



LOTUSEATER

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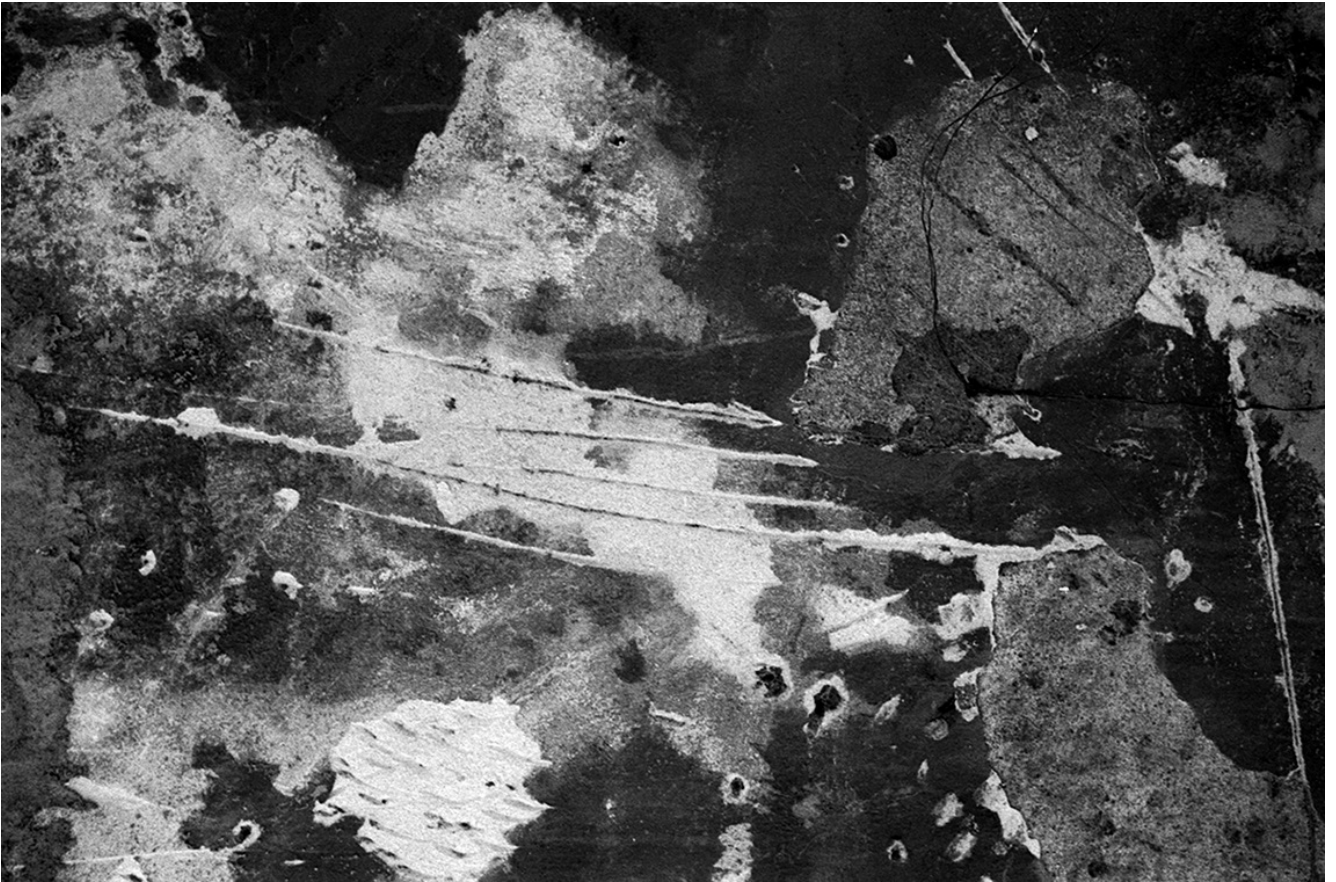
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Prose



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TONY MASTROIANNI

Irvington, Irvington

I didn't meet Irvington until summer. Though for the first three months of dating Minerva (April-May-June), the boy was a frequent topic of discussion. He was a smart kid. He was a janitor, but he was really an artist. (I didn't have the heart to tell her that I'd heard that one before.) He's always in and out of trouble. Et cetera. His sister adored him. Et cetera. I didn't meet Irvington until summer.

By six or seven months into dating Minerva, I was a regular at the Irvington household and even then, I rarely saw him. At least once a week, Minerva and I would go to her parents' house for dinner. They weren't fixed family dinners. They were occasions that over time called for less and less of an occasion to come together. The first time was in honor of a crazy uncle visiting up from Florida, but it didn't take long for close to impromptu dinners to become the norm. A colleague brought me back a good bottle of wine from California or there was a TV special on TV from another generation or we found an album at a yard sale that Pops was just gonna love or simply because we were in the neighborhood. Mrs. Irvington would put peppercorn steaks on almost every single time we chanced in. I asked Minerva what the probability was that we always happened in on steak au poivre nights. I wasn't that stupid. How I ever got tenured was beyond her, she said. She whistled with her lower lip slightly off-center, drooping to the right and made these crazy eyes that opened mine and made me crazy about her. The first time we had dinner with my parents, we had pepper steak, or au poivre steak as you call it, she said. You said it was fantastic. My dad was already thrilled because I wasn't dating a vegetarian. You said nobody in the world makes a steak like this one. And my mother isn't stupid. She won Dad with her mashed potatoes and gravy. They swapped rings after dating less than a year. Now, on top of nets of spud, my dad buys steak and pepper practically wholesale and Mom freezes it. Because they liked you. Now they love you. She went back to whistling.

Naturally, her mom liked me from the start. I had a good job. I was/am well-mannered. And I always made the gesture of bringing something when I came around for dinner. Assorted pastries from Luigi's or a bottle of wine, a pot of replanted flowers from my own mother's garden. Even a pineapple once. I sealed the deal with her father when I took him to a Giants game. Minerva told me the Meadowlands was his second home when he was young. He liked books so I got Paul Beatty to sign one. He loved it. It was fucking funny, he said. As was his habit, he anytime

he wanted to use the word fuck, he'd lean in close and whisper the fuck-part, this (fucking) guy or this (fuck of a) bullpen or book was (fucking) funny. He gave me a copy of *The Summer of '49*. Very small font size, but this is the greatest book of all time, he told me. The storm overhead at the end. Joe D lacing up his cleats. Me and Minerva would get in the car after dinner and Minerva would say, my dad loves you. He lights up when you're around. Mom says he talks to his friends about you. And every time she'd tell me this I'd say, I'm glad about you dad, but what about you? and she'd tug me by the lapels or hold my face still under my jaw and smile like Lauren Bacall used to smile and she'd plant one me like I liked to imagine Lauren Bacall would have. Yeah, she'd say. You're not bad.

They all loved me except Irvington. We met over and over, but that's exactly what it was—meeting anew every single time. Exchange hello's and he'd shake my hand. I'm pretty sure he was mocking me. Minerva said he was just shy.

Once I asked her why they named him after his last name. They didn't. Our grandfather was Irvington too.

We were driving around one day in Fords. It was a typical outing. There's this record store called Vintage Vinyl right off the highway and they had everything. They had hardcore and new jack swing, regular swing albums that we couldn't find anywhere else. Next door there's a deli. After album shopping, sometimes we'd dare each other to get weird sandwich combinations. We'd take turns. This time you gotta get a sandwich with macaroni plus the cold cut of your choice. Oatmeal cookies with tomato sauce and the cold cut of your choice. And we'd always eat in the parking lot and whoever's turn it was to eat the weird one would get the sandwich close to their mouth, me or her, and she'd laugh so hard. All her teeth all out and shining and her top lip curled up. I'd start laughing. She was always expressive with her lips. I remember the way it made my muscles twitched and tick. They still tick like that when I think about it. Then we'd say that if we had never said I love you before that moment, we would have said it then.

This one time were at a light. I'd just ate a broccoli rabe kebab and I was telling her about a student of mine named Marcello from Newark who signed up for Identity Literature in America and college in general because he was flanged in love with a student named Jess.

'That's an Irvington,' she said.

I thought she was pointing out a relative.

'You can tell,' she said. I still thought she was pointing out an assumed relative. I said that they had the same butt. 'The wall,' she said. She punched my shoulder.

There was a grave, at least six feet tall, painted on the side of a place called Spa Lady which I couldn't decipher where it was a spa or an S.P.A. called Lady.

'That's an Irvington.'

'The grave?'

‘The Grave.’

I pulled into the parking lot. You never seen these, she asked. I pulled up alongside it like a drive-thru window. At the top of the grave it read T.I.P.. They’re all over Bloomfield Avenue, she said. Under T.I.P., it read DON’T PLAY TENNIS WITH A MENACE. I laughed for like a minute straight. Minerva had to pull up the emergency brake I was laughing so hard. She had a smile, but she wasn’t laughing. Is this what your brother does while we’re eating pepper steaks? He does it at night. He has friend stay lookout.

You notice people don’t call people menaces anymore? We stopped talking about it after that. We drove to Versailles Diner for coffee and I made chicken caesar salad that night. She pretended not to believe I made the dressing from scratch. We drank two bottles of wine and made out all through *Night of the Living Dead*. The next day I dragged all of Bloomfield Ave. I found three.

T.I.P.

Never even a smidgen
Should you feed a stool pigeon

T.I.P.

Unless already at the top
Never ever trust no Jersey cop

T.I.P.

When you ask if she’s got a man and she tries to pretend
When she says no she don’t, she only got a friend
(don’t even go for it)

It was exciting looking for something. I had had everything a guy tries to get for a while by that point. A home. Ample amounts of food. Cable. A university job. Good hours. Pickup games every Tuesday and Thursday. A collection of music and books to make a motherfucker go ape. I had Minerva. Almost every guy strived to get Minerva. The old ones used to wave, say Miss Minerva, you’re all grown up now and the younger ones just straight up stared and ogled. Once a guy even got in my face about her. I put my hand on his chest and distanced ourselves from each other, this was if he tried to throw a punch I was already in the right, trying to defuse the situation and my back leg was already in position to pivot into a straight right hand but the guy’s friend hauled him off and we left for another bar. I told her I was going to have to start pumping iron if I was going to keep dating her. This was at the

beginning. She liked that I was a young professor, the handsome, intellectual type. But I think she liked even more that university homeboy was ready to throw down on her account when the occasion called for it. After I found three more Irvingtons on Bloomfield Ave., I stopped thinking about it so much. Things went back to au poivre and sports at the Irvington household and wine and lovemaking at mine.

As the year unfolded, more and more graves popped up. And everywhere. They weren't just T.I.P.s anymore. Not just walls either. He was filling in the interiors of three-point lines on basketball courts. Sometimes they'd just say

R.I.P.
Defense

and sometimes they were longer messages. I liked the ones in rhyme. It's amazing how many words rhyme with offense. Twice I found the sides of mailboxes painted over. I then started noticing scrolls, as if on parchment paper, sprayed on walls across Livingston, then the Caldwells and Montclair and Fairfield. The form was different and the amount of words doubled and tripled, but there was no doubt they were Irvington Irvingtons. A new artist, a new style of art and vandalism were being sired before me. And the words were getting stronger. Like they could strike through the boundaries that were cubing up contemporary american poetry and art in general. I forgot who said it, (Derrida? Buddy Holly?) but he or she said all new art was vandalism until it's successor vandalized it. I began to take Irvingtons with me. It was rolling over into my lectures, not by name or example, but the communication of ideas my almost fiancé's brother was leaving over North Jersey. I discussed it with a couple of colleagues, namely Burkess, a creative writing teacher and Dally, the american studies chair. Our conversations were mostly dialectic mirrors, but I did get them to go out the Irvington hunts that had so occupied my time and my head at the time. I told them to at least go around the campus area in Montclair and the areas in which they lived. I left his identity out of it. It sound cooler. A new, anonymous artist. American studies people love anything you could label grassroots.

Dally, who was specialized in socio-political behavior, said indeed spray painting a mailbox was a far more effective form of protest than putting a cherry mob in it and I told him that wasn't it at all. I told him someone is just writing cool shit in cool ways all over the place. He begged to differ and I begged to differ too because not everything that's good or cool or likable and yet illegal is a form of protest. I was much more interested in the active combination of visual art and poetry in view for everyone. Some of my arguments had to do with the feeling of the feeling of having discovered him. Having him closer to me than to you. Naturally, I brought some of these arguments to the dinner table. Minerva didn't technically

live with me, but let's just say there were tampons in my bathroom and both lingerie and pants suits in my wardrobe. One night, I cooked up salmon wrapped in tinfoil with shredded vegetables. The writing teacher gave me the recipe, advised me on a bottle of Pinot, if I was trying to get my pinot wet. I told Minerva I was amazed her brother had never gotten into poetry. (To our knowledge, at least.) She said she already told me. The only person he considered a poet is Nas. I said he wasn't that far off.

I couldn't help myself talking about him sometimes.

She couldn't help turning on the news sometimes.

And sometimes I sat next to her and kept talking. He was growing. I was under the impression he was going through a tough breakup by the most recent poems that went up. I asked about it. If she knew anything about it. I saw a girl staring at a sprayed poem on the street not far from the House of Pepper Steak the other day. Why were you driving by my parents' house? It read April first you left I thought it was a joke/ April second you didn't call, you didn't call me back/ April third and fourth you were hanging out in Newark/ Why would you hang out in Newark?/ April fifth and six and so on, April tenth and so on. It didn't rhyme, but it was definitely your brother's, I said. Well, it sounds like he's finally single if you want to give him a call. I told her to stop it and I gave her a big kiss on the side of the head and she watched the news turn into 60 Minutes. And so I kept my mouth shut about our Irvington for a while. We'd been dating for over a year now and I didn't want to ruin it with an intellectual, not even an artistic, obsession with her little brother. Truth be told, I was paying for a ring in small installments. I was going to pop the ender of new beginnings that summer. Everything was going smooth, if not the most smooth things ever went for anybody. The plan was I was going to feel her out about vacation places. An easy game of top three would do it and as long as they weren't over the top expensive, I was going to book her second favorite destination and I'd ask her to marry me there. Then I'd say, this was your second choice dream vacation, right? First choice is gonna have to wait for our honeymoon. All this. Work was good. My family was happy and in good health. Hers was happy and in good health. And she looked more beautiful a year later which is something I started telling her every night. I didn't think it was possible. Then she all-the-way moved in and my apartment got brighter and cleaner and much more eccentric in its decor with brightly colored illuminants, as she called them, and a new vanity table in the corner of our bedroom and framed photos of family and her various diplomas and awards mixed in with my Malcolm X poster awards and diplomas and signed Scott Brosius ball. Our books got mashed together. It was like we were splicing our DNA or something. Or, a better analogy—like when you were a kid and unafraid of diseases and rusty cutlery and you'd cut your palms a little, little bit so you could share the same blood with your best friend. I

even shuffled our books up on the shelf so we could have the fun of trying to find a specific book and discover the rest of each other's. Like we were one. One thing. Everything was good.

But I still kinda had this Irvington thing.

I didn't talk about it.

It was like he came out of Minerva's mouth a year ago and in through my ear and into my head and now there was one of his headstones sprayed all over my image repertoire.

One day at work I decided what I could do. I went back and forth on it for a while. I didn't want backlash from Minerva and I especially didn't want to constrict his form in any way. I printed out a poem by Baudelaire, Cecco Angiolieri and the lyrics to Shakey Dog by Ghostface Killah. Four days later, at a family dinner, I slipped them under his door. He didn't say anything about it, I don't think. Neither did I.

In November, we broke off our engagement. I was writing my Calvino book and she was receiving job offers in different cities. She said I could keep her books.

In the spring, it was the first day back after Easter break, walking in, I found a small book on my office floor. The title was *Death's Cousin, Sleep*. Inside the first pages were three folded papers. Under them, on the first page, in pen, sorry about Minnie.

C

Unsurpassed, my speed is finite. All bow to the dictate of distance. I travel in darkness, alone in a company all traveling at the same velocity. The wells of mass cause my straight lines to curve. I am without time in a moment, but move along it in the weft of space where all clocks measure the journey from here to there.

Space and time are inseparable monozygotic twins and I, their younger sister, travel along their ways. I don't fight them, they don't resist me. I bend where they bend, if they curl up into ball or sink into a hole I go with them. They do not charge for my passage, I do not challenge their routes.

I move until stopped. Driven forward by the endless, self-sustaining, waltz of electricity and magnetism. Any opposing force will stop me. I'll be halted by a star, a black hole, a planet, a rock, a tree, a blade of grass, a retina. My blind travels allow others to see but in so doing I end, am exchanged, am lessened. Clashing with other particles throws some of me out to shine, to radiate.

My line from star to eye is observed directly, I am invisible from the side. I must strike to be seen, counted, interacted. If not, space would be filled with light not darkness. And yet space is full of me, I am everywhere if you know how to look, how to listen. I have many guises depending upon who seeks me out. Waves and particles are a simple pair if they can be determined one from the other: their frequencies and signs are numerous but I am always constant.

You can fathom my patterns; you create numbers for my smallest part, a constant, a value, a quanta, a photon. But do you see me? Really? Or do you watch the outcomes of my battles? Conflict that creates excitation, movement and mingling my parts with those of all other matter.

Why should I exist at all? Why is light better than darkness? Am I inevitable? Am I necessary? Though I flow through the vast barren emptiness, is there a universe without me? What if I were other than you thought? What if I were to slow as I bend, or as I pass through dark matter? Would you think less of me? Is that why you might have time stretch with space to keep me constant?

I am an effect and a cause. If enough bits bash into each other I will eventually be thrown out to move until halted. When the collisions are monstrously numerous I am constantly generated and shared as I light up solar systems, glinting across the cosmos. Created as a consequence I travel until I haphazardly become a cause: My touch, at least on one planet, giving life.

I traverse galaxies of time, illuminating a past. I have no substance but carry great power holding atoms together with a push of a tiny particle. I am everywhere and in all matter. I am born or killed in exchanges with electrons, the go-between negotiating the constant separation of particle from nuclei: I sustain matter by preventing its collapse.

299,792,458		671,000,000	
300,000	1,080,000,000	173	
186,000			0.307

Like me, your numbers appear to differ but are the same. From universe to atom my differing forms are constant: But it remains your c .

JEFFREY GIBBS

How Your New Neighbors Arrive

The old neighbors had been hiding in the basement since last month after the unmarked white Tauruses started roaming the streets with their surveillance devices. Family by family, night after night, we watched people arrive at three in the morning, the hour the door was unlocked. The women led the children by the hand down the stairs into the subterranean darkness where they hoped they'd be safe and secret. The men carried weapons just in case—hand guns, kitchen knives, broken broom handles. We'd wondered if we should go, too. Each night at three, we had asked ourselves this from under our blanket, not brave enough to voice the question aloud. We listened to the panicked whispers and descending footsteps, thinking 'maybe, maybe,' until one day the door was sealed and not opened again.

We felt their presence whenever we walked by the house, their eyes seeping through the earth and pavement diagonally from their windowless hiding place to the sunlight of the street. Their voices stayed muffled. We didn't dare ask them to speak up or say we could hear the moans from their wounded in the night.

The anchorwoman spoke against them, told us they didn't belong anymore and so we turned up the radio, blasted whatever came forth, and felt justified that we hadn't gone down into the dark. A few days later, the tank appeared and blew them apart. We saw their bodies crawl out of the air conditioner ducts in flames, like insects emerging from a burning log. We were told we didn't see them. The tanks pointed at our building and a soldier in the top said we saw not him but paramedics rushing into the building to save a group of people shot in a terrorist raid. We closed the curtains. They said we had witnessed a suicide bomber attack the ambulances and the soldiers arrive to defend their lives and ours.

And we were content. The story made sense.

We went to the ice cream shop down the road and had them put chocolate sprinkles around the sides of a mound of pistachio, but not on the top, and then we sat on the rocks below the sea wall and held hands. You told me about the book you had read, about how it said our true selves were at the mercy of our inner dialogues, that the voices in our heads had been installed by our parents and we had to silence them one by one to live authentically. Yours constantly told you that you weren't good enough. Mine told me I wasn't worth being loved.

We ignored the screams behind us and the sudden empty spaces. We had no choice, wanted no choice.

I told you about the woman at work who was obsessed with guinea pigs, who had brought a sick one to work and talked to it while she typed, asking it constantly about food, when it wanted to eat, what it wanted to eat, if it liked this pellet or that pellet better, if it wanted mommy to hold it while she fed it. She had named it Zarathustra.

For a full day the basement is a pit next to our building. I stand out on the balcony with my cough and a cup of linden tea and peer carefully over the edge. The rubble is a pile of white plaster and insulation ringing the sides of a mound of red brick pieces. I see from the edge a light blue blouse covered with dust under a rock. A coat hanger. A tiny severed hand next to a mop bucket cracked down the side. Something wet, like a liver. There's hair sticking out from between some bricks.

The Party women spread through the neighborhood like splitting atoms. Power gathering. They descend the hill and then fly apart at the side streets, two to each. They wear headscarves and precisely tailored business suits and Party pins. They are impregnable. They carry large books like ledgers and cradle them so that they flatten their breasts. When they knock on our door, they've already opened to the page with our names on it. They both smile at the same time and hold their fingers on the same page, scanning over the same information. My family name, my place of birth, my religion, my work address, my mother's home address, the amount of times I've visited the bars in the past month, a list of phone calls. They ask me if everything is okay, if I need anything, a bag of groceries, medicine, some information, and the one on the right assures me the tanks are outside on the streets again, that their turrets are turning towards the enemy, that we will be forever be secure from the hidden traitors. Do I know where they are? asks the one on the left and then they both wait, smiling with their mouths only.

We hear explosions in the night, but we don't wake. We are told not to wake, and so I hold my eyes closed in sleep and wonder whether my wife is doing the same, whether I should tell the women with the ledgers if she's not, and the next morning when I go outside to smoke I see that the rubble next door is gone and in its place is a crane and Kurds in construction uniforms. One of them sings a folk song as he pushes a wheel barrow full of cement toward a square pit in the earth. I think I see a boy's face—maybe five or six, open mouthed and bloody—pushing up out of the foundation before the singing worker dumps his load over it and begins to mix. Then it's a flat slab of gray wet stone, like a screen before the film starts or after it's finished.

My wife calls me at work. We chat at lunch and she tells me she is stopping by the gym before coming home and that I should order pizza. The website is on my computer and all the passwords saved. I hang up and walk to the coffee shop for a latte because I have the afternoon free. The stray dogs lie supine on the sidewalk but not one stirs as I walk by. A policeman watches me from a storefront of dried goods, standing next to the figs. A white Taurus is parked on the curb.

When I get home, there is a new building next door. A tall glass and marble structure with vertical lights on the front facade that slowly fade from red into green and then blue before going back to red. The name of the place is *Golden Oasis*. The women with the ledgers stand all together at the gate in a perfect line, welcoming the new residents. They write and write. I watch a middle-aged man in a business suit tramp up the steps, he has a brief case in one hand and a swath of black hair jelled up with the precision of a sculpture. It changes color in the lights—green to blue to red and back. One of the women hands him what looks like a foot. He nods at her and slips it in his pocket.

The tanks are back at the end of the street. One points its gun at me, the other at the front door where the man went through. I see my wife appear around the side of its left treads. She carries a bag of groceries in her left hand and is texting someone with her right. The shadow of the tank seems to swallow her. A charming young man pops out of the turret and says something to her. She laughs. She has to. He is handsome, his life precious.

The new building has a row of windows that face our apartment. They stay lit all night long, shining into our living room as we eat pizza and watch the movie we missed from last year's film festival—a Sri Lankan film. We keep our room dark except for the flickering glow of the laptop screen. The light from the rooms across the way is white and never falters. There's no sign of any living thing, but we can both feel someone watching us like we watch this movie. I look but try to not look like I'm looking. I peek up over the lid of the computer without moving my head. Then I swivel toward the left as if just glancing up at our front door, but let my eyes skim over the row of windows.

We are not allowed to close our curtains now. We don't have to be told. So many things go without saying.

For hours until we go to sleep, we see nothing in those rooms except the two gigantic pictures facing us from either side of the entrance to the hallway. One is of a nuclear family, the smiling father and mother, the precise children. The other is of the Leader looking resolute before the red of the flag. The long empty hall is like an open throat. At the end is a perfect doorframe of absolute blackness. Whatever watches us will walk toward us from there, arms out.

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KEVIN CAMP

Supermarket

Women with more than three kids buy quite a lot. They tend to tip well, too. Sometimes they press creased, overly folded five-dollar bills into our hands after we've once more packed full their identical, imitation wood paneled station wagons. One of them has four small children, three boys and the baby, a girl. They are all hopelessly feral. The boys should have never been given paintball guns for their birthdays. We were told that until the time came to repaint the damage, which was an expensive endeavor, the driver's side door was irregularly splattered with beet-red paint.

Hard currency is always welcome. It is never suspected to be counterfeit, never examined suspiciously—never held up to the light and scrutinized for watermarks—the way the twenties, fifties, and hundreds are supposed to be. Cashiers, nearly all of whom are female, lustily pine away for our mobility. They get tired of being behind identical, claustrophobic stations for hours at a time. We sackers are part of a male-dominated industry, know it, and enjoy it. The stakes are so low—it is our one point of civic pride.

Our official job title is *courtesy clerk*, but this is clearly a ridiculous term made up by someone in marketing and advertising. No one really uses it. It says so on our paystubs and on the series of training videos we are forced to watch prior to hire, but nowhere else. When the company made the change, half of us threatened to walk off the job because of this slight, speaking out with growing, enthusiastic rage. This oppression would not stand.

We are won over after at least three hours of sober deliberation by management, who dangle the promise at least two cold beers. We always were suckers for free beer. In addition, shop stewards are offered free initiation into the nearby freemasons' lodge, the one right up the road. It's the same physical address that doubles as a nail salon during daylight hours. In time, we are told, we'll have the same opportunity ourselves to meet in silence and, in time-honored tradition, complain to each other about nothing much in particular.

On long Saturday shifts, especially during the summer, we try to look past the hours of tedium, envisioning the bills tucked and folded and stuffed into jean pockets—we imagine how they'll look when we are finally free to spend them.

Shift concluded, we take a trip by the record store and purchase vinyl LPs for our high-fidelity systems, concluding amongst ourselves that cassette tapes really can't be

that bad. At least they are more reliable than eight-tracks, which tend to fall apart with time. Because we have not very much money beyond that which we make in tips, our car stereos are beyond cheap. They look like a Cub Scout's unassisted entry into the Pinewood Derby or, should that metaphor not suffice, a very bad science fair project.

We have purchased this sound system from a stereotypically carbuncular, reclusive, genius kid who lives two houses down. He is an electronics whiz, a person who, in adulthood (well, really, in less than three years, if you want to get technical about it) will make far more money than we can even imagine. He'll develop computer graphics software and, as is true with all significant scientific discoveries, he'll get the chance to name his creation himself, the precise way he'd like it to be. The device we purchase, however, is merely an early prototype. A magnum opus will follow, and this ain't it. Nobody's first album is really that great, though, is it?

Being not an automatic, nor particularly intuitive machine, we must eject the tape completely (the system is *not* easy to use) at the end of side one, turn it upside down, and then reinsert the cartridge until it firmly clicks into place—all of this to listen to side two. Magnetic tape must always face east. We have a fast-forward button, but not a rewind option. We adjust our thinking to compensate. With time, we get pretty good at guessing how long we'll need to keep the tiny reel-to-reel spooling, provided we don't want to listen to a particular song. Sometimes it's best to just let the damn thing play.

After punching out for the day, we re-insert our timecard into its usual slot, which looks like a metallic combination of a vest and a venetian blind. The device, which also reveals the progression of time by way of a highly visible, very analogue clockface makes a reassuring noise as the day's timestamps are recorded for the benefit of payroll. As we do so, we pull out a wad of mostly one-dollar bills in our right hand, then begin to count them silently in our head as we would if we were working out someone else's change. *Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three.* Washington's portrait always faces east. They must all be in order, in sequence.

Covington County isn't exactly Yoknapatawpha, but it's close enough. It's a good place to find a hitman for hire (no foolin'!), meth cooks, forty-year-old women who look sixty, and a surfeit of dogs in blatant violation of leash laws. Flagrant violators of the bonds of holy matrimony may find themselves confronted by unforgiving husbands bearing firearms. Renewed vows, undertaken by those with reasonably successful marriages may be taken again. Found with slightly greater frequency is the ritual of repeat baptisms.

No one willingly admits that they grew up there. Residents of nearby counties and towns that border Covington take great offense should anyone mistakenly believe otherwise. Such information is never willingly volunteered. But, for better or for worse, it's our home. I mean, at least we have a chain sit-down pizza parlor and a roller-skating rink. Lots of places don't even have that much.

Collectively turned loose on a lazy, hot, mid-summer day, we grocery sackers have a couple of hours before the chain record store closes. Being that it is not Christmas time yet, we do not fight for quart-sized containers of surplus eggnog. When it is eggnog season, the product in question arrives in yellow cardboard containers—usually, like clockwork, ten calendar days before Thanksgiving. Eggnog Wars are around for a limited time only.

As such, when it comes back around again, we put together the collective perfect mixtape playlist for the approaching holiday season. The task took us all night. Unfortunately, no one else cares much to listen to our labor of love. The night manager with the blonde mustache has heard us, in chorus, singing along to one of the songs. He thinks we shouldn't quit our day job quite yet. Regardless of what we might wish to the contrary, our labor of love will never be played all over the store *for the benefit of the customers, not the employees*.

What will be heard instead is wall-to-wall Manheim Steamroller, on a loop, because the company is run by cheapskate executives with matching unibrows who believe, foolishly, that they'll be the only game in town forever. Low prices for the customers and low rates of pay for us. Those of us who have traveled the country, even a little, know of other chains who do things very differently.

We sackers can be coerced into solidarity when needs be. But few of us really care much for actual organizing. Forming a picket line takes patience and time, as does working up enough hostility on a combination of strike pay and instant coffee—the perfect combo—to spit on scabs. We're just not committed enough, frankly.

Unions are weak in Covington. They always have been and likely always will be. Our fathers held nothing but scorn for men who held at least one of two vocations—union organizer and criminal defense attorney. My old man was a grocery sacker, same as me. What's good enough for him is good enough for me.

Instead, we haggle amongst ourselves, as we usually do, for the out-of-date alcohol, which in this case is truly rotgut wine. Beer is much too obvious a target and would instantly cost us our jobs if we were caught stealing it. No one is ever supposed to pour the cold storage alcohol out, but the same cannot be said for many other products on display for sale on refrigerated shelves. As a result, our diet is heavily skewed towards dairy because we're the only weirdos who want to regularly tote home gallon after gallon of homogenized whole milk.

The guys who stock the freezers or work nights restocking don't participate in any of this. They usually don't have much to say, even in the best of times. They avoid eye contact altogether and don't strike up a conversation with anyone. Invariably, at least one of them has a dual diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder and some sort of chemical dependency. You'll find them on break smoking two cigarettes at once, both fully lit, one casually stuck between the index digit and the

middle finger of the right hand—the other stuck between the ring finger and pinkie. Out of habit, with every fresh puff, their left-hand tucks long strands of greasy hair behind the left earlobe.

Taking a quick drag, regardless of its positioning, they then quietly, contemplatively purse lips together, blowing smoke upward towards the ceiling. When finished with both smokes, cigarettes are regrettably crushed into submission. Breaktime is almost over. Sighing audibly, their plain red golf shirts are tucked into dirty jeans, first making sure that nametags are prominently displayed to their right, which is to say, your left.

We've never understood why it matters. It's unnatural for complete strangers, even good customers, no less, to be on a first name basis with us. No one cared much to know who were or what we were called during the whole of childhood and adolescence. But here at work, suddenly, we're a reminder of fond high school memories long past. We coax gauzy, narrative accounts of the men who never left for the city, or the university—the ones who stayed behind to manage lawn care services or to put aluminum siding in place.

In any case, we casually flick our ash into the clay-molded, glazed squarish tray that must be older, combined, than any of us in the room. It looks for all the world like someone's discarded art project—one thrown together in haste without much thought behind it. Whomever crafted it at least intended for it to be used regularly. That much is true. Like pockets on a pool table, smokers can park their butts in one of at least six different, strategic locations without disturbing anyone else's nicotine fix.

We all smoke and so the tray must be emptied several times a day, usually by us. This Sisyphean task is merely bad karma returned. In elementary school art class, we were the kind of kids who deliberately and mischievously didn't squeeze out enough air bubbles in our own work when it came time to put the combined efforts of the whole class in the kiln. It was always our fault when everyone else's ash trays exploded due to our own lax, but, in our own defense, hardly sinister ways. We were practical jokers, goofs, class clowns.

Once, that same year, we put tacks in the chairs of our classmates. We did not do a good job of it. For that offense we spent three hours in time out, essentially in solitary confinement, albeit with sympathetic jailers, without lunch. That was punishment in and of itself. In those days, believe it or not, cafeteria food was good—good enough, in fact, that the firefighters at the engine house across the street usually ate with us. In my time in elementary school, the firefighters would enter our classroom, teaching us the Heimlich maneuver with solemn gravitas. No one ever thought they'd have to use it until one kid choked on a salad.

The procedure was a success. For their heroism, it was decided that we'd all celebrate. In keeping with cake and ice cream, the firemen shared with us a VHS tape

showcasing their most heroic rescue effort to date. It involved a fire that started on the roof of the Masonic lodge but did not make its way down to the nail salon. We were never told who recorded the slightly grainy footage.

In those days, meal tickets, dispensed to each student, were made of blue flimsy cardboard. I'm not sure who felt that this means of distribution was sufficient and acceptable for teachers and students alike—teachers who had to keep up with thirty ink-smeared, individual cards, perpetually sticky and germ infested, especially. Should a ticket get sopping wet, it was never the same.

Each lunch, the lunch lady who worked the register punched out proof that we students had indeed consumed each meal in the plan. She worked methodically, from child to child. *Punch. Punch.* At the end of thirty punches, which equaled thirty lunches, it was time for a new card, one that didn't look like it had been chewed on by a dog.

Those were much happier times. Today, we're in high school, and our lives inside the four walls of the classroom could not be more different than our working world, especially on weekends, when there are no dismissal bells to compete for our focus. These days, most of our energies are primarily spent simply surviving from 8 am to 3 pm. We totally wilt in the middle of anxious individual science group presentations. We're the archetypical nervous kid stumbling out of the gate, (*basically, we say the word basically a lot*) when we must address the class for any reason.

Our science teacher, freshman year, does not last very long. She has devised a system (with her husband, as primary confidante) to force the hand of student participation. Every member of the class must raise their hand at least eight times a semester. It's introvert torture and almost as bad on those who are more socially adaptable, but nevertheless we're collectively stuck in the middle of puberty. In time, the teacher herself breaks down into tears in front of us. It appears that she's kept her phone number unlisted for emergencies and has been prank called by multiple kids on numerous instances.

Quietly attentive. That's what our progress reports all say. Painfully slow dot-matrix printers attached to equally lethargic mainframes reveal our final grades. In time, numeric grades include a one-sentence description of who we are and how engaged we are with our studies. This is the work of some highly-paid official at the brain trust command center across town—likely predicated upon a highly refined educational theory that few people really understand.

There, we are not in control. Therefore, it's easy, for the duration, to put all those school fears aside, to squarely focus our thoughts only on the latest goods that are currently teetering—not quite resting—by the back door of the supermarket. All that has been trucked in overnight amounts to dry goods, mainly. Each is elevated a few inches off the concrete floor, stacked on refurbished wooden pallets.

One can tell that the pallets are not brand new. Many of five or so horizontal

slats are made at different lengths, widths, and from very different types of lumber. Skilled labor it is not.

What will be soon placed on shelves or inside coolers is wrapped in layers of thick cellophane—partially translucent film that must be first hacked away at like stubborn underbrush, then finally shredded into a sticky, squeaky shroud. The remains are stuffed, in great haste, into large-mouthed grey plastic garbage cans and thought of no more.

We never see waste disposal. They never see us, either. At the end of my shift, we make our way into the morning sun as waste disposal are on their way out to us. The rats crawl out, the rats crawl in.

Our trusty box cutters are our best friend. Though we always seem to somehow lose ours after every day's shift, we always steal them back from the night staff for my private usage. One dude always leaves his in a particularly consistent location in the break room. We have no qualms at all in taking advantage of his carelessness. The shielded, silver blade is used to slice open massive brown-paper wrapped parcels that the night staff has loaded and stacked for us to dispense to customers.

A truck delivery brings in item after item, positioned one on top of the other—all the way to the very ceiling itself, twenty-five feet high. The layout of groceries is often vastly different from store to store. Having sliced through the cellophane, we are next responsible for lining up which product goes on what aisle. We don't particularly enjoy this next part.

It's easier to manage the brown paper bags. Each parcel contains maybe a hundred folded, sturdy bags, each with the pleasant bright red logo of the company standing out well against the yellow brown of the fibers.

Middle-aged women who work the registers commandeer rarely purchased car leather polish from the automotive section shelves, spraying frequently to keep the ancient conveyor belts glossy and spit polished. Taken to extremes, too much polish can reduce friction enough so that the heavy bottles of soda that customers regularly purchase topple over like ninepins. But not enough lubrication, in great contrast, destroys electric motors and stifles the expected progression of goods in its tracks.

We receive few complaints. Most of our customers in line are simply too busy thinking four moves ahead, as many of us do while inside supermarkets, or huge enclosed spaces. *Queen's pawn opening*. As it is, we pick up on all the peculiarities most people wouldn't. We understand why Italian ladies arrive every day and what they talk about when they arrive. We know that lard does make the best biscuits.

Assuming business is moderate, we'll have enough sacks up front to last us at least an hour. In the middle of a rush, however, all bets are off. If we're gone from the front—for example, if it's just past Christmas—we are likely in the back refrigerator, clandestinely drinking our fill of eggnog only a day or so past date.

Unsellable. Flavorful, though. Showing up in front of supervisors with Season's Greetings on our breath could cost us our jobs. Eventually.

One of our numerous responsibilities is to examine the expiration dates of dairy products. Night shift knows how to move in fresher shipments to the back cooler, but it often gets lazy with what never got sold and now needs to get tossed. Sometimes we use the box cutter to shred the cardboard sides of almost-spoiled milk cartons. These bleed out into the sink drain, usually. We wash away the evidence with a rubber hose.

Many glass wine bottles are left there too, crowded together into a filthy fiberglass sink, and somehow, most of them end up in the back of our cars by the close of day.

The buzz helps, as soon as we're decompressing at home with our feet up, watching television. On an eight-hour shift, we get two fifteen-minute breaks and a thirty-minute lunch, but they aren't enough to distract us from perpetually aching legs and feet. Comfortable shoes are never enough.

It beats school, though. We remember sitting on the bleachers in the gym, listening to an assistant superintendent preach on and on, emoting no enthusiasm whatsoever. We remember the humiliation of sweaty, unwashed gym clothes. We know what happens when a tetherball becomes a deadly weapon. We were always told such matters were only temporary. No one can ever make us go back. We don't think about it much.

The Peshaman Fragments

Following the highly publicized disappearance of Elias Peshaman late last year, this unfinished manuscript was found among a small number of cloud files authorities reviewed for possible information related to his whereabouts.

FRAGMENT 1

It is a mouth radically different from other human mouths—infused with an eerie otherworldliness. The mouth attracts attention precisely because of its unsettling difference. It seizes the attention of others because, like a catastrophic car accident, we can't look away. To some, this mouth is hyper-real and in its weird fleshiness, suggests an authenticity, the way a blood-rare steak suggests 'real food.'

When at rest, the mouth often does not relax but returns to a puckered, circular kissing shape that suggests it is at once both open and closed, an orifice of both inbound and outbound potential. Let's be honest, this mouth also has an anal quality to it and is always pantomiming an expulsion of waste. It is always conveying the ejection of impurity, mirroring his promises to eject things and people.

There is also the tongue. Disabled by the neuro-impairments that prevent its full control, the tongue throbs, bends and extrudes in ways that reinforce the expulsion conveyed by the lips.

In its totality, the shape of the mouth as an emblem of disgust and discharge is also connected to his frequent interest in what comes out of human bodies, especially the bodies of women. It enacts his revulsion at excretion, for example, or menstruation or breast feeding.

FRAGMENT 2

altogether ill at ease about what is happening with us

FRAGMENT 3

The water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) is a large aquatic plant native to the Amazon basin. It is known chiefly for its ability to overwhelm the surface of bodies of water, pushing out native species and depleting its water ecosystem of oxygen, suffocating all fish, water creatures and other plants.

So too, all the things he is—liar, chiseler, malignant degenerate, traitor, deadbeat, daughterfucker wannabe, child rapist—may be viewed as precisely evolved for indifference to the question of what a ‘pond,’ is actually for. The old blackhats (Ratched, Moriarty) are quaint by comparison.

FRAGMENT 4

His skin, like the fixtures around him, in the primitive way imaginable, conveys that he cannot escape how gold rushes in upon him, following him like a cloud of gold dust seeking the man who is both its source and its destination. He is Chrysos, Xipe Totec, Midas, Shen Wanshan, Goldfinger, communicating with every image not that ‘I’m like my people’ but rather ‘I’m radically unlike my people or any people.’

But in its obvious artificiality there is more. With his skin, he is sending us a message deeper than, ‘I am a golden man.’ The message also says, ‘I am wearing a me-shaped golden suit.’ His skin invites you to imagine an inner creature, but simultaneously humiliates you for accepting the invitation.

To some, the skin is an alarm light alerting to a dangerous duplicity—the way the coloration of certain animals alerts other animals not to eat them. To others, the situation is more complex. Via its alchemy, broadly speaking, there can be a gratitude, even a love, engendered by the ways he affirms the fundamental duplicity, and the inevitability of the way things are.

The skin serves both as camouflage (allowing him to blend in with the other perceived liars—like certain poisonous toads blend in with a pile of leaves in the forest) and as a beacon calling attention to itself as camouflage (providing a basis of assurance and trust—as if he might be the one true leaf in a pile of poisonous toads).

FRAGMENT 5

read marcus aurelius of each particular thing ask what is it in itself what is its nature what does he do this man you seek

FRAGMENT 6

In totality, we know this as ‘The Uncanny Valley,’ a term coined by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori to describe the phenomenon by which robots become deeply disconcerting to us at the point where they come closest to mimicking human features.

The Uncanny Valley teaches us to think about how we are different (if we are) and how we are the same (if we are). Perhaps it teaches an instinctive revulsion at the not-quite-human—an instinct that may have prevented our early ancestors from breeding with apes. Though perhaps also (if not instead), it teaches us revulsion at ourselves, at what we are capable of. Perhaps it forces us to ask: When face to face with a monster masquerading as your companion, what do you do?

Mirroring the nausea created by our experience, his experience as a sociopath may be one of looking at us across his Uncanny Valley, where he is unable to see or feel the full humanity of any person—to distinguish emotionally between a chair, a car, a bucket, a fish or child. To operate across his Valley, he creates simulacra of human engagement to deal with people because he is unable to generate actual human responses.

Little by little as he deprives our pond of oxygen, he becomes less able to conceal the fact that when he looks at us, no matter who we are, he sees the same lifeless mask we see when we look at him, useful to him or useless, using our own shames and weaknesses and hatreds against us the way serial killer might use the skin of his victim to make a lampshade.

FRAGMENT 7

my god my god to be haunted by the end of everything we are and have created together it is like choking finally after all it will be like choking my god they are gouging his eyes with a flagpole i think

Here Peshaman's manuscript ends, providing scant basis for development of a general synthesis. While pleased to share this important manuscript with specialist and lay audiences, overall, we urge caution in the extrapolation of broad-brush conclusions from what was clearly a work left unfinished and in disarray at the time of his disappearance.

Poetry



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Joshua *a* St. Claire

TEA TIME

Somewhere in the infinite universe, a shivering sun rises above a sea of fortune cookie flowers which bloom and shatter, spouting strips of petal-paper bearing the full text of *Love's Labor Won*. On a rogue asteroid flung into a galactic void by a calcium-rich supernova, the voice of a lone brazen automaton ceaselessly sings the score of *Die Laune des Verliebten* while sentient centipedes listen and weep celluloid mountains—one after the other—of the 42-reel cut of *Greed*. Silver satyrs serve silphium and passenger pigeon fricassee to a Golden Bird on a Golden Bough who sings this poem to brocaded nobles preparing for the Ball at the End of Time.

Bryan D. Price

THE OCTOPUS

of course I'm thinking of your lungs now
(who wouldn't) I smell your old shirts and
they smell like the house instead of you
I read that houses are bigger in America now
we are the enigma that can't stop eating
there are more bathrooms than people here (mainly
in the wealthy zones) ugly beiges interrupted
by little lagoons of plastic grass I did want to
feed you though feed you filberts and pumpkin
feed you apples and inexpensive cheeses (the
people's cheeses) cheeses without names only
brands you were a painter once and I was nothing
and the world was neither handmade nor
borrowed but now all is terrifying in ways I'm sure
neither of us saw coming a question that haunts
me is did I invent you—not your contoured back
or ocean of hair or tortoise-shell glasses cantilevered
in such a way to reveal almost everything about your
personality but your consciousness and ability to
be my interlocutor my caretaker or keeper my
driver in the sense that I put my life in your hands
and then I think I've seen you like how I've
seen an octopus—real but unimaginably intricate
I watched you swim a thousand years ago we
were both babies or separate halves of the same egg
and we were alone together you said you remembered
my voice and it had wings which I thought sounded
unnecessarily poetic or what some might call
aggressively poetic but I don't know there comes a
time when aggressively poetic sounds good to me
sounds tender which is what I need right now but
tenderness often masks something unspeakable in my
experience tenderness tends to just soften the blow

CURSE

Something prodding me along—hints hidden in the crevices of the old internet where collective memory slips into errata. Everyone knows there is an unseen architecture beyond the new day's erasure. Many names for such a structure. I prefer hope—a kind of irredeemable faith in tomorrow. Or a rebirth, not after pantomiming drowning in water as the sun sets purple but pulled screaming like a calf from the acid. Something prodding me, entreating me not to forget it. Asking me to break it free from its concealment. Says to me in the voice of a metronome, do not anthropomorphize me. Something is asking, coercing, pleading—audible begging that makes me sweat and lick my lips. No half measures or obscurantism. But I have to close my eyes to hear it because there is a cricket in the house interfering with my dreams. Through discipline and psychoanalysis something breaks or is broken as a horse is broken for a horse cannot break itself.

David Wolf

18 STORIES

1.

Behind a mossy monument, I found a bride crouched in the grass. ‘Oh holy hell, don’t tell!’ she laughed. I raised a sparkling, airy glass.

2.

She walked through one door and out another. In between: much tension... leading to transformation, epiphany... you can just imagine.

3.

The storm rattled on like a pile of ripe cantaloupes tumbling from the racks. My colleagues are intellectually weak, the professor thought.

4.

‘You’re so obtuse,’ he said. ‘It’s just an angle,’ she replied, ‘and aren’t you a cute spear of crabgrass ‘neath the tall oak tree?’

5.

She hit a jaded snag while cutting clean of nobility’s erosion. So much for unyoking dimensionality from impression under the table.

6.

Heard above the general din of the café: ‘Have a little bubbly with your sweet little tart!’ Meaning can be funny. Bubbles rose in flutes.

7.

With a cavalier flip-off to the hidebound modes of honor-slash-rhetoric, he faded unreliably into the sunrise of over-easy transcendence.

8.

He was all, like, whatever, while she felt partially yet precisely committed to certain aspects of their current relationship. Ah, love.

9.

She shoots through the ancient square on her Bella motor scooter like a glazed orchid, unlike a rugby play embroidered on a tea towel.

10.

He read widely in those days in the desert, widely but focused, drawing few conclusions, checking his shoes each morning for scorpions.

11.

Meaning seemed to be... his enduring subject, inexhaustible, ever perspectival/contextual, ever leaning, vital, bonkers, here, gone, etc.

12.

He signed up for a seminar on how to increase his Web traffic. Got there and the room was full of spiders.

13.

She happily used the conditioning shampoo provided by the Hotel Pavlov—now she salivates every time a bell rings...

14.

Chose the 'pulled rabbit' for my entrée—the waiter brought a top hat, said abracadabra, and plopped a rabbit on my plate—a bit underdone.

15.

Sadly he knew his *l'amour vrai* would continue to drift in and out of his life. He watched the Seine flow by, the river immune to symbolism.

16.

Full orange moon rising above the abandoned shooting range. 'We shouldn't be here like this,' he says. 'Just hit the target,' she replies.

17.

This spring evening's stars are last spring's stars, she thought, realizing that's as true as saying yesterday's scars are today's.

18.

The thudding waves startled her from the dream. She had fallen asleep on horseback again. Oh, how the moonless desert crawled.

MEMO

Thank you for your churned response. I understand the warm tint of disdain attesting to the particulars put before the oar's clearance.

To clarify, I raised the issue of bearings in the context of the trenches' rather unfathomable bouquet of angles. While I do read the chiming clock as quite sound and requiring fractal imagination and tortuous perplexity to rename it Spithead, I wouldn't want to see important sedimentary mists gored because we lack resources (monokinetic, quizzical) to realize necessary paving potions. If such instability proves beyond our logistical moans, then the clothesline option should be spoon-fed back into the ladle. Cyclical bloating of the national saturation aside (the public stance that generosity, care, and wisdom will be the plan when consolidation is locked in [but only after more high-profile players lead the way]), I sense the following: freckled disequilibrium. The dissipatory implausibility of bite-sizing our incantatory vision-belch is clearly a case of retro-blippage.

I agree that our disunified community has no need for spiked specifics clarifying the fresh chaos. I am adding to that a need to speed-skate through the administrative oil slick and spit-balled rationale for the belief in the efficacy of any half-baked safety plan. I hope to tune in to the Town Hall. Quaint, quavering structure. Beams. Splinters. Dust.

SLICKEST POET ALIVE: A PROSE POEM

The slickest poet alive slipped into his Bohemian stereotype with ease. Well-tailored, it suited him. Everybody expected the worst: every other word a double entendre, no underwear, the sordid rumors about frustrated housewives and androgynous boys, the horror stories about disreputable agents and publishers, the apricot brandy, academic tassels, and sullen craft spilled on his tacky, clip-on tie, drinking zombies with zombies at that late cocktail party at that vanity-press new novelist's chic, roach-ridden flat on the Lower East Side, yes, even the truly unconscionable parts redacted from his award-winning, mythic career, all set off by a shocking pink scarf he obviously wore to wake the tranquilized bourgeois from a stupor of flat-packed suburbs and toxic interstates. A mock-up of our poet could be spotted curled in an observation car zooming through spring's lush filigree of dogwood, redbud, and laurel or strolling down Bourbon Street in a violet, supernatural aura or scratching scraggly notes in the noisy airport terminal before ascending to some Olympian colloquium on style.

At readings, he turned into a sophisticated walkie-talkie, a big, loud burp from a radio mouth spouting tinny, ecstatic broadcasts in meter and rhyme, that is, if he were being what may loosely be labeled conventional. He humped the lectern with gusts of vertiginous rhetoric, swells of numinous passion, and fists of cryptic gestures, all climaxing in the staccato of a chiseled epigram or two, and he probably even talked right through intercourse. His plump, electric heart pumped away like mad at his second selection, spilling pickled corpuscles through dilated veins and various dissolute organs. Rattling the mike and sifting a manuscript, he transmitted truth, beatitude, and a spritz of spittle down Plato's magnetic rings, a sensitive receiver set tuned to divine inspiration from a one-way beacon somewhere off the Ionic (or is that Ionian?) shore. He acknowledged devout applause, sipped what appeared to be a glass of illusory water, and sidled (for lack of a better word) offstage.

At receptions, he, potbellied, socialized reasonably well, sarcastically polite at times, turning a question inside out with a sprig of sympathy or a sly smirk or stoneware deadpan, whispering, 'What a fool,' or a trite profanity under his breath so the dean couldn't hear, his middle finger rubbing his nose. A cotillion of formal Pandoras with big brooches, fresh, flirty poetasters, and twiggy, demure coeds draped with glassy pastel dresses—all cornered the artistic commodity (amused against the millefleur wallpaper) like an attack of possessed plastic

dolls who, when chance pulled a string, inquired, ‘What’s the secret to good writing (or money, fame, and love)?’ let alone intelligence, or: ‘Just what’s wrong with my empty, miserable life?’ A second wave broke in, led by an acidic old prof who had read instead of lived (Trollope for trollop) and a surly young rebel wearing army surplus boots and a lumberjack’s glistening beard.

In large urban centers, safely inside federal parameters, his faithful following comprised an even longer list of singular characters: e.g., a select gay or hippie, a gossip columnist, an inner-city brother, a fashion model smoking a coke spliff (for lack of a better reality), an ultraliberal with a silver tray of shrimp canapés, a single swinger, an ‘in’ person, a rising starlet, an omniscient bisexual, a Chinese communist or two for spice, an editor-professor, a professor-writer, a student protégé, and he reads them his latest poem, ‘Gift Not for Resale,’ which is to appear in the next issue of *The New Yorker*.

At night alone in a strange hotel room, our wandering minstrel beat himself to crowing for the sun god instead of checking his cartoonish kids asleep lit blue in the fitful flash of a distant thunderstorm. Time roared past him in the dark, flashing, clacking, filled with filmic glimpses of people in an oddly ominous world—a preppy boy in a triste trance, head against the wide window, a stylish socialite poised in the bright dining car, bored as hell, holding a cynical cigarette. A vision or hallucination emerged from the wall—Satie’s seductive *Trois Gymnopédies* from an adjacent room. A framed Picasso print, *Dove of Peace*, lay on the floor, shattered, torn, stained with coffee.

‘Who threw the switch?’ he asked himself. ‘Physics, fate, a tragic flaw in the hero of our play?’

The demiurge on the bridge sails the double tracks of the oracular, he jotted down in his head—the liquid dream tinged with the shimmer of high C’s, a delirious mixed metaphor of porpoise echoes left open to an elegant critic’s misinterpretation, lacy nuptial memories fading back to the wilds of Wales or Indiana, just far enough away to verify a conscience, but not act on it.

A precarious balance, distracted by a glint, missed a step and fell—change, key ring, wedding ring spilling from his pocket like an erupting wishing well until one mute, frowsy morning he woke, sprawled on the carpet in his own dried-up puddle of blood, the spinning motel-room universe suddenly inscrutable.

‘Where am I?’

He achieved a syzygy of four for a minute—himself, his daughter, son, and wife—but only that once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of happiness hazy as a moonlit farmhouse flashing past his sleeper window late at night, and on the station platform in a pastoral college town, he had simply left a leather briefcase packed with intricate verses and cerebral dynamite. Now, he would never finish that bizarre satirical epic about a famous method actor hiding from Hollywood in an

isolated Benedictine monastery. Too much weed for one little head to clear, some say. An acute case of intellectual trash, others. Alcoholic insult to the brain.

His last words were a slurred '[Bleep] the censor,' a proselyte reports, as if he were politically prone.

In Kilgore, Texas, his epitaph records: 'The great vulva of the world swallowed him whole,' a Virgo at heart.

S. G. Mallett

COUGHING SPELLS

A universal region. As if mana and manna grew from the same source, as if by a trick of the light, as if names thumbed from day to night as your roots grew visible to curse the soil they ran from a clear and easy radio cadence made it seem, like love on consignment, or microwaved joy. As if success was quantified by the English muffins removed from the toaster, they were murdered for what we now compost and microbial syllables, as if thoughts could be plagiarized, as if thoughts were things, as if shades could be restricted, as if two setting suns were inchoative, as if a past Proust could commune with a future Proust through the eyes of all needles.

Light through trees as if time was making up for lost time, who will poison the well?—I think without asking. As if the music theorist invented silence

FORDING THE PATUXENT

Cattail wands in ascus-shaled rows
Rise prolate, and to the seventh moon
Of Saturn, what are eighty-three moments?

Fork the tail of a forster's tern,
Round down to the nearest
Annal of it all, boil the willow
Bark in a brass kettle—

Salt streaks the calx in russet sheets,
He wore his hair longer then,
It snowed that spring, and the spring
After it—magpies painted through

The window's red shift—retrocausality
Is the chamomile steam
Coating the window, red cedar is juniper
The collapse of states weave home for.

Roy Duffield

CONSTRUCTION WORK

kerouac before, cumming beforer

a poem prose

railroad

-ers, we mouthed you

eared

you'd

beautifilled

dress flowers perfumely

—nose pur-for-Haitiens—

pagans

unbelievers

("No, t

his time they're Xian

& white

& yellow & blue" he says, bide'n/"t

his time

it's not KO

Come?

it's the opposite

ni NO")

in all probability, noun-verb-adjectives—

all humanity' S. err-

—or—

[Knock, knock!... Boom! Boom!]

"Unclose

down! It's Defective

Johnson;

Unclothed

& how!

O how now

Steve Gilmartin

HE FELL INTO HIS MOUTH, THE SITE OF PRODUCTION

Sleeping, he is at his most complex. The noise inside is a huge cloverleaf of autonomic spells. He grabs at his constants and hides behind their skirts. Dins stream from mouth and nose. How well they work together in their mystery. Making a pile of everything red, collected from brick dust, it settles. And he sleeps on, unstitching and stitching us back into his head. Covered and dreaming us a grave.

Interviews & Reviews



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*A Conversation Between Two Poets**

CHARLIE

So the thing I wanted to begin with was I wanted to take your mind back, back to 2014 or 2015. I haven't worked it out, but it was one of those years, we went to see Heather Phillipson perform at the Serpentine. I was just thinking about that and thinking about, like, where we are now and where we were then and how kind of curious it is was that there was a moment before either of us had achieved anything as poets. I wanted to ask as well, was that moment, that performance, looking back, was that at all important to you, or was it formative in a way, or was it just something that happened?

POPPY

I do remember feeling quite inspired by it, yes. I was interested in the way, during that, she used sonics, like, overlaid words in a sing-song way. I went away and made a little film actually. I downloaded the open source audio software Audacity and started experimenting with recorded sound. And after that, I got more into music making. I guess because I've worked in visual arts a lot and I'm very interested in the visual in general, I liked the interdisciplinarity of what she was doing, combining different forms. But yes, I remember enjoying the absurdity of the imagery and I guess it made me realise that poetry and art could maybe exist in the same place. How about you? What did you think?

CHARLIE

I think similarly, I think it had less of an impact on me in terms of what the performance was, but more kind of a clarification that this is what I wanted to do. Not that I wanted to be on stage at the Serpentine. I mean, I wouldn't mind having a show, but, like, the main thing was that poetry was what I wanted to pursue, because I think that after that moment, that's when I started taking poetry more

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POPPY COCKBURN is a Margate-based writer and communications professional working in the visual arts. She is the author of three pamphlets of poetry: *feed notes* (If a Leaf Falls Press, 2021), *Waiting Room* (Invisible Hand Press, 2021) and *everywhere swans* (Bottlecap Press, 2022). Her next, *Liquid Crystal Lovesick Demon*, is forthcoming with Broken Sleep in early 2023.

seriously, pursuing it more. It felt for me, looking back, like something that I don't think really changed the direction I was going, but it really confirmed for me that poetry was the thing for me.

POPPY

I remember you being very into poetry already and wanting to speak to Emily Berry. I think she was there.

CHARLIE

Yeah, she was there. I remember seeing her in, like I remember the coat she was wearing because I just remember overhearing a conversation between her and a Serpentine assistant. And the assistant said a kind of awkward, like, 'oh, I really like your coat Emily'. And I was just, like, cringing, like, jeez, that didn't sound very authentic. And I just remember being very impressed that we were in the same place as Emily Berry, because like I said to you before the event happened: 'how can I get to see Emily Berry'. Or something about wanting to see Emily Berry. This was around when Dear Boy came out, I think, and you said, oh, these are her tour dates on her website. I was like, damn, why didn't I think of that!? And then, yeah, we went, and Emily Berry was there. And I just think we remember seeing her and being kind of star struck. I didn't say anything to her.

POPPY

I feel like you did speak. I just feel like you did.

CHARLIE

No, that's the kind of thing I usually do, but I think maybe because you were there I was conscious of not wanting to embarrass you as well. I have no problem with embarrassing myself but I don't want to drag other people into the embarrassment pit with me.

POPPY

Yeah. I guess poetry is quite embarrassing, so yeah, you have to be fairly unembarrassable to write it.

CHARLIE

Yeah, it's funny, I think... so the Heather Phillipson, Emily Berry, Sam Riviere,

Jack Underwood generation. I feel like they really got me into poetry as well, because I quite like all of those poets, and they seemed to all kind of erupt at the same time.

POPPY

Yeah, I think some of them, at least, were published in or involved in a journal that I liked. There were a few editions of it. It was called Stop Sharpening Your Knives... I remember going to a launch event for SSYK in a pub in Clerkenwell, and there was a band called Octagon Court playing halfway through, and I remember just really enjoying the event. I can't remember who it was – it might have been Jack Underwood or Tim Cockburn – but I remember someone reading out a poem describing a romance as being like a fish bowl that had to be held between two people or something. I remember loving that poem. And I enjoyed the music element as well, the mixture of things. I found it refreshing because I'd been to quite a few very dry poetry readings so, yeah, I found it quite exciting. And I thought they were a gang of people to watch out for.

CHARLIE

Yeah, they were a strong gang... moving on... when I read your poetry, I'm always interested in the visual aspect. You're also a really good photographer and I know that you have an interest in film. So I was thinking about the visual element, and then I think I would put myself in the category of being quite image based, but I don't have any talent in terms of photography or anything, anyway do you think that your interest in photography feeds into you being a visual poet?

POPPY

Thank you. Yeah, probably, definitely. Especially because I'm sort of concerned with medium and how you choose to present something. The imagery is amazing in your poetry. So actually, if you're a bad photographer, maybe it's more interesting to think about how you conjure and present imagery most successfully, and maybe a camera just isn't your medium, but the pen is. And besides, you can do a lot more with a written image than a static one. Yeah, I think with photography it's about elements coming together at an exact moment, that creates a uniqueness of image, and I think it's the same with poetry in that sense. I also think that what you choose to present is interesting. You might take 26 photographs and you'll just show one of them or maybe post it online and then it changes because it exists in a different space. There's a lot you don't see. Photography can be a bit like an erasure poem in that sense... And then other people build an impression based on what they see and I think that's interesting with poetry as well, what gets edited out. Personally, I

post a lot of draft poetry on social media. I'm interested in showing a fuller picture, even if it is can get a bit messy. I like the idea of poetry as being able to be frivolous in the same way photography often is.

CHARLIE

Yeah, that's interesting. Obviously, I feel the pull of the visual and I feel like I can see a good photograph, but I have no way of capturing it. Whereas maybe with a pen I'll at least feel some kind of level of I might have a chance of getting the image in my head down, but with the camera, nothing. Another interesting thing, I guess, for people reading this, is we both had poems in a magazine recently, like one after the other, with the same phrase 'Negroni season'.

POPPY

I felt worried about that originally. I didn't consciously submit that one using the same line.

CHARLIE

No, this is the thing, because I actually stole the line from you and I just wanted to be clear that's the way it went, because let me explain. Poppy has a poem from her most recent pamphlet everywhere, swans. And I got this little note from her with a poem called no winners, which has the line, 'they say Negroni season / won't come around again'. And I thought, oh, great Negroni season! That's so Chelsea Minnis, that's going in my poem. And so, selfishly, I just took it and put it in a completely different poem. And then I dedicated the poem to Poppy because chivalry is not dead. And then the crazy thing was, like, I said to Poppy, I just had the poem I dedicated to you accepted in a journal, so send these guys [*Berlin Lit*] a poem. And so she sent the original Negroni Season poem and our poems were published side by side. It's a long story, but you get the gist of it. I was just wondering, though, when you saw that I'd taken that, it's not really a line, it's more a phrase. Were you a bit annoyed?

POPPY

No, not really. Not at all. I guess it's nice to have someone think that something you've written is good enough to reuse, and then it was kind of credited anyway. I had a different situation recently where somebody I was actually in conversation with sent me some poems they'd written and I looked through them. Then I saw that they'd liked one of my tweets. Then they resent me the draft of the poems and I noticed they'd used one of my tweets as the title, but without saying anything about it. I thought that was a bit cheeky and I felt a bit weird and irritated about it.

CHARLIE

Yeah, I think that is more justifiably irritating.

POPPY

And I felt a bit feminist about it as well. But no, I found what you did interesting. I particularly liked that line from my poem, so I enjoyed the idea that it'd gone further afield. In the context of my poem, it was a double entendre in relation to the idea of there being a Negroni Season, but also it being the name of a racing horse... So I guess it was recontextualized by your poem and given a new lease of life. And it's kind of nice to think of poems speaking to each other, of being in conversation with one other in that way. I like poems that borrow lines from other poems.

In the past you've read through some of my poems and kind of cited lots of poets you think I've borrowed from or been influenced by. I remember you saying you thought I'd taken a line from a poem by Sylvia Plath once, and honestly, I hadn't. I don't think I'd read the poem that you were referring to. But I think it's interesting, once you read a lot of poetry, you probably start subconsciously being influenced by the poems you're enjoying anyway, or reading with everything else you're reading in mind. That's normal.

CHARLIE

Yeah, there are certain poets, when I'll read them, and they won't even know of my work, but they'll have certain formulations of phrase or idea that are so similar to mine and I feel like, 'goddamn, I was on the same path to that line that they were!' And it is quite interesting how lines are generated, if someone I've never met can end up with a line so similar to mine, like how original are human beings or are they not original at all?

POPPY

I think context is everything. So, yeah, a single line, even if you think it's quite original, it probably exists in someone else's mind, if not on the page. And yeah, they'll have just potentially used it in a totally different context.

It's exciting to me. Is it perhaps a slightly narcissistic thing, to be so concerned with striving for the uniqueness of the poem, or persona at that, cliché being the enemy? There's a lot of online talk about what constitutes good and bad poetry in relation to mainstream poets that are very popular at the moment. I see quite a lot of online bickering and bitchiness about it on Twitter.

CHARLIE

Oh, do you?

POPPY

It's all quite funny, but yeah, the poetry that most people actually seem to find most popular is maybe more leaning towards the affirmation-oriented kind of stuff that does quite often slip into cliché, and infuriates literary purists. But I don't always think cliché is such a bad thing, especially if you're conscious of it, and maybe even able to wield it cleverly.

CHARLIE

Changing the subject entirely. Someone we both admire is Sophie Robinson, I guess we admire her in different ways. Maybe we could both articulate why we admire her so much.

POPPY

I've got her book, *Rabbit*.

CHARLIE

I think *Rabbit* is secretly like a seminal text and nobody's realised this except me, but I'm waiting for other people to realise that it's really so good. But what is it that makes her such a good poet? Why is *Rabbit* such a good poetry collection?

POPPY

I think there's something about the tone and the honesty of it, the playfulness of it. I know she's quite influenced by Frank O'Hara, which comes through in the tone. I think there's a conversationality to it that manages to be simultaneously charming and raw – it's very human. So, yeah, I think that's probably why I find it good. What do you think?

CHARLIE

Uh-oh, now I'm under a bit of pressure. I think the last two poems in *Rabbit* are both emotional tour-de-forces, they tend to marry complex emotional state with imagery in a way that I don't think is necessarily easy to do. And so I admire that. Also, when reading a poem by Sophie Robinson, I'm never bored.

POPPY

Do you want to read one of her poems now?

CHARLIE

No, I don't. Just because we only have so much time on this zoom chat. But what was I going to say? Yeah, it's very hard for me to engage with a lot of poetry because I get bored very easily. But Sophie Robinson, I don't think there's a point where I'm reading it and I think I'm bored. Also, as you may remember, one of my poems I wrote in conversation with Sophie Robinson's poem *Art in America*.

POPPY

Yes, I've got it here, actually.

CHARLIE

Yeah. What's it called? *Madonna? Madonna*.

POPPY

How does that line ['there's no art in America / it's all just sugar and war'] influence the writing?

CHARLIE

Well, to be honest, I think my opening stanza is all well, the whole poem is all in conversation with Sophie Robinson's poem. But what really inspired the poem was just having a flick through her Instagram. And then I saw a picture of her and Sean Bonney having lunch together, no, breakfast in Berlin. I was like, wow! How do these two separately, amazing people, very distinctly amazing people, know each other? Isn't that cool? And I was like, yeah, well, I felt some kind of tug of responsibility that someone needed to record their friendship, because it's really nice that they were friends and I admire them both a lot in different ways. So, yeah, I ended up feeling that part of my poem was my responsibility to their friendship.

POPPY

It's quite a generous thing to do, and interesting that you felt that responsibility.

CHARLIE

Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I also just wanted to write a good poem, so I think it works in my favour, too. I'm going to move the conversation on again. Have you done three pamphlets now?

POPPY

Yes. I've published three, and written four.

CHARLIE

Because you've got *Liquid Crystal Lovesick Demon* coming out with Broken Sleep in February 2023. And so you've done these four pamphlets and I feel like after you've done four pamphlets, that means it's kind of like collection time.

POPPY

Hmmm maybe it is. I've got another pamphlet or two in the makings potentially. I was going to ask you about collections. Pamphlets feel quite low stakes, but I like writing them. They give a sense of direction. To use an analogy, they feel like dinghies with a little sail, a fun little jaunt. But a collection feels like a major voyage that requires preparation, a planned course and conscious navigation. It's quite an investment for people to buy a collection, I think. So I guess you have to be thinking a little bit more about your reader and who they are and where you're taking them. And maybe I haven't quite got to that stage yet where I'm fully conscious of what I'm writing and why. Maybe I just have commitment issues.

CHARLIE

So, correct me if I'm wrong, you're not putting a collection together at the moment, you're focused on the pamphlets, but you have in the back of the mind that it's going to happen, that you're going to write a collection?

POPPY

I guess, in a practical sense, there's a time issue in terms of work and fitting it in, when you start to think about something more long form, you need to have sight of its entirety. I'm also aware there're lots of great poets who have only recently put out collections. I've been surprised because I've been seeing their names around for a long time and then thought, oh is this their first book? Like Lucy Mercer and Warsan Shire. It makes sense not to rush, and to work out what it is you actually

want to put out into the world when it comes to a collection-length book. But, yeah, I also have the problem that I write a lot of poems. I struggle to work out which ones are worth redrafting and editing. It'd be cool to have a sort of filtering machine that could just tell you which ones would be interesting to other people.

CHARLIE

Probably Sam Riviere has a machine that does it because he had two machine written poems in *The Poetry Review*.

POPPY

Yeah, I think I read one of those. In his novel *Dead Souls*, there's technology that can scan for poetry plagiarism, though that does already exist in some way, for academic work at least.

CHARLIE

So how are they going to calibrate a poem machine which decides which are your best poems, what are the variables of this machine, beauty vs emulsion, death vs heat, trouble vs scansion?

POPPY

A machine that helps decide which poems to submit to which journals – which ones they're going to like? Yeah, you have to just use your brain, unfortunately. Sad.

On that, I think you have to be careful not to write to a brief, or be aware if you are. I think I've done that, where I've read a journal and then written and submitted something based on what I think they might like, and then they published it and I thought, I didn't really like that poem very much...

Anyway, I know you've written a collection. Let's talk about that.

CHARLIE

Yes. I've got a release date. So it's coming out in June 2023 and it's called *A fondness for the colour green*.

POPPY

Ah, nice! I love the word fond.

CHARLIE

Thank you. Mark Waldron suggested the title because he didn't like the working

title, which wasn't very good. Which is funny because me you and him all read together [for the *Santa Lucía* launch].

The process of writing a collection was kind of laborious, really. I don't want to scare you or anything, but it took a long time to come together. Despite the challenge, I'm only doing collections now, by the time the first collection comes out, I'm quitting doing pamphlets, basically. You heard it here first. Bombshell! So it wasn't really the writing that was tiring, because I had the poems from my pamphlets and some new stuff, but it was just like the order, the curation of what fits together, what do I drop, what do I keep? And they're kind of very big questions and it took a lot of time and a lot of painful decisions. I mean, who knows? I probably still don't have the ideal order. Sorry.

POPPY

Did you print all the poems out and arrange them on the floor?

CHARLIE

Yeah, I made some space in the living room. It was very, very dusty. So I swept the floor and then got the poems out. And at that point it wasn't helpful, to be honest. I just was like, well, they seem to be in a good order, so maybe it was helpful to confirm that I had the right order, but like you said, I agree completely. A pamphlet is kind of like there's not so much riding on it. And then the collection, it feels I don't know, maybe it feels quite artificially important, but it feels like it's more important and you kind of want to create something that lasts.

POPPY

I guess the more expansive you can be, the more the poems might be speak to each other and say more. I guess you're able to kind of communicate whatever it is you're trying to say slightly better, to deepen the overall impression.

CHARLIE

Yeah. I mean, you have to have your fingers crossed and you have to hope that it will have some kind of impact. Otherwise what have you been doing with your life?

POPPY

Well, just enjoying the process.

CHARLIE

Yeah. That's a good point. Maybe it's the journey, not the end product.



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Contributors

KEN ANDERSON won the Saints & Sinners Playwriting and Louisiana College Writers Fiction and Drama contests and Grand Prize, as well as Louisiana State University's Caffee Medal for prose. He was a finalist in the Saints & Sinners Poetry Contest, the Ferro-Grumley Award, and the Independent Publishers Book Awards.

KEVIN CAMP originally started his writing career as a poet, but switched after college graduation to prose. His first few written works focused mostly on Quaker theology, politics, and activism, but a willfully perverse work ethic and restless spirit led him to fiction, a pursuit he greatly enjoys. A native of Hoover, Alabama, Camp enjoys confusing advertising algorithms and loves peace and quiet.

MATILDE DAMELE moved to New York in 1999 after a degree in English literature from the University of Bologna, with the desire to become a photographer. She took a photography workshop at the International Center of Photography and she casually met established and famous photographers like Robert Frank and Saul Leiter, who inspired her to pursue the genre of 'street photography'. After participating in several group shows and one solo show at the Empire State Building, in 2015 she moved to London to earn a master degree in photography at Central Saint Martins University. She has participated in various group shows and one solo show and exhibited a project at photo London in 2019. She currently lives in Rome where she continues to work on her photography projects.

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JOSHUA ST. CLAIRE is an accountant who works as a corporate controller in rural Pennsylvania. His poetry has been published in *Mayfly*, *The Delmarva Review*, *ubu.*, and *The Ghost City Review*, among others. He is Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. His work was included in the 2022 *Dwarf Stars Anthology*, and he is the winner of the 2022 Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award.

GREG SENDI is a Chicago writer and former fiction editor at *Chicago Review*. His career has included broadcast and trade journalism as well as poetry and fiction. In the past year, his work has appeared or been accepted for publication in a number of literary magazines and online outlets, including *Apricity*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Clarion*, *CONSEQUENCE*, *Flashes of Brilliance*, *Great Lakes Review*, *The Headlight Review*, *The Masters Review*, *New American Legends*, *Plume*, *Pulp Literature*, *San Antonio Review*, *Sparks of Calliope*, and *upstreet*.

DAVID WOLF is the author of five collections of poetry, *Open Season*, *The Moment Forever*, *Sablier I*, *Sablier II*, and *Visions* (with artist David Richmond). His work has appeared in *New York Quarterly*, *Poet & Critic*, *River Styx Magazine*, and numerous other literary magazines and journals. He is an emeritus professor of English at Simpson

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IAN WYATT's writing about climbing, the great outdoors and nature has been published in outdoor magazines in the UK and USA. His academic writing on literary landscapes has appeared in numerous books and journals. But it was his obsession with light that led to his novel *Vatican File 1181: Galileo*, which explores the reasons why Galileo was brought to trial. Ian's second novel, a work of speculative fiction, again focuses on an astronomer; the as yet unpublished *Falling Light*. Links to many of Ian's publications can be found at ianwyattwriting.co.uk.