed you before she let you in. She took your hand after you'd taken off your shoes and you went upstairs to her room. Her walls were covered in pictures of Joan Jett.

*That's Joan Jett. She's from the seventies and eighties*, she said when she saw you looking at them.

You didn't tell her you already knew who she was. Instead, you asked if she was still alive.

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*Oh yeah, she said. I saw her at Lancashire County Cricket Ground last year. Would you like to see the photos?*

She didn't wait for you to answer, she just knelt down and took an A4 envelope out of a drawer at the bottom of her badly painted bedside table while you wondered why somebody born in the fifties and still alive today was from the seventies and eighties, and if you were from the decades in which people cared the most about you, and what decades you'd be from. You hoped it wouldn't be the nineties or noughties, because then you really wouldn't have done very well.

She sat down on her bed and patted the space next to her. You sat down beside her with your thighs touching. Hers were firmer than you were expecting, and you wondered if she was sporty. You reached out to take the envelope and she pulled it back.

*Only touch the edges, she said. You must have looked surprised, because she added: sorry, I just don't want them to get smudged.*

*That's alright. Do you want to hold onto them?* you asked, already knowing that she did. She smiled, and reverently leafed through them.

*She's still pretty, you said.*

*She's beautiful, she said, which either made you jealous or feel that you ought to be.*

When you got home you told your mother that you were in love with a rich girl just to see what she'd say. She shook her head but said she'd love you no matter what, and you went to bed slightly disappointed. You almost wished your mother didn't love you so much more than she hated rich people, because you liked people with strong opinions.

You and your girlfriend broke up two months later after she stayed at your flat and you came back from the bathroom to find her tidying the lounge. You messed it up again after she left. You and your mother had always been messy people, and that was fine, perfectly fine.

When you were eighteen you came home to find your mother in tears over a bill she couldn't pay. She told you not to worry, but of course you did. The next evening you went out and applied for a job at a local pub so that you could do something to help. You spent hours writing up a CV before you went, but the owner barely looked at it. He just looked you up and down in a way that reminded you of how the farmers look at their cows on Countryfile, then offered you the job. He stood too close to you and touched you too often when he taught you how to serve drinks, and you knew exactly why he'd hired you, but a job was a job, as your mother used to say.

Your contract began the following week. You wore the revealing uniform and smiled when men three times your age told you to and didn't complain when they dropped their money over the bar so that you'd have to bend over to pick it up or slipped fivers into your bra and waistband, because as the weeks went by, your mother stopped crying and started sleeping again, and that was all that mattered.

You were afraid of ending up like that, and even more afraid of your mother spending the rest of her life like that, so you decided to grow up and accept once and for all that you were never really going to be an actress and study French at university instead, consoling yourself that at least you could write your dissertation on *Les Misérables*, about which you were then sure you had memorised enough pointless facts to do very well on the specialist round on *Mastermind*.

Your mother wouldn't hear of it. You told her that you were giving up because you loved her. She told you it didn't work like that. You applied to Manchester School of Acting, and your mother drove you to your audition and you sang *On My Own*. Your mother came into your room with jam around her mouth holding a letter with the Manchester School of Acting insignia on the envelope a few months later. When you told her you'd been accepted, she went out and bought the only bottle of champagne you'd ever seen in your home other than the ones your gran used to bring at Christmas. So that was that.

When you were in your second year, you went to a bar with a group of friends and offered to buy the first round of drinks because you'd just heard that you'd got a small theatre role you'd auditioned for a few weeks ago and you wanted to celebrate. The woman in front of you had hair exactly like another friend of yours, and you presumed it was her and said *alright, fuck off so I can get my drinks*. When she turned around and you realised she was a stranger, you apologised at least six times, but she laughed and said that it was alright, and when you went back to your friends you didn't tell them what had happened because you knew they'd laugh, and you didn't want her to think that they were laughing at her.

About three quarters of an hour and several drinks later, *Hanging On The Telephone* came on and you tried to convince your friends to come and dance with you, but they said they weren't drunk enough to make idiots of themselves just yet, so you went by yourself because it was one of your mother's favourite songs and had been your absolute favourite for as long as you could remember and not to dance to it felt like blasphemy.

You stood with your back to the rest of the people on the dancefloor so that you could lip sync at your friends and tripped over your own feet and stumbled backwards into the same woman you'd accidentally insulted earlier, and when you turned around to apologise, she said *we've got to stop meeting like this*.

You said *this is my favourite song!* because you couldn't think of anything more appropriate, and when she said *me too!* you instantly fell more in love with her than you had ever been with your rich college girlfriend. You danced and sang along together, and she wrinkled her nose and curled her lips as she growled the *ohs*, and you kissed her as soon as the song finished because it seemed the only thing to do, and your friends whistled and weren't surprised when you grabbed your coat and bag and left with your arm around the other woman's waist before you'd even been at the bar an hour.

You remembered almost nothing of what happened after that by the time you woke up just after six the next morning with her arm draped across your chest. You wished someone had told you whether or not it was impolite to move your one-night-stand's limbs so that you could use their loo. You deliberated for five minutes, looking at the woman beside you and wondering how she could sleep so peacefully with the sun shining so brightly onto such pale eyelids, until you decided that it was creepy to watch her sleep and that it would be more impolite to wet yourself in her bed, and then you shifted out from under her arm and stumbled around her corridor until you found her bathroom. When you came back she was still asleep and you were going to be late for a rehearsal if you didn't leave soon, so you got dressed and wrote your name and phone number on a post-it note on her desk and left her sleeping.

She called you nine days later, after you'd convinced yourself that she just wasn't as interested in you as you were in her and that that was a shame but you'd get by, and told you that one of her local pubs was having a Blondie night and asked if you'd be her date. *I bet you say that to all the girls*, you said, and she laughed a sort of somehow decorative laugh that you could tell was reserved for the people who she didn't know well but wanted to. Before she hung up, she told you that her name was Eva and you laughed at yourself for having convinced yourself at the bar that you were in love with someone whose name you didn't even know.

*What?* she said.

*Nothing*, you said. *It's a lovely name. Eva.*

You spent the evening digging through the boxes under your desk to find the most Debbie Harry clothes you owned and settled on a pair of jeans with a slightly higher waistband than the rest and a jacket that had always been a bit too big for you and smudged pink lipstick over your cheekbones for blusher. When you arrived at the pub you realised that you were the only person who had dressed up, and you were trying to decide whether to go home and get changed or not when Eva arrived looking like she'd walked straight out of 1978, and then you couldn't decide whether to be more embarrassed that you'd dressed up or not dressed up impressively enough. You both laughed at yourselves and one another, and when she touched up her lipstick after she kissed you, you wondered if she was always a perfectionist or if her attention to detail was reserved for Blondie-related circumstances, and decided you liked her for it either way.

She sang the French parts of Denis and Sunday Girl perfectly and you asked her if she was fluent, and she said her mother was French and that she grew up in a village just south of Calais. You told her that you'd always wanted to go to France, and she said that the two of you should go together, and you thought she was joking until a plane ticket with her name printed on it landed on your doormat a few weeks later while you were getting the fluff out of the washing machine filter. You

left it there because picking it up felt like a commitment, and you didn't know how to tell her that you couldn't afford to go to France. She called you a few hours later and said *well?* instead of *hello*, and you could hear that she was smiling.

*How much is it?* you said before you could stop yourself.

*Free, for you. It's a gift,* she said.

*You really didn't have to,* you said.

*I know,* she said.

When you came home from France feeling slightly less linguistically competent than you had before you left, Eva asked you to move in with her, and you said yes and didn't care about how fast things were moving or that it would be inconvenient for your housemates to find someone else to fill your room. Eva's flat overlooked the canal, and when your mother came to visit, she said that she didn't know Manchester could look so pretty, and you felt that it was her way of telling you that she thought Eva was an excellent choice.

You'd never been the type, as a child, to dream about your future wedding, mostly because you never thought you'd have one, but one balmy August morning, you asked Eva to marry you just because you could. You expected her to say no because she usually hated traditions purely on principle. She wouldn't even let you put fairy lights around the windows at Christmas or buy her chocolate at Easter. When she said *well, since you asked so nicely,* you said *how on earth are we going to afford a wedding?* and she quoted you on Facebook when she changed your relationship status to 'Engaged'.

You got married a couple of years later, when you had saved up enough money for a service in a three-star hotel. Your gran came up from Kent to be there and didn't say anything about having hoped for great grandchildren. You asked the DJ to play Hanging On The Telephone for your first dance, and this time Eva didn't bother to fix her lipstick after she kissed you.

It was just after your twenty-ninth birthday that the headaches started. Eva ignored you when you complained about them at first, because you liked complaining. You complained about the weather and noisy neighbours and people who ate with their mouths open at restaurants and the fact that insects fly against the same window over and over again when another is clearly open and the inconsistent characterisation of Inspector Morse. The headaches seemed to be just another addition to the ever-expanding list of things that you liked to moan about while Eva did her make-up or made you both a cup of tea. It wasn't until you woke her up in the middle of the night rummaging for paracetamol in her bedside table that she suggested you visit a doctor. You resisted, but she was insistent.

*It's probably nothing, but it's best to be on the safe side,* she had said, but you could feel her uncertainty in the hand she placed on your thigh as you navigated the Thursday morning traffic. She offered to come in with you for your appointment, but you said

*no, I'm not a child, and meant no, there might be something wrong and if there is I want you to hear it from me.* You told yourself that you were just being neurotic, but that wasn't like you. The doctor was around your age, which reassured you for a few seconds because it felt almost like meeting a friend for coffee, except that there was no coffee, and the room smelt unappetisingly of antibacterial products, and friends don't ask *what can I do for you today?*

You told her about the headaches, and she asked you if they made you feel nauseous, and if you'd been feeling more drowsy recently, and if you'd noticed any deterioration in your eyesight, and you answered yes to everything and didn't want to think about what that might mean. She told you that she was referring you to a specialist at the hospital, but not to worry, it could be nothing. She didn't say what kind of specialist. She didn't have to. When you met Eva in the waiting room, you told her everything was fine.

You were put on a two-week waiting list. During that time, you said nothing to Eva and found excuses of varying degrees of convincingness for your constant restlessness, telling yourself that it would all be alright, you had nothing to worry about. Cancer was something that happened to other people, not to you.

You went to your hospital appointment while Eva was at work, and when the radiologic technologist noticed your wedding ring and asked if your husband had come with you, you just said *wife*, and didn't tell him that she didn't even know you were there.

When the results of the scan came back and a kind-faced doctor invited you into her office and leaned forwards in her chair to speak to you, you knew what she was going to say before she said it. You asked if you were going to die, and she said not necessarily, that there were options, the best being surgery, but that there were risks attached. You said that you didn't care. You were a daughter, an actress, a wife. You were much too young to die.

You finally told Eva when you got home, the words spilling out of your mouth between sobs that had been building up for hours, and she held you and stroked your hair and said *it's okay, it's okay*, even though you both knew that it was a lie.

On 6<sup>th</sup> October 2019, you underwent neurosurgery intended to save your life.

On 7<sup>th</sup> October 2019, you woke up without it.

The surgeon told Eva that your temporal lobe had been damaged during the procedure, and that while they couldn't rule out the possibility of a recovery, your long-term memory may have been irreparably damaged. Eva repeated this to you when you drifted out of unconsciousness and asked for your mother for the fifth time that morning.

You remember none of this.

# DOUGLAS J. OGUREK

## *Felled Evergreens*

I got new Regals wristbands, and my Buck May riding mower shines and shines. I wiped it with a PineGlace. PineGlazes are clean, and they're cool. They smell just like pine, all right, and they keep my Buck May nice and clean. My Buck May is green, green like pine trees? And like my Greech+. RB drinks Greech+. I have a new Regals flag, thank you very much. My father, he got it for me, and I put it on my Buck May.

The Regals, they're in the American League. Father says bear in mind the American League's better. Because they got DHs. That means designated hitter, like Roger Binder? RB hits for the pitcher. He doesn't even have to go into the field. And my father says I'm a designated mower. He just hits and I just mow. Roger Binder and Reed Berrywood. RB and RB.

I'm riding my Buck May down Ruby Gate Lane. There's a field down at the end, and it's got big pine trees. Three of them. And my PineGlazes smell like pine.

Yeeks. There's the shodly house. It's shodly... shodnee... shod... bear in mind that guy's the only house in Harding Valley with a driveway like that. Black like that?

Look at those birds there. Maybe they're singing.

I'm driving to that field, after I mow at Mr. Honeycutt's, and after I get my mon-ey from Mr. Blades? Then I'll go across that field. The tank's on F. I'll mow that lady's lawn, all right. On her car she's got a Bulldogs sticker—I don't like those guys—and her hair's gray, and like pine needles. But she lives across the field, and not in Harding Valley, and when you go to that field, you can see part of her house. She said she could pay me ten dollars only, but I'll mow it.

There's some squirrels. I shut off my Buck May and turn on Father's CD. Number three. Hey, those guys' tails. They look like a bunch of needles. The squirrels, they run in the grass, and in the trees.

A lady says, 'Vivaldi's 'Fall.'' She has a box. She goes, 'I think they like it, hm-hm.' She makes a squeaky laughing sound. She's up to something. I don't know what. I don't even know what the situation is. But she's up to something, all right.

She goes, 'You must like the Regals, hm.' The box moves a little.

I say, 'Not a problem.'

'Relax, hm. I mean I won't hurt you or anything.'

'Roger Binder's the designated hitter, and I'm a designated mower. RB.'

'Yeah RB's good. But he strikes out a lot. Ty Overfield, on Detroit? I like him better, hm. I mean, he's just more dependable. A team player, hm-hm.'

Father says bear in mind Bulldogs fans are falgar. I go, 'Bear in mind the Regals we're in first place.'

She taps the box and her fingernails, they're green. 'Maybe the squirrels like your music. You think so?'

'Squirrels, those guys don't like music.' I point down Ruby Gate. 'I have to go mow at Mr. Honeycutt's now.'

'He's the one with the ugly house? I mean that one down there it looks like a giant plow, hm, or an axe or something, hm-hm.' It's a laugh, and it squeaks.

She lifts the box. There's something in there, and she's up to something. She goes, 'You want to know what's in here?' Her fingernails are green, all right, green like my Buck May.

She takes the lid off, and I smell a PineGlape, and there's a bird in there. I go, 'Hey, where did you get that guy?'

'It hit this big glass wall. On that house? That axe house? I'll take this guy and hm, and I'll try to help him get better.'

Hey, this music. It just goes out there and out there and my PineGlapes smell nice. I say, 'In that field down there? There's three big evergreens. They're pine trees.'

She goes, 'Evergreens, hm. You know why they call them that?'

Hey, there's Tom Richfeld and Gnash. Those guys, they're watching me from the Richfelds' yard. She goes, 'Evergreens because they're always green, hm. When it's hot? And when it snows? *Ever green*, hm-hm.'

I go, 'There's this lady, and she likes the Bulldogs, and she lives across the field, and I'm going to cut her lawn, thank you very much. For ten dollars.'

'That's good you're doing that. Oh listen listen.' She holds the box toward my radio. 'I like this part, hm, this part here?' The music runs and the squirrels run and she goes, 'Squirrels are... I like squirrels, hm. They're everywhere. You see them all over the place, hm-hm. Even in evergreens.'

I tell her Mr. Blades, he gives me fifty dollars. She says something about that lady and the squirrels. Gnash throws something into a tree. They're up to something, all right.

She gives me a piece of paper. It has trees on it, and even some evergreens, and lots of words. Gnash has a black thing, and he's looking in the bushes.

She goes, 'It's for the forest, I mean the Godwin Forest preserve, hm. In November, you can vote. I mean if you vote 'yes,' hm, and other people do too? Then we can make it bigger. The forest preserve?'

There's birds on the paper, and trees, and people.

'So it'll have more pines. More *ever greens*, hm-hm. For you, for me, for squirrels, for him.' She taps the box. 'Just don't let that guy in the axe house see it or anything. I mean, hm, he kind of yelled at me.'

She goes to her car. It's not like the others in Harding Valley. It's not shiny like that, and it's got stuff on it. Dirt and stuff.

The needle squirrel hair lady's car? It's got even more stuff. It has a Bulldogs sticker. Bear in mind Bulldogs fans are falgar. And it's brown, and there's rust. Yeeks, lots of rust. She came to Harding Valley and took cans out of the green things and put them in a bag. Father says she gets money for the cans. He says in the grand scheme of things, she makes Harding Valley look falgar. But she asked me to mow her lawn. I said not a problem, but she said she could only give me ten dollars.

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One squirrel's way up there in the tree. He's looking down at Tom and Gnash and hey, Gnash throws something at him and he runs and hides up there.

They come over, and Gnash he's got this shiny black thing. And his shirt's got a sign that shines and shines. Hey, my father's car has that sign too. Tom goes, 'Freeze, Pine Snart. You're under arrest.' They laugh. There's lights on that black thing, and a picture of a coffee cup. These guys, they're up to something.

Tom says, 'This music's grush, Pine Snart. Where'd you get this? San Fagcisco?'

Hey, he said Francisco wrong. I say, 'It's my father's CD, thank you very much, and it's song three. Falvi, I ... when I was eighteen? My father played it and we went to a Regals game.'

Gnash presses a button on the black thing and yeeks it makes a loud noise.

Tom goes, 'Chippity chippity chop.'

Gnash looks into the tree and he goes, 'Kabowm kabowm.' That black thing, it's some kind of machine. Gnash picks up a rock and he goes, 'Nice fag ... flag flag I mean, flag,' and they laugh. I don't know what the situation is, but they're up to something.

Tom says, 'What's with that *fatsugarcoat*? That lady with the *sugarcoaty* car you just talked to?' Bear in mind he says bad words, and I sugarcoat them.

I show them the paper. Tom goes, 'I shot a bird like this once. This one right here? I held a match up to it and whoosh.' Gnash laughs and throws the rock and it goes into the tree.

I ask them what's the purpose of the black thing. Tom goes, 'We use it to grind up moronic dummies.' Gnash puts a stick in it, then presses the button. It makes the noise and hey, that stick. It just disappears.

Tom goes, 'How's San Fagcisco.'

I say, 'Francisco. Fran fran fran and we're in first.'

'Oh, *you're* in first. *You're* on the team?'

I tell them we won yesterday and RB he got two homers.

Gnash picks up a bug.

Tom goes, 'How come you hold your arms like that? You under arrest?'

I show them my new wristbands. 'My father got me these, thank you very much. RB wears them too. And RB drinks Greech+. RB and RB and we're both 26.'

The bug crawls on Gnash's hand and it's shiny green. Just like my Greech+ bottle. He opens the black thing and turns it over. Little stick pieces come out. Gnash points at the tree and goes, 'Kabowm kabowm.' He puts the bug in the black thing.

I say, 'Hey now, wait a minute now. I have to say I think you guys are up to something.'

Tom goes, 'Hold up a second, Gnash. I think Pine... maybe Reed should press it.'

I drink my Greech+. My father takes clients to Regals games, and he brings me back Regals stuff.

Tom goes, 'Roger Binder likes to press buttons. So you should too. I mean, you both got those *sugarcoating* wristbands, and you're both 26, right? RB?'

I smell a PineGlace. My father took me when I was eighteen and the Regals won.

Tom pushes Gnash and goes, 'I read an article, in *Baseball Times*? And it said Roger Binder likes to press pitchers' buttons. And true Regals fans press buttons too. I thought you were a true Regals fan, RB? Aren't you?'

I press the button and the machine makes the noise and Gnash's shirt shines.

Tom goes, 'Chippity chippity chop. Reign Brakz soars at the top.' I've seen Reign Brakz. He's on channel 240. I know because the Regals play on 242. Reign Brakz wears a crown with red jewels.

Tom goes, 'Maybe we should put that paper that *fatsugarcoat* gave you in there.'

I drink my Greech+ and take a PineGlace and not a problem. Evergreens make the air clean. Tom asks if he can use a PineGlace. I ask for what purpose.

'To clean that.' He points at the black thing. That bug went in there, and I pressed the button. I say I don't have that many left.

He goes, 'You know Ty Overfield? On the Bulldogs?'

'Bear in mind, the Bulldogs, they're falgar.'

'But Ty Overfield drinks Greech+.'

I say, 'RB drinks Greech+, thank you very much. And he's RB, and I'm RB. And he's 26, and I'm 26.'

'I know, but I'm just saying, so does Ty Overfield. You don't want to drink something that someone on the Bulldogs does, do you? RB?'

The music goes way out there and my PineGlace smells clean, and nice. I say, 'Hey, I know you guys. You guys are pulling my chain. I got to go now.'

Tom, he says, 'Fine. I'll go get the *sugarcoating* thing. I got an ad, and I'm telling you, it's Ty Overfield and he's drinking Greech+. You're just not a loyal Regals fan.'

That thing on Gnash's shirt? It looks like a circle with knives in it. He points and goes, 'Kabowm kabowm' and there's a squirrel running, right on top of the fence.

I shut the music off, and I start up my Buck May. Got to go to Mr. Honeycutt's. I put the paper from the green fingernail lady in my pocket. Chippity chippy chop. Reign Brakz has a crown, with these red jewels. It's sharp, all right, like big jaws around his head. I put my Greech+ bottle away. The bug was that same color. That shiny green?

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I finish at Mr. Honeycutt's and yeeks, my Regals wristbands: they're all wet. I shut off my Buck May. The birds sing and I turn on my father's Falvi CD. Number three. 'Fall.' Here's a PineGlace. It'll make my Buck May clean, thank you very much. Clean, and nice, and shiny, and piney, and hey, Mr. Honeycutt's house does look like an axe, all right.

Hey, there's two guys up there in the house. They got this big square thing, and it's got lots of red marks on it. That bird the lady had... it hit the window.

Mr. Honeycutt comes out. He's looking up there and talking into a phone. I just have to get my check from him, and get my check from Mr. Blades. And I can go across that field then, with the pine trees? Evergreens, they're good for the air. And that lady with the squirrel needle hair? Bear in mind Father says she's a Bulldogs fan, all right. My Greech+ is nice and cool. Her car's not like the ones in Harding Valley. Ten dollars? Not a problem.

Here comes Mr. Honeycutt. He's got a glass of milk, and he's got a bowl. I don't know what, but he's up to something, all right. He picks something off the grass. It's one of those little wood guys. Sometimes I run over those guys and schoom they shoot out. He throws it with the other wood guys by the flowers. Then he eats something from that bowl. He reaches to his axe house and he goes, 'Look at her, Reed. One wonders whether a design could be more provocative.'

In the bowl he's got these red guys. Little red berry guys. He talks into the phone. 'Gentlemen, I suspect it will better complement the verticality of the façade if you move it nearer to my *beacon cove*. That's the room with the red furnishings?'

The phone goes, 'Yep' and the guys up there move that square thing. Hey, I think he's talking to them. Yeeks, the red marks on that thing? They look sharp.

'Look at that painting, Reed. It's a Garron Chopala. There's this austerity, an austerity there... probably too austere for the plebeian palate. Suffice it to say it'll make a severe statement at night.'

Hey, he's got ice in his milk. I tell him that green fingernail lady, that fat lady? She said his home looks like an axe.

He laughs with the music and he goes, 'Ahhh, the ignorance, Reed, the immeasurable ignorance.' And in a monster voice he goes, 'Too provocative. That's too provocative.'

Sometimes, these guys and these ladies in dresses come over. I hear them and Father down there. And sometimes Mother. They talk and laugh, and Maria puts berries out and some look like Mr. Honeycutt's berries. She brings me some with dinner and I play Rulers of the Diamond.

Mr. Honeycutt goes, 'Try one of these, Reed. I suspect you'll enjoy it.'

I turn the CD off and I try one and in my mouth it's in and in and it tastes good. The fat lady didn't have any berries and yeeks, there's a loud sound down Ruby Gate Lane. Louder than a Buck May. Those guys up there with the square thing? They don't have berries. I go, 'Those red things are sharp, all right.'

'Red, Reed, red. Red's a whole different animal. Red evokes an emotional response. That's a scientific fact.'

I eat another berry, and hey, it looks like red jaws up there. Chippity chippy chop. I go, 'When I play Rulers of the Diamond, I'm the Regals. And I hit homers with RB. RB and RB and I win and I get more money for the Regals.'

He drinks his milk and when he talks there's a funny smell. 'I certainly understand your preference for a team that's more... let's just say more Harding Valley. I'm so tired of all these Bulldogs fans, with their brown—kind of a crude rust, isn't it?—and their green. And all this 'Bark Long, Bark Tough?' It's rather... roughneck. Suffice it to say there's this significant cultural... almost a cultural regression.'

'RB is a designated hitter, and I'm a designated mower. RB and RB.'

'That's it, isn't it? That's the formula. I am an architect. I design. That's what I do. Then I pay *you* to mow.' It smells like Mother's nail polish. He goes, 'I pay them to deliver a painting. You work for me, and I work... I am an architect.'

I eat another raspberry. I'm a designated mower. I mow, and Maria, she works for me.

Mr. Honeycutt picks up another wood guy. 'Most people like apples and bananas and—keep going, gentlemen, keep going—bananas and pears, but raspberries? They're a different animal, Reed. They're one of the best fruits for you. It's a scientific fact.'

The phone goes, 'Sir, we can't move it any more.'

'Oh, I suspect you can.'

'It ain't gonna work, sir.'

'I, Scott Honeycutt, an architect, a design architect, am telling you, installer, to keep moving it.' He throws the wood guy. 'It's best to eat raspberries by themselves, Reed. You should respect the raspberry. To mix the raspberry is to insult it.'

The phone goes, 'Fine, but we're gonna put it over your light switch.'

'Now... I know that. One wonders whether you've suddenly transformed into an aesthete. You see, I design. I've designed art museums, and performing arts centers. But apparently, you're more of an authority on these issues.'

There's that noise down Ruby Gate again, and those red things are sharp.

Mr. Honeycutt, he gives me sixty dollars. That's a lot more than ten. Bear in mind the squirrel needle hair lady makes Harding Valley look falgar. The Regals are Harding Valley, and she's a Bulldogs fan, and crude rust. Her car it's brown and it's got rust and rust and rust. But I'll mow for her, with my Buck May.

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Mr. Blades, he's got this white stuff, and he's putting it all over his car. Hey, his glasses, they're red, and that sound down Ruby Gate? That sound's even louder and it goes *eeeerrrrr*.

He's got this white thing. A little white pillow thing. He smiles fast and takes my arm and goes, 'Wow. Look at these, buddy. These are cool.'

I hold my wristbands up and up and I say, 'I mow. I'm a mower, all right. A designated mower.'

'Harding Valley's finest. Did your dad get you those?'

That pillow thing? It's got white stuff on it. I don't know what the situation with that is. I go, 'The Regals, and we're in first, thank you very much.'

'How's your dad doing?' Yeeks, his eyes are red and he goes, 'Is he home at all this week?'

Red's a different animal and that white stuff it looks like glue. He says, 'See this buddy? It's called Gem-Armor. You just rub it on your car and guess what? Foom. You get this nice shine.'

His car it's not shiny. It's got white stuff and white stuff all over.

'You'll see in a minute. It keeps off rust too.'

'Bear in mind rust it's falgar, and I got PineGlapes.'

He smiles and smiles, and there's a smell. I can see his tooth and that white stuff it smells. He goes, 'Maybe you should try some on your Buck May, buddy.'

Not a problem. I get a PineGlape and I smell it. That *eeeerrrrr* his tooth it's glue red's different and that pillow thing. He goes, 'Here let's put some—easy, easy, okay. Wow. All right, I won't put any on. It's your mower. I won't, okay?'

My PineGlape it smells clean and nice and he goes, 'You're gonna see, RB. Just a minute.'

He puts his hands together and swings but he doesn't have a bat. 'Maybe next time your dad's in? Maybe you two want to come over and watch the Regals.'

I wipe my Buck May. It's nice and shiny, all right, and no rust.

Mr. Blades goes, 'We can watch RB, right? Watch him crush one? Voom. You like RB, right?'

'RB, and RB.'

'Guess what? I'm RB too. Randy Blades.' The tooth shows and he swings with his hands. 'I just got a seventy-five-inch TV. That's a monster. Seventy-five inches?'

And tell your dad I've got Couper & Tomber. That's his favorite, right?"

There's a squirrel there. It spins and spins up a tree and things fall and that bird it hit the axe house and it fell.

'Couper & Tomber. The bottle, you know. It kind of curves?"

I go, 'I know that guy, thank you very much. There's a fence on that guy.'

'What? On the bottle? Right right. Fooh. Should be a palace.'

Hey, that squirrel. Where did that guy go? I should play the Falvi CD. That lady that laughed, she had green fingernails.

He says, 'I'll get your check, buddy. Hold on a sec. And I've got something else for you too.'

He's up to something. I don't know what. I don't even know what the situation is, but he's up to something, all right.

He comes out and he's got a paper, and there's purple and red on it. He goes, 'Look at this, buddy. Guess what? These here? These are some of the paint colors we got at my body shop. Blades Auto Body?' He points at one. 'That look familiar?'

I go, 'Red's a different animal.'

'Yeah, this color here though. Haven't you seen this somewhere else?'

'Of course I know that. That guy, that's Carnelian Insurance color there. Bear in mind my father he's vice president.'

'That's true. Boy, I didn't even think about that.' Yeeks, there's that tooth. 'But what else? What else is this color?'

'Raspberries. Those guys are, they're better.'

'True. But I'm still thinking about something else.'

I mow, and I eat raspberries, and they're better than apples, and pears, and bananas and rust.

He takes my arm and he holds my wristband up to the paper. I go, 'Hey, they're the same.'

'Yes, yeah. Now how'd you like to paint your mower red? Regals red.'

I drink some Greech+. 'My Buck May it's green.'

'But I could make it match your hat, and your wristbands, your flag. All that. Your team. Just a half hour and foom. A Regals red Buck May.'

'It's green, and it's shiny, and clean and green.'

'The Regals are red, buddy. Guess what's green: Bulldogs. The Bulldogs are green, right? Don't you want red?'

There's that squirrel, and he said a Regals mower.

He goes, 'How much did you get from Scott Honeycutt?' I tell him sixty dollars, and he writes a check. 'Your dad's gonna take you to cash that, right?'

The squirrel it's running on a fence and yeeks, this check's for seventy.

He goes, 'Tell your dad Randy Blades gave it to you.' He gives me the paper with the red. 'Here. Just hold onto this and think about it, right? Tell your dad I can

paint it for you. Anytime. No charge.'

Squirrels are everywhere and I go, 'My Buck May it's green, and it's shiny.'

He takes a white towel and smiles fast and goes, 'I'll show you shiny.' The *eeeerrrr* and he rubs the car and squirrels run in the grass. He rubs, and the green finger-nail lady she was fat and rubs and rubs the squirrel and his car, it shines and shines and shines. The stuff, that glue stuff, it smells nice and clean, and that sound down Ruby Gate Lane. I'm Harding Valley's designated mower, all right.

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There's that field up there, part of it. It smells like PineGlapes out here, and I can't see the pine trees yet. There's that tockly home. That one with all the bird-houses and the birdbaths? Bear in mind Father he says it doesn't belong here. Not in Harding Valley because it's tockly... tack hey, there's a squirrel. That guy's right up there on a birdbath.

I turn off my Buck May and yeeks, that *eeeerrrr* sound, it's even louder. I take out Mr. Blades's card and this guy's Regals red, all right. *Eeeerrrr*red a bird flies down by the squirrel. I know that guy. That guy's a card nail and they're both on that birdbath.

I turn on the Faldi CD—it's my father's—and I turn it loud and I still hear that *eeeerrrr*. Behind me, 'Freeze Pine Snart' and laughing. It's Tom Richfeld and Gnash and Tom's got a magazine.

I go, 'You guys, you're up to something.'

Tom goes, 'There's a dead unicorn in my yard.'

Gnash says, 'Grush' and that circle knife car sign on his shirt? That guy really shines, all right.

Tom goes, 'I think you ran over it, Pine Snart. You ran over the unicorn.'

'You guys unicorns they're not real. I don't know what it is. I don't even know what the situation is, but you guys are up to something, all right.'

Gnash points at the tackly house. He goes, 'Kabowm kabowm. *Sugarcoathole*' and the card nail and the squirrel, they're still there.

Tom puts the magazine on my Buck May. It's Ty Overfield, and Tom puts his hand over part of the picture. He says, 'Wait a minute. His jersey. It's the same color as your mower. You must be a Bulldogs fan.'

'My Buck May it's green and in the grand scheme of things bear in mind Bulldogs their fans...'

'And... uh...' Tom lifts his hand and there's Greech+ on that picture. 'Wait, now what's this? Greech+? I thought only Roger Binder drinks Greech+.'

'RB and RB. Not a problem.'

'And Ty Overfield, TO. TO too. TO drinks Greech+.'

I turn off the CD and that sound it goes in and in and I dump my Greech+ and dump it all out and they laugh. Tom goes, 'Chippity chippity chop' and Gnash picks up a big stick and breaks it.

Tom asks if he can have a PineGlace.

I say, 'I got to go cut that lady's lawn. Across the field.' And Tom, he says something about bulldog face lady. The card nail and the squirrel? Those guys they're still drinking.

I go, 'In the field there's three big trees, and they're evergreen pines, and the trees? They're good for the air.'

Tom goes, 'Where's that card that *fatsugarcoat* gave you?'

I take out the card.

Tom says, 'Ty Overfield likes forest preserves. It says so right in here. So you should rip it up. If you hate the Bulldogs—you hate those idiotic morons, right? And you're RB, RB and RB? You should rip it up.'

The card has pine trees, and birds, and people. And there's probably squirrels in there too. Gnash hits the sticks together and goes, 'Rip... It... Up, Rip... It... Up.' The squirrel and card nail pine air and Tom goes behind me and goes, 'Rip... It... Up, Rip... It... Up.' The car shined and the circle knives Regals red different animal red red and I rip it up.

Gnash holds the sticks up and screams and runs at the birdbath. The card nail flies away and the squirrel runs away.

Tom's got his hands behind his back. He laughs and goes, 'That was grush, Pine Snart.'

I start my Buck May and that noise, it's so loud it's louder than my Buck May.

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Pine scent, grinding noise. A street ends at a wooded area and an Alizarin Real Estate sign. On one side of the street, an iron fence encloses a three-story, red brick mansion. On the other, four men in a field feed branches into a woodchipper. Three pine trees lie next to them.

A man on a green riding mower approaches. He pulls over, then turns it off. He raises his hands, palms out, and faces the field. He wears a red cap and red wristbands. A red flag extends from the mower.

He turns around, then presses buttons on a radio. The chipper renders it inaudible, and the pine scent hangs heavily. The man, keeping his hands raised, steps off the mower.

Across the field, duplicate ranch homes face a street. A flag, reddish brown, tan, and dark green, rises above one home's entry.

The chipper stops, and violins join with the pine scent. The man opens a container

labeled PineGlapes. Nothing in it. He raises his hands again and watches the men. He opens a metallic green bottle, then looks into it. He holds it upside-down and nothing comes out. He turns off the radio.

The man removes from his pocket a paint strip with shades of red. He holds it over the mower. The grinding resumes, then he drives back down the street, but the air smells strongly of pine.

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## *The History of the World*

Suburb A considered itself superior to suburb B, the A's mocking B's accents, although their accents were almost identical.

Expletives avoided in A, except to mock the B's, were used by the B's. This, according to the A's, demonstrated B 'brutality.'

When litter unexpectedly 'polluted' suburb A's clean streets, Suburb A's leading newspaper, *The Erudite Browser*, claimed: 'B louts commit litter heresy against decency', their source undisclosed, research superfluous when poetic conclusions cause gorgeous indignation, the mellifluous cadences of articulate sniping singing with truth's enrapturing vibrancy.

'A final solution is required,' an A politician howled, before white-shirted supporters, who linked their index-finger tips to make forty-five-degree finger slopes to create the A Homeland Brotherhood symbol of Purity, Perseverance and Procreation.

That A politician, Klaus Ariel Dewburger, had hawk eyes that shone with certitude's sharp lustre. His proportions led 'pussy, left-wing wimps' to call him 'the Wailing Whale of Blubbering Blubber.'

'Roadblocks will be erected to stop B filth from entering our beloved territory,' said his friend, Zealot Von Hoffenheim, from the ruling Association For Democratic Allegiances.

Thin-lipped Zealot was short and thin, his savage eyes 'charismatic.' AFDA blasted ahead in the polls.

Klaus responded with: 'The B subspecies must be banned from our territory. Checkpoints aren't enough. Permitting heinous elements into our sacred land constitutes treason against our hallowed ascents who secured our agreement with God that A's must remain eternally pure. Our suburb is His kingdom on Oith, we his sacred souls. No subspecies shall pollute our sacred blood.'

The gap in the polls closed. AHB television stations showed huge masses in white shirts, with blue armbands, raising connected index fingers. Historians later claimed that Klaus hypnotised the masses, others claiming the masses were already bewitched by their own stupidity and greed.

The AFDA roadblock policy stemmed arrivals from suburb B, but not because of border interrogations, but because the A's treated the B's as if the latter were wild animals that needed taming, the A's attitude signalling that B's faced violence for entering 'the sacred zone.' Being attacked for driving a B-registered vehicle

now seemed likely, especially as extreme suburb-A elements, directed by God and not by ethics, possessed such self-ordained importance that they gave God a personality. Any God would think: 'I favour freaks who charge around like ants with beards that resemble steel wool!?'

'Don't go there!' a B-suburb politician screamed on TV. 'We must prepare for war!'

His weapons-manufacturing brother sold arms to B's who hunted ducks on the lagoons west of suburb B.

'They eat the sleazy duck!' Klaus yelled at a rally.

Klaus, who ate succulent, B-imported duck himself, had become so vast because of his consumption of the 'tasty boid' that he wobbled as he screamed, ducks vermin in A religion.

'The duck causes dissolution!' bellowed Klaus, before 'white shirts' that mirrored each other, 'truth' creating identical units of dumbness.

Future historians referred to this neurotic conformity as 'the rise of nationalism.'

A future publisher advised a future historian that the following wasn't propitious for literary success: 'The A-B war demonstrates that people are bipedal amoebas, living under the delusion that they can think, although that's an insult to amoebas that don't revere idiotic fantasies. If you're reading this, you're probably stupid.'

'Change it, Bill,' the publisher said, 'to: The charismatic cult of personality drove people into patriotic fits in which sensibilities got distorted by the magnetism of manipulative genius.'

Bill smiled.

'How about,' he said: 'The dream of nationalistic glory, manipulated by malign brilliance, created a hysteria that only eccentric outcasts on society's fringes could resist?'

'Bill, Bill, Bill,' the publisher replied, 'that'll magnify sales. The readers will believe they're the fringe.'

A-B tension erupted into violence when Robert Capricious, a cavalier photo-journalist and writer entered suburb A to report on events. It wasn't just Bob's curly locks and film-star looks that stunned the border guards but his comment that he was motivated by curiosity and the love of the unexpected. That motivates someone? He must be mad! Because nobody could invent such a motive, they let him through.

Bob and his crew, entering 'the spice zone,' saw 'ant nests' of white shirts, blue armbands, and blue-and-white flags, the A symbol amid those colours symbolising purity in heavenly eternity.

Bob's cameraman recorded 'creatures hatched from the same egg.'

Such was AHB's success in distorting reality that the A's believed they were genetically superior 'to terrorist infidels.'

Genetic Supremacy Limited, headed by Klaus, produced AHB clothes.

Bob and his crew entered a gas station. Bob's driver nipped in before a car whose bonnet displayed a blue A. A blue-and-white pennant wavered on that car's aerial. The A driver believed there was only one law—God's law—a law man created that backed free will, hence chaos.

That driver pulled a pump out of a woman's hands. He raced from the pump stand, the hose stretching across the station. Eyes like peeved mica in a storm of steel-wool facial hair, he sprayed Bob's car and ignited it with a lighter. Flames engulfed the car. Black smoke swirled skywards. In an incident later called The Day of the Long Hoses, the cameraman, holding a pump, sprayed the car behind Bob's. Trying to throw a lighter, the cameraman got restrained by gas station employees. Youths in another car attacked Bob and his crew. The woman who had had the pump ripped out of her hands shrieked; she was now going to miss her hairdressing appointment! The shimmering slithers of her blue irises sat within fuzzy lines of broken mascara. People pulled up and attacked the B 'terrorists.' Bob, clutching a satellite phone, died wearing sunglasses, objects confirming his coolness before danger.

Suburb A TV claimed that 'vigilant patriots eliminated petrol-bomb terrorists.' Bob 'Baby-Face' Capricious, with his film-star looks, was no longer going to entertain big-eyed beauties with tales of his daredevil exploits. A border guard said: 'He 'satisfied curiosity.' How about that shit?'

Border guards are border guards because they love hating differences.

Because Bob became a B symbol of resistance, the weapons manufacturer saw his chance in the clothing industry. T-shirts decorated with Bob's face became available. It became bad taste to not wear 'Bobbie Caps' T-shirts. Pressure to denounce injustice increased sales.

'A few months of war,' the weapons manufacturer told his brother, in a spa in suburb C, 'and we can retire in the Caymans.'

Their gold necklaces glistened in the bubbling water.

'Thank God for the Brits,' he said.

The brother set to work.

'We must avenge the death of that symbol of tolerance, Robert Capricious,' he told television audiences. 'If we allow ourselves to wilt before unprovoked aggression, how will history judge us?'

Viewers applauded rapturously, something fresh about exerting free will without seeing consequences. Why should B's be aggressed by human-rights' detesters?

'Every citizen,' the brother continued, 'must arm to defend our rights as freedom-pursuing citizens of suburb B.'

Gun sales soared. Hot with righteous vindication, and the joy of destructive free will, someone fired the first shot across the border, striking someone's enormous arse. Doctors 'scaled fat mountains' to remove the slug, one saying: 'We found a needle in a butt stack.'

The people, freeing their base instincts from a dungeon called morality, yelped: 'Terrorists can strike at any time.'

Bobbie Caps T-shirts became the army uniform. Weapons and T-shirt sales grew so large that unemployment disappeared, inspiring commentators to say that war helps economies.

'God-damned, kick-ass outbreaks,' one high-ranking officer said, 'kick recession butt.'

*The Erudite Brower* believed that this 'military genius should be given the Noble Prize for Economics for his eloquent discourse on pulverising for profit.'

The weapons manufacturer and his brother made enough money to disappear to the Caymans. They laughed when the Secretary-General of The United Suburbs, Xavier Rainbow-Delight, called for an immediate ceasefire. Rainbow-Delight had light-brown skin and African features. Exuding humiliated nobility, he secretly believed that 'the chances of a ceasefire' were 'less than the next Mozart being a monkey.' His chief negotiator, Hans Fly-About, alternating between suburbs A and B, rose daily from sandbagged basements to say: 'Constructive negotiations are proceeding.' But not around here, he thought.

Rising from sandbagged bunkers to spout clichés was Han's job. He looked like an accountant with a right hand soldered to a leather briefcase, his hair like a wig hewn from satin and silk.

'It's fantastic,' Klaus said, 'how Hans keeps a straight face.'

The weapons manufacturer and his brother ran into Klaus in the restaurant of a five-star hotel in the Caymans. Klaus was eating Peking duck in plum sauce.

'Five hundred thousand armband units at fifty a hit,' Klaus said, 'kinda adds up. And let's not forget the shoits. You two didn't do too bad yourselves, eh?'

'Mike,' the politician said, referring to his brother, 'revolutionised marketing by calling Bob Caps the Robert Capa equivalent of Che Guevara. Marketing experts now call that a tipping point.'

'It damn well nearly tipped me off my seat,' Klaus replied. 'I almost died laughing.'

'Bob,' Mike smiled, 'did die.'

'And for a great cause,' Klaus replied, grinning.

Klaus's smile was as wide as his stomach, his head like a shrunken cranium above his metre-wide shoulders.

'To great causes,' Mike said, raising his glass.

'This duck,' Klaus said, 'is almost as good as the boids you babies sold from those lagoons.'

'You were our best client,' Mike said.

Although looking like an eagle, Mike had a charming voice, his smile a dazzling shower of fluorescence. His hair fell like dank cloth from the fish-belly-coloured part that dissected his head.

'And the client,' he added, grinning with horrible luminosity, 'is always right.'

## PETER CHERCHES

### *Contributor's Copy*

I received a literary magazine in the mail that had a story of mine. I opened the envelope. Nice cover, I thought. I confess that the next thing I did was to look for my piece. Unlike most writers, who would peruse the table of contents and then read all the other work in the issue before checking their own, I'm too vain for that. So I found my story's title in the table of contents and went to the appointed page. I quickly realized that the story I was reading was not my story. It was similar to my story, but it was not my story. The style was similar to mine, but it was not exactly mine. The staccato was not my staccato, it was a different staccato. Where I had written 'The man could not reach the top shelf; the book was out of reach,' the version I was looking at said, 'The man could not reach orgasm; orgasm, he feared, was out of the question.' That changed everything, didn't it? From book to orgasm.

What's going on? I wondered. Would I have written 'reach orgasm' or 'achieve orgasm,' I also wondered. Is orgasm an achievement? I mean, it's not something I'd list on my CV. The whole story had changed. In the original a man was trying to get a book down from the bookcase, but he couldn't reach it, and he didn't have a ladder. The man instead imagined the book, and the rest of the story was the story of the book as he imagined it. But the story was now about a man who could not reach, achieve, attain orgasm. Not a book, as I had intended, an orgasm. And the rest of the story was the story of the man imagining the orgasm he might have had if he could only have one. At one point he got rather meta in his ruminations. Is an orgasm something you have, he wondered, or is it already had after all is said and done? And then he started ruminating on the phrase 'after all is said and done,' realizing that these days it's more likely somebody will say 'at the end of the day' rather than 'after all is said and done.' After all is said and done, is it easier to have, achieve, reach, attain orgasm at the end of the day or the beginning? I suspect the beginning, as I often wake up with an erection, the man thought. But what happened to the book? I wondered, tearing myself away from the erection section of the alternate version of my story. My story was a story about a book, a book unattained, so reinvented instead, not a story about orgasms and erections, achieved or imagined.

What had the editor done? I was outraged. I started composing the venomous email in my head. Then I decided to read the rest of the issue instead. I might as well see what kind of company I'm in, I figured. Every story, it turned out, was about orgasms, mostly unreached, unattained, unachieved.

# Poetry



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# *Howie Good*

## SUNDAY BLOODY SUNDAY

A gun goes off. I lie there on the carpet, more and more convinced that something is wrong with my breathing. It's only then that I realize I should have listened when they discouraged me from using semicolons. On this particular Sunday, the music returns, like an angel with wings made entirely of eyes. Pope Francis declares from his window in St. Peter's Square, 'Don't be afraid of tattoos.' Ha! I know what it's like to live under the tyranny of bodily pain, forced to endure its cruel and arbitrary edicts, and no one to prevent allegorical statues of Dawn and Dusk from being melted down for bullets.

# *Christian Ward*

## CONVICTION

The woman sitting in front of me has a goat in her handbag. I'm convinced. She moves a little and a bell rings. I'm convinced. There is a tuxedo shaded pygmy goat with a bubble-gum-pink bow inside. I'm convinced. Her name might be Tinkerbell or Gloria. I'm convinced the bell is attached to a cracked red leather collar turning terracotta. I'm convinced. The woman sitting in front of me moves a little bit more. The bell rings. I'm convinced the goat is real. I'd like her to open her bag so I can offer some downy arm hair to chew instead of non-existent grass. I'm convinced. The woman in front leaves but I keep hearing the bell. Is this a sign? I'm convinced. Maybe the goat is the saint everyone says I mutter about in my sleep, asking to take away my pain that bleats in the day and makes me bash into everything like a bumper car gone haywire.

## A SURREALIST WRITES POETRY MAGAZINE GUIDELINES

Every submission must include a photo of you dressed like Greta Garbo or Dean Martin. Pieces reducing the human heart to the size of a clenched fist will not be read. Pieces reducing your father to the size of a clenched fist *will* be read. Other acceptable subjects include the locked rooms of the human body, grief reincarnated as a one eyed cat, a full moon lost in a fruit bowl, braille mountains and fish as a metaphor for depression. Please remember these in your writing. Please send 3 - 5 poems origamied into elegant great white egrets and enclose a biography of your dog. Look forward to your submission reading *you*.

# John Bradley

I learned English from a television raised in captivity. Words burning the throat, opening the body to 1914. Genghis Khan as a baby saying: *A bird connects us to the inner skeleton of the sky.* How easily the brain forgets the sight of icebergs floating over Jerusalem. The volcano locked in a room with a small peephole in the wall. After a seamless convergence with a pink pony, my thumb stalled out on the side of a hill. Every time I speak, blank spaces grow smaller, grow larger. The rough back of the carpet learns glassblowing from an opening to the underworld.

*All rectangles*, said Eurydice, *fit into more rectangles*. My mother's tongue, raised in captivity, learned English when it passed over her to join another wild flock. *Mere shavings*, said Orpheus, smelling of oblivion. I could see tiny graves under his tongue. How easily the brain forgets the red thread tied to the lowing in the night. *I have become alphabetically beautiful*, said the baby, after hearing the recording of Siberians melting (sand) in 1914. Some sharp, some feathery. Every time I speak, blank faces speak. Magnetic fields circling seamless magnetic fields.

1.

I idolize print, temporary, terrifying print. Carry the language corpse: *smarrita, spaesata, spiantata, stranita*. Hold the four rules of painting: Chaos, fear, outrage, stasis. Surround yourself with Let-me-drop-the ordinary-evil, yes. I am a retired shape that appears on paper. *This is that*, says Chaos. The night is not that big and the night is going-beyond-verbal. Little knives cast themselves through the eye. Holding the body. Carry the language corpse through the mountain. Slowly, the fastest.

2.

Voice from a black wig: *I want to tell the camera: I'm [expletive] pure light. Part of me is a biscuit with razor blade edges. Part of me is Jean Cocteau's iridescent lingerie. I have died fifteen times over; it's really rather magical. Beyond the body, the first memory of desire.*

3.

Anton Chekhov's gun idolizes you. 98 percent of those who disappear say they were ready to go. The towels learn from the math-loving, myth-loving sofa. Because a table should be as high as it is. Surround yourself with the three rules of painting: False, outrageous, storytelling. *But the world must happen*, says Chaos. I emerged at 6 a.m., a carbon rhythm, a ring, a spoon, a coin. Last night I could hear music in the basement, monastic wave music.

Come up, irresistible song, come up.

# *Joshua Martin*

## ALL DIVISIONS ARE SUFFERING

Cave dwell to violence  
steam caravan  
carrying along Delaware  
river basin  
gloomy blooming  
food processed  
recession  
session to find  
new meaning  
for  
advanced case  
of victimhood  
relief  
a leaf  
over spooled  
un-  
daunted  
next  
a travesty

# *Linda Ann Strang*

## HEART BYPASS WITH AMARYLLIS

The drill sounded  
In the beginning  
Above roof tiles

like a woman shrieking.  
there was hypertension.  
of clay, pigeon,  
the sky is blue.

The woman sounded  
like a shriek drilling.  
Judge not lest you worsen  
in the garden

your latest angina,  
with roses  
and signage for Atlas.

The shriek sounded  
Love your neighbour  
Shock will find you

like a woman drilling.  
as you love up arrhythmia.  
in a garden with Christ thorn.

Among the nodding  
Dyspnoea becomes  
What a fawning faun

naked ladies,  
a mossy nymph.  
my greenish panic is.

## *Merrill Cole*

# LINEAR A

suspicious of inanimate

## 7 *whenever*s

threaded tape, follow

it doesn't doesn't red

LIGHT and your city and think

about it, "Athenian,"

if the razor exaggerates it doesn't hinge  
on scissors' decision that axle

“neither STOP nor GO” and no  
to bend

shards of (names its trashbins PLANES glass

retribution a lie and tribute and tribe  
red doesn't

paranoias no axles, but neithers of doors  
and cast to die

*Saturday's* (anonymous suture)  
14

(tagged to old jokes

gabby charges of admission  
your price: *no longer find fault.*

## EXIT (imperial)

drew the winning ticket  
and went away        “hear a fist”

SLOW CHILDREN  
behind which door  
                      “intimacy it screams”

No wonder the razor lies

## HINGE

tulip through the tip toes leaf  
over clover for a looking

bye bye say butterfly's  
spots rubbed

over tongue saying not yet  
neither diphthong nor divot

"this is you and this is  
you and you and me"

saying every baby  
loves my body don't nobody

love little old apple me  
don't sit under

the "it was me" caught  
on the hinge of hearing

be or might be

# Steve Jordan

## PESTILENTIAL

adrenaline paroxysm  
who knew one house cornering

could have all these haunts

•

not haunted but  
the horrors store-bought manmade  
decaying into

•

infinitesimal motes pestilential  
airborne tides heading in virulent  
tumbling into my pinkest tender-est lungs

•

bronchial-bound branching left  
right unerring pivot and roll  
finding alveolar sacs and nestling in it's

•

underway  
gestation is short births abundant  
migration upward to the blood brain no barrier

•

in the cerebrospinal bath cortical cells shivering  
myelin sheath breached axons fraying  
dendrites rived neurotransmitter-less I am



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## Contributors

**CAROLYN ADAMS'** poetry and art have been published in the pages, and on the covers of *The Hunger Journal*, *Steam Ticket*, *Apercus Quarterly*, *Apeiron*, and *Red Weather*, among others. She has authored four chapbooks, with one being a collection of her collage art, entitled *What Do You See?*

**BRIAN MICHAEL BARBEITO** is a Canadian writer and photographer. Recent work, a novelette called *Indigo Gemini Seven*, appears at Notre Dame University's anniversary edition, *The Notre Dame Review*. It has also been chosen as the on line feature of Notre Dame's current issue.

**JOHN BRADLEY'**s poetry has appeared in *Calibanonline*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Lake Effect*, *Otoliths*, *SurVision*, and other journals. His most recent book is *Hotel Montparnasse: Letters to Cesar Vallejo* (Dos Madres Press), a verse novel about the Peruvian poet Vallejo who finds himself confined after death to a hotel in Paris. A frequent reviewer of poetry books for *Rain Taxi*, he is currently a poetry editor for *Cider Press Review*.

**PETER CHERCHES** has published five collections of fiction and creative nonfiction since 2013, most recently *Masks: Stories from a Pandemic*. Called 'one of the innovators of the short short story' by *Publishers Weekly*, he's also a jazz singer and lyricist.

**MERRILL COLE'**s poems have appeared in such venues as *Denver Quarterly*, *Cutbank Literary Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *Women's Studies Quarterly*. A professor of English at Western Illinois University, he is the author of *The Other Orpheus: A Poetics of Modern Homosexuality*. Merrill has also translated the Weimar-era Berlin naked dancing magnum opus, *Dances of Vice, Horror, and Ecstasy*. Most recently, he co-edited and co-translated *Quertext: An Anthology of Queer Voices from German-Speaking Europe*, published in 2021.

**KIM FARLEIGH** has worked for NGO's in Greece, Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine, and Macedonia. He takes risks to get the experience necessary for writing. He likes painting, art, bullfighting, photography, and architecture, which might explain why an Australian lives in Madrid. 185 of his stories have been accepted by 108 different magazines.

**HOWIE GOOD** is the author of *Failed Haiku*, a poetry collection that is the co-winner of the 2021 Grey Book Press Chapbook Contest. It is scheduled for publication in summer 2022.

**STEVE JORDAN** was born and raised in the Midwest, the son of Colombian and Serbian immigrant parents. He has taught high school English for over twenty years, taking occasional leaves of absence to live and work in South America, East Africa, and the UK. Steve has been published in *Blue Unicorn*, *Lalitamba*, *Third Wednesday*, *Lyrical Somerville*, *Common Chord Anthology*, *English Journal*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Sparks of Calliope*, and *Gamut Magazine*.

**JOSHUA MARTIN** is a Philadelphia based writer and filmmaker, who currently works in a library. He is the author of the books *combustible panoramic twists* (Trainwreck Press), *Pointillistic Venetian Blinds* (Alien Buddha Press), and *Vagabond fragments of a hole* (Schism Neuronics). He has had numerous pieces published in various journals including *Otoliths*, *M58*, *The Sparrow's Trombone*, *Coven*, *Scud*, *Ygdrasil*, *RASPUTIN*, *Ink Pantry*, and *Synchronized Chaos*. You can find links to his published work at [joshuamartinwriting.blogspot.com](http://joshuamartinwriting.blogspot.com)

**DOUGLAS J. OGUREK**'s work has been rejected by publications more than 1,500 times. However, *The Paris Review*, considered one of the world's leading literary journals, thanked him for submitting a manuscript in one (form) letter. Another highly respected journal, *The Yale Review*, stated, 'We want to thank you for your kindness in letting us see your work.' Thus, Oigurek is also a kind author. More at [douglasjogurek.weebly.com](http://douglasjogurek.weebly.com). Twitter: @unsplatter

**BRONTË SCHILTZ** is a journalist, academic and writer based in Manchester, England. Her prose and poetry have appeared in several magazines and journals, including *The First Line*, *Olney Magazine*, and *Hungry Ghost Magazine*.

**LINDA ANN STRANG** is the author of two poetry collections, *Wedding Underwear for Mermaids* (2011) and *Star Reverse* (2022). Her poetry and short stories have appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Gone Lawn*, and elsewhere. Linda is the editor-in-chief of *Hotazel Review*. She lives in South Africa.

**CHRISTIAN WARD** is a UK-based poet who can be currently found in *Wild Greens*, *Cold Moon Review*, *Discretionary Love*, *Spillwords*, and *Chantarelle's Notebook*. Future poems will be appearing in *Spry*, *Dreich*, and *Uppagus*.