



LOTUSEATER

ISSUE 22

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Prose



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D. G. BRACEY

Richard Static

This is the story of Richard, a man who always wanted to help, but never quite knew how to help, a man who said the wrong thing so much... well, not necessarily wrong, but overly complicated. Richard was a worried man, a serious man, and if we were to start at the end of his story, we would see him coming apart, literally disintegrating, pixelated by sound, torn to pieces by varying frequencies. Minutes before his pixilation/disintegration, he was a tired mess. His black pleated slacks and white button-up shirt plastered to his thin frame like plastic wrap. His hair gel washed down the storm drains, mixed with the runoff of a tropical storm. Dirty clouds faded like lumpy pillows on wrinkled grey sheets. The peeping-tom moon winked through these clouds and kicked open the door on a sunrise, spilling like orange juice across a TV tray, soaking a red shag horizon. Wind bit through him. The grass wet and waxy beneath him.

But this isn't a story about the weather. This is a story about Richard hiccupping a burp and disappearing in a blip.

Richard grew up in a small North Carolina town with one traffic light. He lived in a tin roof farmhouse on the outskirts of town. Sun blared or rain tickled the tin like tiny jokes laughing into gutters. His Grandfather died when Richard still toddled, but his presence lingered in the marrow of a place—the Basset-Hound lamp in the den, the war-worn Carbine rifle propped in the hallway, the Monte Carlo in the driveway, collecting the dust of plowed fields.

Richard wished his Grandfather's ghost would walk into the room. He talked to his Grandfather like he was there, but he ignored Richard.

His Granny worked third shift at a carpet plant. Whenever she woke up, her and Richard would sit together at the kitchen table. Granny snapped peas and yelled Wheel of Fortune answers at the television. Richard munched peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, crust and all. Granny's hands twisted with arthritis. Her wrists rolled on knobby joints, always a task to be done—muscle memory wrapped in tissue paper.

Richard's mother would come to visit, every now and then. His mother looked like her mother. Richard looked like a stranger. The women yelled in private. Richard

listened through walls. He pulled the chain on the hound-dog lamp—click, light, click, darkness. He stared at the bulb under the shade until his vision splotted.

Granny was rocks and dirt roads. His Mother blew like a dust-filled breeze. The two couldn't last for long in the same house for too long. He wanted to ask them to behave, to love one another more, but he couldn't find the song to sing, the right words to say.

When Richard was alone with his Mother, she'd ask him about school or girls, he'd answer her reflection in the vanity mirror as she got ready to leave again. He'd ask to go with her.

"Come inside," Granny would say from a creaky screen door. The car crunched rocks—the birds' gave a disgusting whistle. The fizzle of a coca cola in a glass on a table. The pluck of a chord inside him. The shuffle of sounds.

Richard migrated south for college. In Charleston, he shared a house with three other business students. His roommates laughed in another room. Their house rotted, jammed between a locksmith shop to the left and a French confectioner to the right. Paisley tapestries covered peeling paint. His roommates sat on a couch with mismatched cushions. His room smelled of shaved metal and day-old dough.

Richard would crawl out of his window to smoke a joint on the roof—shingles, rotten and splintered, but the pitch was kind, only a slight slant. Over the roofs, the barge lights twinkled on the bay like floating, fallen stars. He'd scoot to the edge, where the gutters dangled loose, just a small leap to the ground. The city sat in uneven fences and narrow backyards and falling-down houses converted into apartments. The sounds of the city heaped together.

Once, Richard stretched out too stoned to climb back inside. Cries rose from below. Looking down from his ledge, he spied a little girl sprawled in one of those backyards. She laid on packed dirt and sprigs of spider grass. He could see into what must've been the girl's house, four paint-chipped windowpanes, like four tiny drive-in movie screens. People talked around a table, laughed into wine glasses.

The little girl, no older than eight, curled fetal, just below those windows. She scratched at the earth, like she wanted the ground to swallow her whole. Richard could've whispered to her like an angel hovering above her, but he didn't. Her sobs trapped in a vacuum, unheard by everyone except her and Richard and the dog next door that stood by the fence with a tilted head and perched ears.

Richard felt that familiar fizzle down his spine. The fizzle to a burn in the gut. He was struck mute, unable to find the words in the void, only the tinkling of metal chimes—empty, useless sound.

Richard met an English Major named Maggie. She was older than him. She talked a lot. Often, she told him how his quiet disposition made her want him more. She said things he liked to hear. She said things like, “Your efficiency of words showed restraint and strength.” She said his words meant more, because they were few. She kissed him with tornado force. They watched smart movies and when they watched dumb ones, she made smart comments about them. Richard would wait until the credits rolled and try to say something quippy. “Oh, this is my favorite part, I love when they list names and accomplishments... it’s like graduating from the movie.”

She’d smile, slap his shoulder. Sooner or later, they’d kiss in gusts and blusters.

She loved Irish poets and grapes, and she could toss one so far up in the air it’d hit the ceiling, but they always came down in her mouth. The whiz of the toss, the plop of the catch, the squish of the bite.

They married straight out of college. Got a house on the suburb side of the bridge. The distance sounds of lawnmowers on sodded lawns and freshly-painted firetrucks. Two years in, they had a daughter. They named her Rebecca, called her Bec. Richard used to watch Bec sleep, just like he saw all the Dads do in the movies. She grew older, looked like her mother. Only when she was troubled or angry could you see his faraway eyes and wrinkled brow.

At seven, Bec would sit alone in her room at night with all the lights off. She’d close her eyes tight and hope a ghost would come to her in the darkness. She hoped for something to scare her, anything. But their house was only five years old, and they were the only family who’d ever lived there. Still, Bec tried séance after séance to summon a wayward spirit. Any spirit would do. All she ever received—intrusive headlights of her Father’s car on the eggshell walls when he came home late from work.

The crack of eggs. The dimmed vroom of a car cranking.

Richard worked in a second-floor office. An old brick building converted from an industrial-aged boot factory, filled with fluorescent lights and cubicles and people on phones. People rarely came face to face, unless they marched to the break-room for more coffee. Occasionally, people held meetings about what other people did in their cubicles.

Richard stared at in-boxes and out-boxes full of paper-clipped pages. Green file-folders stuffed with red bottom-lines. Stacked index card laminates of addendum tax-codes and state-law amendments and loopholes tacked to his cushioned

wall. On his cubicle wall, directly in his line of sight, he'd hung a black and white Ansel Adams' calendar. It was three years out of date, stuck on December.

Judy sat on the other side of Richard's faux wall. He'd ask her questions about international bank codes through the wall, drifting down Ansel's Snake River on the way to the Teton Mountains.

Rapids whirring. Judy's voice droning.

Judy was quiet. She sneezed more than normal. Every day, she brought a microwave bag of popcorn and a piece of fruit for lunch. An orange on Monday, an apple on Tuesday, a pear on Wednesday, an apple again on Thursday (usually a Granny Smith), and Friday she would shake things up with a Kiwi or a star-fruit. Judy weighed more than she wanted to, and her skin never tanned. She only talked to three people in the office—Noreen, two cubicles down, Beverly in the glass office and Richard.

Judy's conversations added up to Richard asking her a question and her responding with three words before Noreen or Beverly interrupted her with their giggles about a funny email they'd just read. Judy's green eyes never glittered. They hunched behind tired eyelids, atop bags.

Judy went home to her cat, her Nicolas Sparks' book and her chunked apple-spice candles. She'd take a deep breath, chug some wine and transform into Dominatrix Deana—a moderately successful queen of webcam S&M.

Judy's cat o' nine tails snapped the air. Her laptop dings another payment, dings another request to be dominated.

Once, late at night, Richard researched cures to his numbness, his inability to say the right thing, his need to take on the numbness of others. This worry, this burden, like a heap of broken things in a lumpy satchel upon his back until the straps ripped at his soft skin. An email popped up from Judy—no text or explanation, just a link. He clicked it and zap, there she was, Dominatrix Deana. Her leather mask wasn't enough to hide Judy, her voice different and deep and in control. Richard knew she'd found her waystation, a way to lay her burden down. Where was his whip? Where was his release. He lay in bed and felt the hum of nothing grow into an anxious squeal.

Day after day in ticks and tocks, Richard's wife would ask how he felt about Bec's teacher or about getting a new car. She would ask how dinner was. Half the time, he'd say something, "good" or "fine" or a flat "great." The other half, he'd say nothing. Richard stopped dropping funny one-liners after she finished talking. At first, Maggie thought his pent-up ideas must be so big that one day they'd burst in splash all over the floor, but the floor never got dirty from Richard's ideas.

Night after night, Richard began to feel Maggie toss in bed. She whispered to the lumpy sheets that wrapped Richard's body like a sarcophagus. Eventually, her whispers turned into burning wisps. "You're so cold." Her tone sharpened against the stone of Richard.

Richard wheezed fake snores from a possum stance. He didn't know how to fix this, couldn't see the fissure to fuse it back together, had no idea it had been there. He didn't know how to roll over and put his arm around her and reassure her. He hunted and couldn't find a phrase funny enough to break through what boomed there. It would pass. Even when she yanked the sheets and punched her pillow and cleared her throat with grunts and groans.

The synopsis fired, Richard smiled, thick in a dream. His wife sang from the bathroom, over the sound of the shower. A steam buzzed around him as he rose, pushed open the already cracked door. The humidity kissed him, wrapped around him. She sang "Sunday Kind of Love" or was it "Easy Like Sunday Morning." Richard woke up. It was too late. He yawned loud, put on his robe and inched down the stairs. The house was clean. Parts of the house were empty. Little by little, Maggie had been packing, and he couldn't think of a way to stop her. She'd finished while he slept. He knew the weight of his silence would've been too heavy for her if she had to work as he glared, always so empty. Why couldn't he find the laugh? Why was he so tired?

The moving van roared alive. Maggie's car already idled, whirled from the pumping air conditioner. It was weighted down except for two seats. She'd left the house's front door cracked.

Richard walked barefoot out to the porch. The moving van jolted away, his brother-in-law at the wheel. Maggie followed in her car with Bec in the passenger seat. It was a beautiful day. Bec squinted from the sun and waved goodbye. Maybe Maggie smiled, Richard couldn't tell.

Richard flinched when he heard the music from the car window. Bec belted the high notes. Maggie took the lows. It sounded like a church choir...no, it sounded like the thing that would bring him out of the void. The song that might reach down and pull him up, and like a new birth, the lyrics would launch from his mouth. He might be saved and singing along and clumsily dropping into a harmony. But the song faded and he forgot the words.

Richard sat in a meeting on a Monday morning. His boss repeated the same talking points as last week. A variation of the same questions came from the employees

around the table. The same people gave the same pushback as last week. The same open-ended results. “I thought you said there are no bad ideas,” someone said.

This wasn’t a solution, Richard thought. He pushed away from the table, made his way for the glass door.

His boss asked “Are you okay, Richard?”

Richard nodded all the way down the row of cubicles and under the EXIT sign and down the stairs. He bypassed his car on the way out of the parking garage—horns blared in the street. Down East Bay, past the outdoor markets, he weaved onto the uneven cobblestone of the side streets, ignored the delis he’d never eaten in, the specialty stores he’d never shopped, the coffee shop he couldn’t remember seeing before. He passed blank faces or snaps of conversations or people staring down at their phones, trapped in motion. Music from the shops and restaurants crammed together. The city unveiled and folded fetal and rose and barked and breathed smoke in his face. A string in his spine felt pulled and his legs pumped across the Battery’s grassy park and its statues and cannons. He stopped at the waterfront. A strange mumble cursed his lips.

The spring rain drizzled. People walked fast around him. Tiny diamonds tapdanced in the bay. He could hear it coming—the crackle of a flame, the burning of his gut. Palm trees shook loose unwanted fronds. Winds swept trash to the gutters. The city knew like an ex-lover, rerouted and pushed away the rain. Richard clinched the railings. His clothes blasted to his body. He faced the rain head-on. He screamed. Until his lungs deflated and his throat throbbed.

Cars slash through the knee-deep puddles beside him. Across the street, people on balconies blurred in the downpour. Voices lost. Richard felt his weight shift, felt his feet leave the broken sidewalk. Umbrellas passed under him. Bodies lost in the shadows. No one bothered to look up at Richard.

He wanted to call to them, let it out, let them in—see the wonder. But screams retreated and embers flared in his gulley. His blood, his bones, the flesh around them, his thoughts trapped in his skull, his brain burned, and he opened his mouth to pour his guts, the blaze erupted, caught hot air, and he rose higher.

He can see the house he lived in during college. That dirty, sad, little girl would be a woman now. Maybe she escaped. Maybe, she doesn’t exist anymore.

Here’s when it happens—the pixilation, the disintegration. Time chased time until it caught up and no longer existed. Richard felt weightless, like he rose through the air without rules. The rain reversed in a whoosh. Morning exploded. Richard strained for a message, a meaning, a scroll of credits to read how it was all made, but the frequency blurred. A new transmission fused his soundwaves—a pulse—roaring thunder and quiet sigh, roaring thunder and quiet sigh.

His body relaxed. His mind went fuzzy, hazed fuzzier still. Richard was Richard no more. His atoms unhitched. His pores widened until black holes opened and

swallowed the matter around it, turned it all into music. The gore of unleashed, discordant, un-orchestrated sound. A body of sound, transcending, wafting in the in-between, blanketed in a scratchy frequency—a white noise.

Blocks away, Maggie wrote an email to Richard and saved it. He'd already snatched the message from the ether as her fingers tapped out the words, *Talk to me. Talk to me. PLEASE, TALK TO ME!*

She sat her phone beside the kitchen sink and gathered her coffee from the windowsill. She smiled at Bec sleeping on the couch. Unknowing, her daughter rolled over in her sleep and smiled back.

Maggie sat at her new bistro table in the corner of the kitchen. It only had two chairs. A small antique radio served as a centerpiece. She sipped her coffee and clicked it on. She turned the dial—only static. From station to station, hissing frequencies grasped for a friendly ear, transmitting in unheard languages.

A static shock—a sign, her fingers stopped. The radio's lighted dial brightened with a pulse. Through the speakers came a grainy and faraway buzz, rising and taking shape.

Transfer

Her hair was coarse, and I hated running my fingers through it, but I loved to wrap it around my fist when we fucked. She was still learning all the ways girls can screw girls, which is like what guys can do but better. But you understand, you and your whisper-soft touch were always there.

The first time I saw Her, I was smoking outside the DVD store where I worked with The Sister. The Sister was inside, arranging new titles by release date, but I watched Her standing outside by the ATM. The Sister was petite but wiry, pretty in a workhorse sort of way, one of those scrappy girls you know would win a fist-fight. But Her was the type of girl who has others do the fighting for her. I made conversation with Her, she asked me out for a drink. I couldn't resist Her's confidence, the way she'd known I'd been looking at her, and how she'd looked straight back at me. It was only when I was in the club watching Her work her hips to the music that I found the first sign in her handbag. I didn't realize what you meant at the time, but I know you saw me too.

A little while later, we were at Her parents' place. The Sister was in the bedroom with The Boyfriend and we were in the lounge. I heard The Sister fucking but that was okay because Her and I were making out. I'd known she was nervous, I'd known how badly she'd wanted me, I'd known I was only the second girl to be with Her. My hips pushed back against the desperation of Her's, I felt Her breathe, hot delicate moans in my ear. I'd heard the bedroom door open but didn't let that me slow me down. I remember making eye contact with The Sister as she went to get a beer for The Boyfriend. I watched her pause and stare blankly as I touched Her. When she heard the rattle of the beer bottles, I felt Her try to shove me off her. The Sister seemed not to notice, seemed not to see one of us on the couch, the other on the floor, disheveled, panting. But as soon as The Sister shut the door, I let Her pull me close and shove her hands down my pants. I always wondered if she pushed me off the couch because she knew I fucked The Sister months ago. It was only after I was shuffled out the front door an hour later like the cheap fuck The Sister just had that I got in my car and saw you. A single strand of hair delicately draped across my shoulder. You were long and blond, glinting in the street light as we drove home. You were not mine, not Hers, not The Sister's.

Her and I spent a lot of time together those next few months. She finished highschool and I got a real job shuffling papers and sending emails. We went from

fucking to making love and that made me uneasy. I was tempted to lose myself in her, but it wasn't about the wet slap of sweaty bodies or salty skin against my tongue anymore. For Her, it was about eye contact and tenderness, about feelings and futures. It became the difference between fiery street salsa with its humid cross holds, turns, and throws and the calculated repetition of the fouetté, fermé and effacé of ballet. One time, in the bathroom, I held the sink's edge like a ballet barre and practiced in the mirror until it came naturally. I learned the measured moves; I learned to say I loved Her.

One morning, as I headed to work, I weighed the pros and cons of falling in love. As I realized I felt obliged to give up the ass I got on the side, I saw you again, a strand of blond hair curled on the passenger seat like a viper. I looked at you every time I stopped at a light and you looked back. I almost asked you how you got there but I knew you wouldn't give me a straight answer. I tried not to think about where I'd find Her on the days she dropped me off at work and used my car.

The first chance we got we headed to the coast with The Sister. The three of us shared a bed because there was no couch. As I lay there waiting to fall asleep, I thought about a threesome but figured that'd be incestuous, so I pinched Her nipples how she liked but she pushed my hand away. We hadn't had sex in a week. I crawled out of bed in frustration and waited for Her to come to me, but she didn't. I wrapped Her hoodie around me and went for a smoke on the balcony. The faint light from my cigarette tinted your blondness a shade of red as you cuddled on the sleeve. You quivered in the late-night breeze and I wondered how far you travelled on your own, if you moved in the wind or slipped through drains to find me.

Her and I had carried on as usual for a month or so, until she got a place of her own. I went against my gut and believed Her when she told me it made sense to live closer to where she worked. The next time I saw you, you were nesting on a hairband around her bedpost. I heard you slither while we slept and thought about taking you off, but I left you there and watched you while we fucked. After she fell asleep, I crept into Her bathroom and practiced in the mirror. I'd gotten quite good at saying I loved Her. My eyes lit up and I could hold my open smile, but when I looked into Her eyes, they were blank.

Sometimes I thought of what I'd say if she asked me about The Sister. There wasn't much to tell. The Sister and I hooked up on a weekend and a few days later, The Sister was crying because The Boyfriend I hadn't known about had kissed another girl.

I hadn't seen Her in a while when I was sitting in my apartment and she texted to suggest a break. She asked me where I'd been, but I couldn't tell Her because I didn't remember their names. I saw you watching me from the couch. I almost ignored you but then I picked you up and took a closer look. I measured you against my forearm, checked to see if there was a root attached like they do with transferred

evidence in CSI. I rolled you between my fingers, held you up to the light, then I set you aside while I lit a smoke. I picked you and put you in my mouth. I pressed you against my tongue, wrapped you around it. I ran you through my teeth, slowly, because I could. Then I held you close to my cigarette and watched you sizzle and curl. I rinsed with Listerine. Sometimes I thought I'd find Her cheating on me. Some days, I wished she would.

When I heard Her tell me she was in love with Her Ex, I was relieved. I was sitting in the tub as we texted, watching your lithe form snake across the water. I dipped my toes under so they wouldn't get in your way, then I moved my hands under the water, cupped them around you and brought you close. I took comfort in knowing you'd always be there

A few days later, I text Her. I text The Sister. No one replies. I imagine The Sister with The Boyfriend, Her with Her Ex. I practice in the mirror, hold the sink edge like a well-worn barre, try to deaden my eyes, stiffen my lips. My hands leave clean spots on the sink where they've brushed the lint away. I take a rag and clean the edges, under my toothpaste and brush. I worry because I haven't seen you in days. I pull out the trap in the tub and both sinks, fish behind the toilet through all manner of fuzz and dust. I use the broom for under the bed and behind the couch. I check between my books and behind the microwave. I even use tweezers to pluck out one of my own. But it's black, stunted, dull. I rest it in the palm of my hand, breathe on it, whisper I love you, but nothing moves.

JOHN HENRY SCHAUB

Adrift

The sun feels so good my dermatologist does not know what she is missing.

The sun, she greets me each morning in my little bedroom. She slips through the blinds caressing me as I lay on my cot preparing my mind for yet another day.

The sun and me, we never talk to each other or ask each other questions. She does not like questions so I do not ask them. This eliminates friction and makes for the foundation of a good relationship. We simply exist with each other as we go on.

I am an old man, probably too old for a dermatologist's magic but I see her regularly anyway. I like her.

I do not know my age but I am not a vampire or one suffering from memory loss. Instead, I am just an old man who lost count years ago and who the hell cares? The number around the sun makes no difference. She does not care so why should I?

I have no children. My relatives, what is left of them, are dislocated—sparse and estranged.

I have friends but they are more like familures. Doormen. Waitresses. Shop girls. The barman.

My little cottage teeters atop a sandy hill just steps from the white sand beach and the blue allure of the ocean.

Here in the sand it is warm but not hot.

My favorites on the beach are the families in colorful clusters. Every day they dot the beach where the white sand meets the blue water.

The children giggle and chatter and scream with their joyfully small voices.

The breeze is constant and light except for the sudden gusts. The air is pungent with the salty scent of summer and suntan lotion.

The waves roll in lightly and retreat like breathing or a kiss.

Every day I look down the beach at the families all pudgy on the beach and I want to be them, all pudgy and un-self-aware. I am at the edge of it all under the sun, observing.

The little ones cry and dance under the sun.

The fathers in their big swim trunks half sleep on too small beach blankets while the mothers are attentive to their little ones too close to the water.

It must be so freeing only worrying a little about the mortgage and not a thought of growing old or dying or even a wonderment about why we are here or even the sun burning so brilliantly above.

Could I join all this dumb happiness?

No.

Maybe.

A sudden gust, stronger than the others, works its way across the sand inflicting all that is annoying about the beach.

Instinctively, forearms protect the eyes. Sun umbrellas lift off skyward. Blankets and beach towels tumble away. Children let out little screams.

Just as suddenly the wind settles to a breeze and as it does a small and pink inflatable water mattress tumbles to a stop at my feet.

A floaty I think they call it.

Standing at the edge of it all I look for the owner of this small and pink floaty thing and its dizzying pattern of pink flamingos. I look down the beach at the colorful clusters of families as they gather their wayward blankets and umbrellas. I wait until they settle back into their pudgy and simple alluringly thoughtless routines.

I decide to wait for the thing's owner. I wait and wait and wait and I look along the beach and no one seems to be missing it.

What if I take a little ride on it, one step closer to being them for just a moment?

A tiny cloud drifts in front of the sun and passes as if winking. Instantly I take this as a sign to go for a little ride on the mattress.

The sun warms and I step into the water with the pink floaty thing and wade to my knees and then the water laps at my swim trunks. I look back at the families on the beach and see no one who sees me, so I officially claim the thing temporarily my own and I sit on its middle and the ends of the thing pop up off the surface of the water. I turn and lay my long body onto the thing, my legs awkwardly hang off the end at my knees. I look up to the sun as she greets me burning at my chest—my arms outstretched at my sides, Jesus-style.

My hands flap in the water trying to steer the thing against what I sense is a current. I turn my head to the side and see in the distance the colorful clusters dotting the beach.

What if I join them?

I would first need to find a wife good at ignoring my peculiarities. She would need to look the other way at times and I would need to do the same to her since at this stage in life I do not think I could attract a perfectly sane women who had no undesirable qualities.

Is she my dermatologist? I do like her and she tolerates me so that is good.

We would not officially marry since why does the government need to be involved? Instead, we would have a little ceremony on this very beach right here not far from our little cottage on the sandy hill and at the end of the ceremony we would pummel each other with rice.

Babies would arrive one after the other. It would be easy to make the babies since we are both so fertile. She becomes pregnant with just a passing look at each other. Babies and babies and babies all pudgy and bubbling around the cottage and down to the beach we go for a Sunday picnic.

Little Molasses, with her bouncy red curls, tows behind her a small pink flamingoed floaty thing she had just filled dizzyingly with so many of her tiny breaths.

We claim our spot on the hot sand and settle in as a colorful cluster.

I paddle a little with my Jesus arms to counteract the light tug of the breeze and current that wishes me further out to sea. Sensing the breeze has matured to wind I paddle a little faster but feel I am not making any progress so with great effort I flip to my stomach allowing the sun to burn at my back.

I look back to the shore and barely see the beach, or maybe there it is, or is that salt in the eye? I blink it away.

Now I feel I am moving rapidly out to sea. My flamingoed mattress thing is becoming soft. All those little puffs of air from our little Molasses are somehow hastily escaping into the universe.

Now there is a small sense of a problem.

I do not have problems often but I feel this may be one. The floaty thing is so soft it is becoming of no use. It is actually preventing me from staying afloat since now it is nothing more than a plastic bag I need to manage. Reluctantly I let go of the thing and turn onto my back and look up and see nothing but blue sky and sun.

I feel I am moving rapidly out to sea. I think of my family.

We are all annoyed with little Molasses who is complaining incessantly about her lost floaty thing. All the children and babies are becoming too warm under the sun. They are hungry and irritated by their sandiness. They are all tugging at me and each other all hot and irritated.

Little fights break out among them.

My dermatologist wife is of no help as she applies a thick paste of zinc to Molasses's little red nose.

Suddenly the pudgy un-self-aware along the beach are aware of something and are pointing excitedly at the horizon and shouting.

A person.

That man.

There's someone swimming.

Way out there.

Floating?

Someone call the authorities.

I think, looking out to sea as the babies cling to my legs whimpering, why would

anyone disturb that man's few moments of peace?

A helicopter hovers above the man, its silver blades flash under the bright sun.

A rope dangles from the helicopter and at the end there is a rescue person trying to save the man.

They have been trying for what seems to be too long.

Of Fridges and Flights

The unusual positioning of the fruits in the room gave the space for the conjuring of storms of varied natures. With no sharp distancing between them, the strikingly red cherries looked oddly separated. The oranges on the sparsely clothed table were simply judgemental. The rug demonstrated an attempt at being floral but the resulting glitch went just fine with the torn sea blue wallpaper behind. The light only shone on the textured parts of the muscles. A half formed fist supporting a fearful face and a forearm resting on an indecisive knee and a foot already having stepped into the anticipated troubles.

An unforgiving mist had descended upon a procession of black shrouded figures. Carrying the burden of a silently screaming grief and of the unforgiving harsh winter, they marched onwards heavily carrying a liberated cold body.

He stood behind a moss covered tombstone. A naïve stalker with a beak like nose protruding in fearful businesses of no pleasant gains. He didn't even register in either categories of distraction or danger and was paid no attention to. Contrary to habitual old age gossips, the grim gathering departed with heavy silences leaving the boy and the body to fend for their own.

Since summer never happened here, all that could be imagined of the warm and the welcoming season were the summers already spent somewhere. A contrast of mother's floral strikingly red dress and a huge self brought bouquet of pink peonies intertwined in a blur picture near reflecting moss green marble qualified for a distant whiff of the compromising season. A return to freshly harvested lemons drowning under the sharp rectilinear gush of tap water was remembered as an other worldly act. Something that could never be pictured against the heavily draped unapproachable being of the humans of this winter infested place.

The unappealing chipped bucket in the corner had an overbearing presence over all measly scents of the forcefully occupied hollow house. He had initially wondered about the nonchalant permissions given in no intentionally conducted courts. But the eventual treatment of the house explained the unimportant bargain. The windows had never witnessed a clear outlook to the courtyard outside. A film of frost or that of entrapment covered them always. A struggle of a queue of conflicting desires and the victorious emerging of the task at hand. The crowd of trees outlined charcoal black against the frosty background seemed to have nestled closer for him to be greeted in this lonely landscape. The familiarity making

him acknowledge and appreciate them back. Daringly brushing off the needles of cold and crunch, he created the first patterns on the ever present ice. Sometimes there was nothing to nudge the ever playing record of grief and the exposition to the brooding weather did the job fine. Through the warm gush of tears, he could see unearthly cotton balls circle around him and all that was alive and warm. The dust dry trees exuding stubborn scents sprawled barren yet majestic, an entry to a detached patch of a fairyland.

Tears rolled down the chapped face, clearing the vision. Icicles of pompous structures had conquered everything that met the longing eyes. He brushed the pinching mirage of dry lands away and continued on the tragic track ahead.

She sat at the far end of the cursing creek. An outgrowth of all that was forgotten, insignificant and avoided. It sat well with her..quite well actually. The prim and proper placing of dystopian flora no more a duty of hers. Neither the Immaculate powdering of her sunken party face nor the feminine placing of her mirror ball dress.

The air was thick with an unsung grief. No smiles could cut through the hanging despair. He let two nonchalant tears escape his indifferent eyes.

The flowers waited for his mother. Pale, lifeless flowers trying hard to cheer the gloomy unattended kitchen. After some moments of laying still on the grimy table they seemed to have given up on the task and were merely there for appearance. Mother looked at them along the same lines. Happy for them for they were flowers, indifferent for they made no difference anymore. She had done some indescribable and incomprehensible wobbly talk about different kinds of pains. There were no definite conclusions to any narrations and only a weird ending was bestowed in an unwanted surreal act, that of her hugging a new born lamb close to her chest. Partially crushing it and somewhat trying for some gore osmosis of a rare pain she had formerly listed in her list of pains, to happen.

Under the heavy late night influence of a visiting bird and a dinner gobbled down excessively, she spoke of some tame horses who run wild in ceaseless meadows. Shape shifting being a minor inconvenience in her realm of uninhibited action, she could feel a horse's heart pounding in her weak chest. Such was the conviction, that the once unsure belief paved way for unwavering and echoing pounding of liberated hooves.

It had come all wrapped in a bubble gum pink crinkly paper, screaming selective acceptance. She had snatched it like a little kid, hoping all frequencies to synchronize with the vivid hopeful shade delivered to their brooding doorsteps. A maniac dressed up in a patchwork of numerous sceneries. She belonged to a lonely pastel wall wherein the onlookers would admire her from a harmless distance. The inmates knew of no appointments as such and yet they had to play host to a projection of guests which arose from realms besides the concrete physical ones. Their one

costly lamp, a souvenir from a vacation lost in some old memory, was placed on a wobbly chair. Whether to be treated as a guest for the night or to see the others in a more comforting light, the intention needed no clarity. Over plates of hurriedly cut lemons and violently brushed cakes, there were conversations of hopping rabbits, lost girls, the desire to have gone on an expedition and the happiness of a meal shared with many. After the night changed some more shades, the conversations went on to become more intimate. The guests seemed to have forgotten that they had a home to return to. They faded on their respective chairs.

A swan striking a perfect curvature with its bored beautiful neck, floated on a current of black nothingness, a completely unrelated diffusion of rose and black currant berries. She had once decided to never go out again. She said the windows were a product of generous craftsmanship and the sunlight never shied away. It was a counter attack against the constant urge of running away. Though the destination never made a transition from the hazy, blurry stage into a more clearer one. A corner dedicated to scrunched expensive paper, three much deserved ink blots on a flimsy table cloth, cartons of food eaten to the edges, the random fussy walks between the rooms, the cosy plans that had become a continuation of trapped days. The heavy door seemed to stare at the stupidity of it all with a patience as can only be expected of a chunk of dead walnut wood.

Jars of habitually brewed coffee lined against the naïve pastel pink of a sombre kitchen wall wherein the ambience had grown accepting and generously demanding, waited the bizarre beginnings of an occupant balancing on the edges of transient sanity.

One fine morning the careful construct of the indoors felt sickening. A screaming tale of a snake doomed to be a loop seemed to be echoing from everywhere in the overwhelmed house. The fire made her obnoxiously drowsy, the assuring feeling being a deserving entity which can't be denied a niche, seemed to be vaporizing fast.

A vague wailing strikingly no painful chords

Cups of remorse and despairing dredge

Introspection of aimless beginnings

Transient dreams of unmanageable steam

In teapots of clustered thriving markets

Appetites that died in occasional breaks of imposed nourishment

Where did my sack of spices go?

Cushioned on deep red velvety shoulders?

She spoke of many things after the trip. Incomprehensible, mystical things that had agreed on being acceptable just for this lady of no maps and unshakeable determination. She spoke of the fat man leaking from his pompous orange tweed suit. She spoke of the man with a horse for a friend who had recognized a dead man from the muddy boots sticking out of the snow. She had been a guest to a kind family of overflowing children.

A display of unusual conquests
 Enormous immensely proud, wobbly turnips
 Plethora of sauce stains dotting the aged apron
 A beloved guest of many rough seas away
 Old woman in possession of oddities
 Of a flaming fiery fox, a charming chameleon and a cocky crane devoid of
 friendliness

A melting castle she had reached
 Wherein strange creatures settled unbothered
 Of demons with pockets full of sugar cubes
 The origins that from deep woodlands, bogs and sensibly avoided marshes
 Buckets plopped from mossy archways
 Serene green waters of obscure streams
 Bizarre dinner tables conjured anonymously
 Wherein were meals shared with tousled toads and boisterous beetles
 Mansions that didn't go by the tales
 Greenish bony fingers clasping the overused brooms
 Ladies dozing off near untrustworthy fires
 Clustered rooms with sickening patterns of flora
 An artificiality that squeezed the joys of April
 A dance around the unprofessional tent
 Tousled hair kids of forced vacations
 And unruly ones with over ambitious goals for the summer
 Of aged goats with gifted mufflers
 Of barging in dwellings of rebuked abnormality
 Helpings of mossy cheese
 And of bread baked with overwhelming care

The barley field stretches far and wide. The diced, slightly stained marble gets reflected in the waiting water. My little boy has insisted on having his cake whilst his precisely six rogue birds line the slippery edge of his adorable bathtub. I have made him a towering bed but he insists on the pea hidden under the comically enormous pile. Talk about tousled hair princesses working themselves to the bone. There is a method to it. That of precisely packed bags and unplanned roads. Someday one could take a flight from the seemingly necessary construct. These and many other hopeful thoughts stirred the sauce in the pot with her. For now she looked at the list of planned dinners stuck to the fridge from the sale.

Syed Nahida Anjum is a writer from Kashmir, India who finds her voice in the silences saturating everything around us and tends to present in all their whimsical ways, the details of things that get lost in between the lines.

RICHARD ABRAMSON

Mother

Guilt was the poison and Mother was the syringe, a little each day. You were always the good one, at least you pretended to be, lowering your eyes and turning away so you didn't have to watch. But you know what I'm saying. I can see it in your eyes, they're like kaleidoscopes, all broken up into different colors and triangles, squares and shit. You give 'em that little cat smile and hold it all in and then they look at me and it scares 'em so they say I'm crazy and they lock me up. So I won't hurt anybody else, they said. I mean, I'm the one that's hurt, right? Gimme another cigarette.

They got a doctor here, his name is Bruce. Dr. Bruce. He sits you down in a chair that's big enough for a moose and it makes you feel like a little kid and I think that's the point because all he wants to talk about is your childhood. I didn't have one, I told him. Or if I did, Mother took it away. I realized that after.

"After what?"

Why do you even come, you hardly say anything, you just sit there like you're the fucking Sphinx and I'm a butterfly pinned to a board. It's like that song, you know, the lunatic is in my head? I know that's what you think. Because the story, you know, that home is perfect, the family's perfect, everything's perfect – nothing to see here folks, move along – it's all a fucking lie. But it's only me that'll say it. And Mother brushed my hair and poisoned me in nasty bits and spoke her soft little lies and called it love.

"They had to pull you off. Blood all over your face and hands."

It's hot in here, right? And you know what – sorry, I shouldn't laugh, sometimes I laugh when I get nervous, I can't even light up my hand's shaking so much – and, oh yeah, you know what? The windows? They don't open! Hot, cold, doesn't matter, they nail 'em shut so you can't jump out. Like that crazy Lilith – no, no, she was a bleeder, I mix 'em up sometimes. But her I remember, bleeding out in the bathtub.

"You remember standing there, looking down at her, don't you?"

No.

"Sure you do. It's not the sort of thing you forget. No matter how many times you wash your hands. You know. After."

Don't look at me like that. Just don't.

"It must eat at you."

Mother said she'd always be there, no matter what. She promised, but it was a lie, it was all a lie. Dr. Bruce asked about her too, but I don't remember. No. No.

"I've got to go, but I'll come again. Until you die or remember. Whichever comes first."

You're leaving? Gimme another cigarette. When is Mother coming?

Poetry



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Daniel Naazwenkangua Abukuri

GRAVESTONES DON'T ALWAYS POINT NORTH

after Pieter Bruegel the Elder's The Massacre of the Innocents

hush. the roofs hunched—
like elders, heavy with knowing.

snow falls wrong here. not gentle. not innocent.
(the kind of snow that blanks out names.)

a pale sun,
flipped like a coin,
spins between two clouds.
lands on **tails**.
loses the bet.

sled tracks = little elegies.

doorways = mouths pried open.

(screaming exits the scene first.)

the doll wears a footprint.
its lace collar, licked with soot.
the soldier hasn't moved. yet.
his blade: still breathless,
waiting to be born.

woman = still life.
hands like moths,
stunned against glass.

she thinks stillness might undo
this butchered frame—
reverse the blur,

rewind the brushstroke.

but time here only paints forward.

crib = crumpled line.
child = under the sky's blank page.

one boy runs.
one does not.
 (no need to clarify.)

blood thickens in snow,
not steam—
just settles,
like punctuation. a comma. a stop.
Then—

mercy forgets her lines.
even the horse flinches from its own role.

a branch cracks like a sentence breaking.

 *

 *

 *

and far beyond the frame—
something howls
like it studied mourning.
rehearsed the grief.
perfected the pitch.

the painter does not blink.

THE ONE WHO STAYS TOO LONG

There is an art to lingering, though no one teaches it.
To sit beneath a skylight as dusk slips its fingers across the room,
watching the dust hover like doubt, is to remember
that staying is its own kind of pilgrimage.

You learn to read silence: the sigh of kettles, the creak
of a hallway board warped by old weather. You listen for
a voice that might call your name but never does.
Still, you practice your reply.

Some days you dress for departure,
put on shoes like declarations,
stand at the door & feel how heavy a knob can be
when no one asks you to leave.

You were not born with patience,
just a quiet itch for somewhere else,
a suitcase of almosts.
But time has a way of braiding your name
into wallpaper patterns, into the way
the floor bends a little where you always stand.

& when someone finally asks, *Why didn't you go?*
you smile & say, I was waiting for the right *kind* of goodbye

Emily Keverne

WHISPERING INTO A GALE

when the stone
the lake parted
wet replicas
plopped.
i expected
to settle
the trees as they were,
under water.

CRADLE OF THORNS

Songbird shies from harsh crow rattle;
Drops like liquid meteorite
To javelin a dead sea stiff
With thorny breakers, tangled stars.

The rusting huntsman ribs twist stiffly,
Knotting withered yellow stars.
Errant breeze the gnarled limbs rattle,
Flaking piths of meteorite

And coaxing breadcrumb wink of stars.
The errant bee and the dead breath rattles
Cratered, buckled meteorites
In fallen orbits, tangled stiff.

Gnarled and breaking meteorite –
Liquid tangled, knotted stiffly,
Hunted dead (a shooter's star) –
Bed down here where the songbird rattles.

Jake Onyett

ALTAR

She waters her plants
when going out of town
by carving holes in plastic bottle caps

and sticking the bottles upside down in potted soil.
Intending for the steady drip, drip of lifeblood,
while she's away, from makeshift IVs.

We all must put our faith in something,
even in time itself.
Scarcely any to waste. This rare once,

she expects gravity to pick up the slack
by virtue of its predictable pulling down.
A real ally, after all these years.

Not to be feared always,
at least not now.
She keeps the shutters open

and presses the plants
tight against the panes of the locked windows.
Everyone knows
where light comes from.
Even a child looks up instinctively
on a sunny day.

Though we may not worship
at the same altar,
I cannot deny loitering within earshot

straining to catch a hint of grace.
Whatever she will return home to,
well,
she can only hope for the best.

Maureen Clark

UNDOING THE WORK

the crew who ripped up the street and laid Google Fiber
last week are now undoing their work

to repair their mistakes they made in their favor
they are young and have energy for the task

the same accompaniment will be playing all day
of jackhammers and road scrapers constant noise

on this perfect autumn day low sun so luscious
two yellow leaves fall on the green tablecloth

of autumn dancing as all leaves do in this last warmth
coming down from the mountains the trees flutter

their leaves like veils in bright arabesques
dried leaves spinning languidly around all that is dying

under the cacophony you can hear the crush of fallen leaves
under your boots as you hike the foothills

there is a hint of undecided weather hovering on the edge
the crashing of machinery bringing speedy internet

color exploding on the mountains dry tinder
moisture sucked from the air one lazy yellow jacket

end of summer ragged helps himself to my sandwich
in the glitter of plant dust the last pollen of autumn

Joseph *h* Kenyon

TWO DRAGONS

Yesterdays can't fill tomorrow's gaps. Only now bears the sky with
balanced shoulders. Ah, that eye roll, the modern reply to all absolutes.

Should I say fuck everything but how you feel? Fuck APA
citation, having no relevance to a generation undergoing

planetary meltdown? This world gets blown
apart from time to time. I leave you
fragments.

The next explosion is yours to re-make into an anecdote,
a name

YOU CAN'T RECALL

at your tomorrow's party.

FINGENT SHORES

A girl
who likes hollow trees
has a mind of eggs.
She stretches to meet
any occasion,
side to side or end to end.
I am the first
of her unborn children's children.

But history can't flow backward,
you say.
A leaping dolphin
begs to differ.
Its episodic emergence shines,
the drippings of the past rushing off its fins
falling back into the present waters.
I stand and watch the spectacle
from a future shore.

Ghosts — they must be us
as children in the future
cycling back past our present,
their windy laughter whipping up
what they know we can't
— or won't —
approach.

Tegan Sullivan

RABBIT

When I was young, my mother ran over a . I did not notice. That beat, small crunch of small bone under big, heavy, condensing metal misplaces itself. I remember my brother and his friends wanting to look at the dead . My mother turned me away, shutting this to silence forever. Off, off those boys went. It was dark, spilling shadows for all of the s to hide in stretching long and thin. Our tire was the same gruesome color of the street. I did not check the tire for the . What lain there could have been the remains of the , a smear of blood and flesh and fur. A loose, lippy ear. The eyes of some strange creature in the road; the fuzzy beating of hearts through leaves. s in every place I see now. In my home, with the boys outside in the street. The golden light of the inside blanketing me, soft and flopping and safe. Run run. Flee my dreams come the morning. In my nightmares, I go with them, my own soft feet pound through the long and thin shadows that swallowed those boys whole that night. Even then, I heard their whooping cackles all down the street, the shutter-shutter-click of photos of the crime scene. They emerged from the ink, steps slow and steady, that herd of boys. My brother lagged behind, staring at his phone. Later, I asked my brother what the corpse looked like, absence ringing in my ears. “ ,” he said, his eyes as wide and beaded as some strange creature in the road.

A LIST OF THINGS I LEARNED WHEN DYING

- 1) Your body's blood will flow into the river; red born and washed away in the slow drip of your death.
- 2) The river will get into the rabbit and the fox; all desperate things must drink.
- 3) You will feel yourself rushing and rushing through the woods, whipping water that winds through dirt and flesh and the chambers of two hearts.
- 4) You will feel when you spot yourself from across your shore. You will not think.
- 5) The chase will be so sweet, so fast, so hot that you will not see the car.
- 6) Black ice will form the sweetest new graves.
- 7) Bones mangled, bodies high as angels, the scream of metal and of beasts.
- 8) There will be nothing more heavenly than to be killed by something you cannot understand.
- 9) Everything will be light and noise and the precipice of another breath.
- 10) Listen to me: you will be the rabbit and the fox and the body and the river. You will be the blood on the street and three corpses and you will never stop dying.
- 11) All of you will shine rainbow diesel through the fog; brown and orange fur haloed by those haunting honing beacons to help home through the night.
- 12) Everything will be as bright and as burning as the sun you used to love.
- 13) It will hurt.
- 14) Exhaust smoke will pour into your lungs, all of your paws and hands and river-beating rushed blush reaching out at once.
- 15) Here now, you are nothing but a glassy drop in the ocean of your own eye of dead.
- 16) In the morning, they will find your crushed bodies, blood seeping into the water supply.
- 17) Somewhere, a deer will bend her head.
- 18) I will never stop dying



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Contributors

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DANIEL NAAWENKANGUA ABUKURI (he/him) is a Ghanaian poet and prose writer. A Best of the Net, Pushcart Prize, and BREW Poetry Award nominee, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Colorado Review*, *Chestnut Review*, *Transition Magazine*, *The Malahat Review*, *Consilience Journal*, *A Long House*, *Minyan Magazine*, *Protean Magazine*, *The Poetry Lighthouse*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *NENTA Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. He is the first-place winner of the 2025 Wingless Dreamer Contest, first-place winner of the African Writers Award (Poetry), a finalist for the 2025 Adinkra Poetry Prize, the fourth runner-up for the African Literary Prize, and the third-place winner of Poem Stellium's Black History Month Poetry Competition. He was also recently longlisted for the Renard Press Poetry Prize. Instagram: @poetrael.

SYED NAHIDA ANJUM is a student of English literature from Kashmir, India. Her works usually linger around spaces, subtle and silent. Apart from writing she likes to sketch and sit amidst flora of any sorts. She holds a Master's degree in English Literature and is currently pursuing a Bachelor's in Education.

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MAUREEN CLARK's book *This Insatiable August* was released by Signature Books in 2024 and won the Association of Mormon Letters Award for Best Poetry Book of 2024. Her memoir *Falling into Bountiful: Confessions of a Once Upon a Time Mormon* won Honorable Mention in the 2024 Utah Original Writing Competition.

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HANNAH R. GREEN lives and writes in the Midwest, with work appearing in *[PANK]*, *McSweeney's*, and *Queen Mobs Teahouse*.

JOSEPH KENYON is the author of one novel, *All the Living and the Dead*, as well as poetry and short fiction. When not writing, he teaches the craft at the Community College of Philadelphia and attempts to square the mysterious chaos of quantum physics with the beautiful order of music and light.

EMILY KEVERNE is a writer from the UK. She was shortlisted for the Charles Causley International Poetry Competition 2019, and her work has appeared in *Café Aphra*, *Backchannels Literary Journal*, *Anansi Archives*, and *Quail Bell Magazine*.

LANCE MAZMANIAN: word/visual author. Random House distributed with Harlan Ellison, got a coffee for payment. Mazmanian appears in London Writers' Salon, Fiction On the Web UK, Poetries In English Magazine (Los Angeles), more. Leonard Cohen (RIP) once wanted to create a poetry chapbook with Mazmanian. Til the Scrapbook File imploded.

JAKE ONYETT was born in Canada, raised in the United States, and lives in Italy. His poetry appears/will appear in *Abstract*, *Chiron Review*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Pangyrus*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, and elsewhere.

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JOHN HENRY SCHAUB has been published in *La Piccioletta Barca*, *Manoa*, *North American Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *Carolina Quarterly*. He claims his story, *Adrift*, is true. He lives and works in the state of Wisconsin in North America.

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