



LOTUSEATER

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Prose



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KEN POYNER

The Civics of Vending

On Thursdays, the balloon vendors are the thickest. They know the weekend is coming and that many balloons purchased early in the week already have met an unexpected demise. By Friday, most who need weekend balloons have replenished their cache. Only the procrastinators are about, ready to take any balloon - awash in options, as those who think ahead purchased on Thursday. Weekends are for replacing balloons savaged. A good salesman can up-sell, using the demise of the bereft balloon owner as leverage. Suddenly finding themselves a balloon or two short of a quorum, some citizens panic. But not enough.

Mice

A streetlamp buzzes and dims for a moment, then reignites with a sequence of flickers.

A shriek rises from below.

It's the last lamp on this street, which used to be a section of a firebreak decades ago, before single family houses were built alongside it, spaced far apart.

Beyond the lamp's light, the unpaved road slowly tapers into a narrow path that continues dark into the forest and oscillates over the years, leading here and there.

A dead end of sorts.

For the past ten minutes or so, a group of mice has been foraging around a public dumpster that stands under the streetlamp, rusty and very loud to use.

The dumpster—its legal status more and more obscure to each new resident of the area—has not been emptied for a while, so there is plenty of food to be found here.

Enough to have your fill and then take some for hoarding.

The mice are scattering now—abandoning the food.

The faltering of the electric light concealed a predator's attack.

One of the mice was struck—they can hear it.

They don't recognize her by the sound she's making, but they know its meaning.

As they bound toward the lee of the underbrush, away from the dumpster and the light, her shriek keeps coming from the exact same place.

This means goodbye.

Take care.

They flee.

The pinned mouse watches the others bolt to safety.

There is some comfort in it.

She does not look back at the hideousness that descended upon her.

Nothing to be gained from looking.

And maybe it was nothing.

Just a bad mood.

Her screams come naturally—she doesn't pay them any mind.

She stood and then she fell—that's all she knows for certain.

Not one to act brashly, she lets the events unfold, calmly observing her kin hop out of the spent light that hangs here and doesn't move.

A thin light that an earthworm could bask in.

The mice disappear suddenly, mid-stride, when they reach the shadows of the forest, and each one is gone with a quick bright flash as the darkness closes behind it.

Afterimages.

A swarm of decoys inserted right into the predator's eyes.

And as it gives chase, eyes overrun with impressions of mice in full gallop, the mice will stop and sneak—maneuver—perplex.

And wherever the predator's eyes move in the dark, they will see prey getting away.

A failed hunt in every direction until it seems like madness to believe that you're a predator at all.

The mice will wait for it to give in to doubt.

Let it stumble in its befuddlement and cross its own path, drool swinging.

And if it starves to death, it starves to death.

The mice will bide their time—they can eat later—the predator must eat now.

Maybe it wanders off—leaves with nothing.

But maybe it kills itself.

Tears into its own hungry flank to quiet the reproachful squirming coming from inside.

Such strange things are known to have happened.

Many strange things had to have happened to culminate in the mouse.

And maybe yet, the mice are coaxed to come out with the beast's whimpers.

Let themselves be eaten, one by one, in procession.

Groom themselves before they go—spotless.

Who knows.

Many strange things are still waiting to be proven—in mice.

But this time the predator won't follow them.

It's obvious from the sound that the downed mouse is making—she is bait.

The others creep away, listening intently to her cries—and they'll linger on the edge of earshot perhaps a little too long.

Letting go of the bait is difficult for both sides.

Her shriek is a very clear warning, and her kin will be reluctant to go some place where the warnings won't be nearly as clear.

But as soon as she falls silent, they'll depart.

She is aware of all this, tepidly.

In muscle memory, she is right there with the others—but her muscles can only lie flat and remember.

Sometimes, in moments of great distress, her body wishes it were dead—and acts death out.

Fortunately, she is not the type of animal that can grant her body that wish.

She is busy surveying her surroundings for a good initial hiding spot, waiting for her hind legs to move again.

Her assailant is still behind her—scared, perhaps.

Perhaps.

When it comes near her, she can almost sense its regret.

No—not almost—she can.

She is flung into the air.

Like a hole that's much too large to take shelter in.

The earthworm light shakes and spins around her.

It takes some getting used to, but she makes peace with it.

She is slammed against the ground.

There is no pain—only an unbearability—everything feels the same.

The entire body engulfed by a single, gigantic goosebump.

The force of the impact blinds her briefly.

She hears no sound either.

All of her senses gush out of her.

For a moment, they have to get by as their own separate beings that chanced upon one another here in this place.

Like how the mouse first came to be.

For a moment, there is no her.

When she returns, the earthworm light is back where it was before—and does not stir.

A full day of this light must have passed.

A sad day, it seems to her (—a day that never truly gets off the ground—one of those days that don't count but add up—you just didn't have it in you this time—4 a.m., because how can it end with you having nothing to show for it—were the day's accomplishments worth even the water and detergent needed to wash a pair of socks and a piece of underwear?)

A whole day and she hasn't had the chance to eat anything or get any rest.

It's no wonder she's so tired.

There is pain now.

A blunt ballast suspended on a thin, sharp cord that slashes through her when she tries to move—like it's trying to produce a sound using parts of her that weren't meant for it.

The awful thing behind her seems to be retreating.

In fact, there seems to be less and less of anything behind her.

The ill-advised attack and her valiant defense must have caused most of what was there to flee in terror.

Wise to run.

A fearsome clash must have taken place here, between her and her enemy—even if the details of it elude her.

Tufts of electrified fur must still be hanging in the air around them.

It was ferocious and she was ferocious.
She can tell by the pain.
The pain makes her silent.
There's nothing to scream about anymore.
It's already here.
She must keep it secret now—protect it.
She shifts gently to hide it deeper in the looming-over of the beast.
It is good to know that the beast feels the same pain.
It must.
She may have crippled it during their struggle—it seems unable to withdraw completely.
She manipulates the pain so that it flows secretly toward her enemy.
Pass it on—but be shrewd about it.
She can stoke it by tilting her head to the side.
She does so, carefully, and the monster almost winces with the pain it receives.
Almost.
She can smell it lose control over its stench.
It's all wet with scent—scent that tells it that it has tarried for too long in the same place.
The scent that gets trapped under cadavers.
Neither of them wants to be here anymore.
And the shape she has given to the pain won't stand up to the wind if it comes.
It's time to go.
It's not worth dying for.
If there truly was anything worth dying for, life would not exist.
But the beast is too weak-minded to know what's best for it.
It's swaying over her, dumbfounded, like a poisonous thing struck by a falling branch waiting for the tree to die.
Maybe it crashing into her was an accident after all.
It seems to have no place to run to.
Lost without ever going anywhere.
Pathetic pest.
And she knows she could kill it.
Deep down she knows, even as she lies motionless in the dirt.
It would take a lot, but if it comes to that, she's ready.
Lash out at the brute with all the pain she feels.
The pain is very big and so she must be very big.
As a last resort—if that's what it takes.
Things haven't reached that point yet—she's not desperate—but it's reassuring to know that she could do it.

And maybe she should.

Swing back—teeth bare and eyes merely a distraction—a horrified screech that the beast would take as its own—a thunderstorm hiding a wasp's stinger.

Slip between the miserable creature's spasms, take its life, and spit it out for its mother to find.

Leave the body twitching—trying to fend off the scavengers for as long as its dignity can last.

Dead—nothing left to learn from.

Last resort.

Any moment.

Not a moment goes by that she couldn't do it—not a moment that she couldn't have done it already.

And maybe she has.

The beast huffs and repositions itself.

Maybe it's already over and the beast's swaying is only its bones deciding which way to fall.

And next, she will feel the pain that it took to do it, but it had to be done.

She waits for it—and she waits for the beast to collapse—with detachment and easy patience, the way one waits for urine to start flowing.

But the disgraceful villain somehow anticipates what has already happened.

Just as it's about to drop dead, she is run through.

She is run through.

She is run through.

The same message coming from deeper and deeper in.

She is very placid about it—as one should be.

No wasteful movements.

Now is not the time.

She accepts all of it and lets it reach its misguided end.

A mouse howls.

Eventually, whatever punctured her draws back.

She recollects herself—now, finally, healing can begin.

But there is a fissure in her.

Many different parts of her tumble into the fissure and start fighting blindly for space, threatened by one another's proximity.

It makes her afraid of herself.

Oddly afraid of the food she has consumed.

The food inside her moves in vile ways, changing its taste and turning her into a cannibal.

She learns that her own tail can provide her sustenance in times of need.

She will hunt it.

Diremouse.

But her tail is difficult to locate now.

It's become indiscernible from the chaos and gloom spreading behind her ears.

The same way that an object you hold in the palm of your hand for long enough seems to vanish gradually over time until you tighten your grip and make sure it's still there.

For now, she will remain here and wait for her tail to show itself.

A little ambush keeping what's left of her together.

It might be a while before it's time to pounce—she doesn't mind taking it slow—this is as good of a place as any.

The horrid thing is brushing the fur on her back with its extremity, as if it can't reach her over the mess it made.

Eventually, it finds purchase on a fold of her skin and starts to pull.

It draws her nearer, gently and timorously—negotiating every pebble and unevenness that's in the way—getting down on the ground in submission—stricken with shame—disbelieving its own gall.

She gives birth somewhere back there.

Much too early.

Some of it comes out, but the rest is caught in the miscellanea and gets stuck on the way.

Then it spills on both ends.

Hot, pumping, and silent.

Not asking anything of her.

Whether or not she had any control over what happened, she owns up to it.

She does not mother the birth.

It's defective—air-locked.

It brings no creature that will ever know itself or assert itself against the world.

As much a mouse as a severed piece of one.

It will neither live nor die—only spoil.

Let the maggots have it with their torpid fire.

She rejects the guilty male's advances retroactively—if he comes close, she will bite.

It's good to be rid of him and his inferior seed.

And maybe the birth is what the beast was truly after.

Maybe she evacuated it into its muzzle only to confuse it and she is already darting away.

Or maybe the birth broke out earlier than she realized, and she is where the beast came from—first of the litter—an obscene child of eating when you're not hungry and mounting other mice just for dominance.

In any case, she will not mother it.

She withholds herself.

And even if the foul thing takes her milk by force, it won't find any nourishment in it.

It won't be her milk and she won't be there to offer it.
 She chooses what she is and where she ends.
 As long as she can choose, nothing can touch the real her—the thing that knows it's there.
 The only thing that has any idea of how all other things are and should be.
 The real her has little to do with a mouse.
 A mouse is just a means—the real her is the thing that needs to know it's there forever, in a mouse or elsewhere.
 So relentless in its purpose that in some animals—ones that learned their own lifespans—it found ways to deem itself immortal.
 It will put a mouse through anything just to keep going.
 The beast drags her by the choked birth and then wrenches it out of her.
 And then she is too old—or too young again—to bear any more children.
 Unburdened at last.
 The monster, the simpleton, outwitted yet again, coos into the mouse dross it obtained with juvenile demand and begins to consume it.
 What idiocy—she should kill it on principle alone.
 But she does not concern herself with it.
 She is hiding—blending in, easy to miss among the parts she vacated.
 She scans her body from the inside, in search of a nest.
 In here, she is as quick as ever and she moves freely.
 She travels herself.
 There is a grassy slope at the end of a day, with hair-winged seeds floating over it.
 Climb, catch, eat.
 Nervous briars growing out of cool, woodlouse shade, where birds can't reach.
 A cavernous burrow revealed under a newly-fallen tree, littered with ant eggs killed deliciously by lightning.
 Places only she can see from here.
 She puts them all in front of herself.
 She is hidden.
 Once it's safe to move again, she will visit all those places and collect everything she left in them—to fix her body.
 For an instant, the task seems absurd—the way the air smells when she sniffs it to confirm that she's facing a gap that's too wide to clear with a jump—but then the notion passes.
 Once it's safe to move.
 She can hear the beast heave itself up.
 Perhaps it's departing already.
 She tries to catch a glimpse without being spotted—without disturbing the glint of her eye.

She sees little.
 The thin, crippled light—light that goes nowhere.
 The little bit of food she was carrying, strewn on the ground.
 Stick of dried up lip balm with no cap.
 The beast is still there—she can feel its heat.
 It's wallowing in the shame of what it has done.
 She steals some of its warmth for herself, to stanch the gaping of the wounds
 on her back.
 The wounds remain, so they cease to be her.
 She banishes everything that won't bend to her will.
 And she begins to sneak into the warmth.
 Away.
 Past the dew point.
 Fuck mice and everything about them.
 The beast touches her—
 —awkwardly at first—a glancing touch—the way you would stroke something
 with the back of your hand before groping it—toying with its own shame now—
 swearing this is the last time to make the next time even more shameful—because
 shame is good for it—shame tells it to stay hidden until the very last moment—
 —and then it seizes her.
 She gives no response.
 The earthworm light begins to split into an entire zodiac.
 As the eyes give out.
 And when the wretch bites down, it's like waking up sad—the two seconds be-
 fore you remember what it is that you're sad about.
 But this time, it turns out to be nothing—just a bad mood.
 Older and wiser instincts take over as cells—let her have this—as cells who
 promised her that she could not and would not die set off on their journey from
 her brain into the beast's gut.
 The thing that wants nothing but to live forever—the real her—is swept up in
 their rush.
 Let her have this—what's it to you?
 She escapes.
 She never realized she lived so close to the sea.
 —
 When the beast's fangs meet, a mouse claw comes up to a mouse head to shield
 it, late, like a sleeper's hand trying to swat away a peck on the cheek.
 The horror of what it finds there reaches no mind.
 The terrible truth beams across a mouse body, but with only the spine left to
 comprehend, it's indistinguishable from sunlight.

The Wild Grasp

It all began with the professor driving home from a cryptozoological conference along Route 47. For amusement, he imagined himself as the victim of a traffic accident, described through the eyes of the reporting officer.

*“The driver was seated alone at the wheel”—*well, who else would sit at the wheel with him? How many people normally drive a car at once? Five?

*“The driver was seated at the wheel in duplicate and showed a blatant disregard for reality: his left arms clutched the warning sign by the roadside, while one of his right arms yanked the parking brake without warning. At the same moment, the other right arm ceased its absentminded scratching of the inner thigh”—*the professor, at this point, really did stop scratching his own inner thigh and considered quite seriously that he ought to see a doctor about this constant itching.

*“The cause of the accident may have been the sudden appearance of a dead rabbit in the driver’s path, forcing him to swerve”—*this was already the second rabbit carcass he had passed that evening. It was spring: a season when burrow-dwelling rabbits lose all restraint. The males plunge into a haze of testosterone and launch murderous charges at one another, headbutting anything that vaguely resembles either a rival or a potential mate. Even cats aren’t safe this time of year. Was this poor creature chasing someone, or was it the one being chased? Either way, it certainly hadn’t counted on the trucker who thundered through on a Saturday night.

“The cause of the accident may have been the sudden appearance of the carcass of a particularly lusty rabbit,” the professor imagined. At that point, a bear-sized zombie rabbit would leap onto the small gray Suzuki ahead of him, knock it clean into the roadside ditch, and proceed to have its way with it. By now he had passed the third dead rabbit. Newer highways already include frog passages—little tunnels running beneath the asphalt. The professor resented that no one bothered to build rabbit tunnels, though an animal of that size could do far more damage to a car than even the fattest toad.

The professor pulled over abruptly at a bus stop. The cause: yet another rabbit carcass. A tightness swept over him at the sight of this latest ex-rabbit; he felt the blood drain from his hands and feet, retreating to safer shelter in his torso.

All right then, he sighed, switching off the engine before stepping out toward the animal. The rabbit wasn’t in bad shape. At first glance he assumed its head had taken the hit—if anything had hit it at all. There was no visible injury, no flies

humming around it; it looked perfectly healthy, except for the minor detail of being almost certainly dead. The professor put on his rubber gloves and fetched a sterile, airtight sample bag from the trunk. After bagging the rabbit, he wrote the day's date and the GPS coordinates on the plastic. He placed the rabbit in the trunk, got back into the car, entered the same data into his notebook, and added remarks on the previous carcasses, along with the current weather conditions.

When he reached home, he set the bag down in his workshop and disinfected the car with systematic precision. He showered thoroughly, put on disposable surgical scrubs and a mask, and returned to the workshop to begin the dissection. He quickly determined that the rabbit had indeed been hit by a vehicle—but not on the head. The impact had caught it across the pelvis. It was almost across the road, the professor thought, when the vehicle clipped its hindquarters—he examined the flayed, pulverized gluteal muscles—and the force of the blow cracked one of the iliac bones. But that alone wouldn't have been fatal, he reasoned. The impact hadn't been absorbed by the muscles or the pelvis; the force traveled onward and snapped one of the rabbit's vertebrae. And that was the end of the little creature, he concluded—a neat, final snap, poor bunny. Surely he could relax now; his questions had been adequately answered. Yet the tension that had clenched his stomach and heart since the bus stop refused to lift.

took tissue sections from the internal organs and the skeletal muscle. For culture, he placed samples of the rabbit's skin, urine, intestinal contents, saliva, and blood into separate Petri dishes. He was entirely convinced that this rabbit would prove no sicker and no healthier than any other rabbit currently dozing peacefully in its burrow. He looked down at the body before him. The flesh was fresh, showing not the slightest sign of decay, and there was something undeniably appetizing about it. The professor had never in his life eaten wild rabbit—and the thought of doing so at last began to loosen the knot of tension inside him.

Within a week, the pathological results from the sections and samples had arrived. The rabbit had nothing the matter with it—apart from burrow plague, whose name sounded alarming but was, for burrow-dwellers, no more unusual than the common cold is for humans. It was also riddled with intestinal worms, of course, but that was perfectly normal for wild game. Finally, the technicians found in its brain a parasite not uncommon among rabbits, harmless to humans and barely perceptible to the rabbit itself; the only effect was that the world appeared reddish without it and bluish when it was present. Such distinctions mattered very little to a rabbit.

The professor was not particularly surprised by any of this. In fact, the truth was that he no longer much cared. His first rabbit paprikash had turned out divinely—a success owed in no small part to the thrill of theft. For yes, the professor was perfectly aware that he should not have taken the rabbit at all, even if he had

justified the act to himself as the natural impulse of a scientist to understand. The dead rabbit technically belonged to the regional game authority, or something of the sort—or to the road maintenance service, or the local council, or perhaps it counted as state property, or fell under the jurisdiction of animal control. Whichever way one looked at it, the professor knew full well that he had stolen the rabbits.

Rabbits—because by then he had acquired a taste for the springtime harvest of the roadside asphalt. At first—like a mischievous schoolboy—he stopped only when certain no one was watching. Sometimes, on his way to the university at dawn, he would spot a carcass by the verge and spend the whole day fretting over how many cars might crush it further before he returned in the evening. Would a hunter notice it and alert the road authorities? Please, just don't let them mow the ditch today, he prayed. Often he wasn't lucky. Most creatures had the indecency to die right in the middle of the road, and others were flattened en masse by passing traffic. It wasn't a pleasant sight by any conventional measure, but the professor grew not only accustomed to it—he found the spilled innards and sun-warmed flesh positively stimulating. Slaughterhouse red became his new favorite color.

One weekend, the professor devoted himself to thoroughly sterilizing the car's trunk. He coated the interior with an easy-to-clean layer of silicone and replaced the disposable rubber gloves with thicker, vulcanized ones that withstood washing. Soon he discovered that a rabbit benefited from being left at the roadside for a while, and that the impact of a collision did no more harm to the meat than a vigorous tenderizing. Of course, the professor did not limit himself to rabbits. Variety delighted him as much as it delighted anyone—one only had to think of his fondness for young undergraduates and doctoral candidates. Pheasants were unfortunately collected by many others, but quail and hedgehogs seemed completely invisible to most drivers.

At the library, between lectures, he took pleasure in leafing through old ethnographic reports. According to an 1897 account from the Lower Danube region, hedgehog was considered a delicacy: the locals rolled it in mud and placed it under hot embers, much as one might bury potatoes in coals today. The professor could hardly wait to try it.

As he spent more time patrolling the roads, the professor began to make sociological observations that deeply intrigued him. Some people, when an animal darts into their path, do everything in their power to avoid a collision—often risking their own lives without considering that the oncoming truck in the opposite lane might leave a far less pleasant impression on their windshield than a partridge ever could. Others, however, drive into wildlife like true predators—and, for the most part, that is precisely what they are. These drivers, after a successful strike, quickly reverse, pull over, and load the animal onto the back seat.

What fascinated the professor most was this: the very same drivers who would,

without hesitation—even by executing sudden maneuvers—run over a small creature, would calmly drive past a carcass that someone else had already hit. Was it respect for another hunter's kill? Or were most people simply enticed only by what they had brought down themselves? Or was it the cult of freshness—the same impulse that prevents the Japanese from drinking two-day-old milk? A wasteful species, the professor thought, and he felt a swell of pride that he, at least, could rise above such primitive ideas, so harmful to the planet as a whole.

“Humans are omnivores,” the professor declaimed in one of his lectures. “Our molars, our digestive system—everything about us points in that direction. But which way of life lies closest to true omnivory? That of the predator, or the herbivore? In primary school they hammer it into your heads that early humans were ‘hunter-gatherers’—so much more flattering than simply saying scavengers. This view stems from the hypocritical moralism of modern humans, not from scientific observation. Tell me, who is the cleverer animal: the vulture, patiently waiting for a guaranteed meal, or the lion, who expends all his strength in a single charge—only to have his prize stolen by lazy hyenas because he has no energy left to defend it?”

“The pig is a clever beast; it too is an omnivore, and it shows no shyness when it comes to eating. The domestic pig is smarter than the dog. Early humans managed their energy wisely. They ate carrion, cracked open bones to suck out the marrow that fueled their developing brains. That is how we became intelligent—through laziness and craft, through scavenging. Herbivores eat all day, every waking hour, and then spend the rest of their time digesting, pumping their gases across the planet, with no energy left for play or philosophy. Predators fare no better: their lives are constant tension, every moment consumed by focus, with no room for imagination. But humans—once they found a dead rhinoceros and weren't squeamish—could feed for two weeks, and with all that surplus energy they had to find some initially useless, creative distraction. That is what we call art: the first beautiful spearheads and arrowheads, carved purely for the pleasure of carving—which, as it turned out, proved useful after all.”

Although the professor's theory did not inspire universal enthusiasm, the university nevertheless supported the new field of research, and soon a series of dissertations appeared on the positive effects of scavenging. The professor, however, was a vain man—as is everyone who spends too much time exerting authority over young adults. He did everything in his power to acquire a striking nickname on the faculty: “*The Hyena*,” “*The Jackal*,” or “*The Vulture*.” For the latter, he even adopted a baby vulture from the local wildlife park.

In the meantime, he noticed that he felt increasingly comfortable in his own skin and was falling ill less and less frequently. His varied diet—composed of birds and paws fattened in the wild—had restored the digestion that had troubled him since youth. The wild fats made his nails and hair shine; his acne disappeared. And with

all the driving back and forth, he had fewer opportunities—and even fewer inclinations—to linger in the cafés and bars around the university. The “*hunts*” invigorated him; his former sluggishness vanished. Watching the roads filled him with a healthy inner tension; dopamine pulsed in his arms and chest muscles—in short, his life acquired a new, previously unknown meaning.

But the professor knew that nothing lasted forever: spring passed, summer faded, autumn dwindled—and winter would come, with no game and no fresh carcasses. For it was pointless to deny that by this stage the professor, like any self-respecting scavenger, no longer distinguished between dogs and cats; they were all destined for the same dish. Yet the prospect of a carcassless winter did not discourage him; it merely spurred new ideas. He set aside the pelts, teeth, and bones he had collected, so he would have something to occupy himself with during the long, dull evenings.

And so it was: throughout the winter, the professor studied and practiced the craft of leatherwork—tanning, stitching—until the entire interior of the house became one vast fur-lined coat, all hearthside softness and warmth, tickling bare soles and inviting further undressing. From the bones he fashioned knife handles, buttons, combs; from the sinews he invented playful new instruments, their strings taut and singing. And not even the offal or the fat went to waste: in his workshop, soap simmered with the wild herbs of the meadow, its scent rising with the steam. The savory mountain mint became a particular favorite among those who received it as a Christmas gift.

By the following spring, the professor let nothing go to waste. He spent his days patrolling up and down the roads, having abandoned the university lectern—the fur trade and soap sales proved far more profitable than an academic post ever had. With his little shovel, he scraped even the most pulverized bits from the asphalt, at dawn or in the middle of the night—when the road was at its quietest—and he no longer bothered to hide what he was doing if anyone happened to see. From the thoroughly flattened carcasses he made pâté, following ancient recipes, while over the offal and viscera he murmured the Latin incantations from old witchcraft manuals. For the professor had developed a taste for enchantment, a talent that made him particularly popular in the neighborhood.

One evening, the professor was on his usual patrol along Route 47. It was a strange night: by day the fasting winds had dried the meat of the road, but by evening the shivering stars were already hiding behind clouds. There was fog—milky, glass-thick fog—and silence. The professor scratched his inner thigh through the leather trousers he had sewn himself. His beloved vulture perched on the passenger seat, the two of them sniffing the air together through the lowered windows. In the chilly dusk, he pulled his mole-fur coat a little tighter. The vulture, not wanting to be cold, stepped daintily into the professor’s lap.

Thus they sat, the two of them at the wheel, when they spotted the car standing ahead of them. They steered around it carefully, lest they miss anything. In front of the car a young couple were fussing over something, shivering in their short sleeves. The professor and the vulture leaned closer to the window. It was a fat, dead badger.

"Knyaaah," grumbled the vulture with displeasure.

They drove on slowly.

MARIE W. B.

Someone Is Calling Your Name

Say you hear someone walk down the stairs.

You're lying supine on a couch (location unspecified) with a coffee table to your right, a mug of coffee on top. What's painted on the mug is beside the point. All you see is the ceiling above you but you hear someone walk down the stairs and abruptly, quite staggeringly, you see through the drywall to the person in question moving with a purpose down a set of steps (though really you're not seeing them walk down the stairs in real time, the spatial logic of stairs and ceiling – at least this specific portion of ceiling and stairs you're familiar with – unable to allow such Reutersvärd manifestation). No one can account for what's happening except to posit it might be the effect of an esoteric phenomenon affecting more than half the global population give or take half the global population. This causes instant electromagnetic piercing perception. You now boast an uncanny range of alternate realities flickering in your primary visual cortex.

The brief lapse that follows after coming to this revelation gives you enough time to also realize you're taking part in an activity you'd rather not participate in. Looking up, that is, looking *into* someone from the ground up (couch up) as they walk down the stairs. The moving crotch point of denim is a cross like no other. There's no audience. But you can imagine someone catching you. Several 'someones' calling out in a deep timbre, sonorous and chasmic. And though you didn't wake up hoping to bear witness to the finer points of factory dyed cotton, when such an event happens, infelicitous and stunning, you find yourself reaching conclusions you hadn't had the grace to conceptualize previously. Nothing is safe. Nowhere is safe. At least the subject is fully clothed (even inside, one dresses for stair outings). But just think. How long have you been staring? A minute? Half an hour? As far as you know, your success rate for processing otherworldly stimuli is slim. Near zip. You're not known for expeditiousness or illumination.

But what if you can't see the person descending?

Your brain tires. Due to some remnant wizardry you still know someone is descending but you can't get your retinas to follow through. Only the idea is left. The impression of something collapsing the closer it reaches the ground like sand collapsing underfoot and sealing itself after, the shadow of a foot and residual tension leaving nothing but one more furrow in a sea of yellowed granular furrows. A pillar of salt spilling down the stairs.

Calculate.

The type of person walking, their size, their mass, their footfalls, the chance of this person being someone you know (on any given day your confidence in knowing the quantity and quality of people inside your house, or any house you choose to visit, is like a hand sanitizer, 99.99%), why they're walking down the stairs, how they're doing it (swinging arms, leg lifts, limps, skips) and finally where does this leave you on the couch, next to a coffee table with a coffee mug on top. You always had a curiosity for walking. The act of acting. How fast, how slow, how meticulous and incrementally incommensurate it is to place – deposit – one negligible portion of yourself onto an equally negligible portion of ground, or perhaps, exerting oneself into and around space as one does when exhaling. The deepest sort of attentive discretion ordinarily – habitually – regulated to the subconscious. Some people walk without thinking. Astounding. The method of movement, an exercise in itself.

But now. Should you sit up, meet this visitor at ground level? Extend greetings, ignore them, carry on with your (assumedly innocuous) couch activities or calculate other possibilities? The latter then.

What if the person walking down the stairs is a stranger?

What if this person materialized halfway down the stairs (slideshow presentation style) because you both live in a digital matrix (multinational technological corporate flair) specially conceived for scanning, translating, or otherwise computing organic entities? Or perhaps they arrived serendipitously from another dimension, an alternate world that also happens to use stairs as a practical means of progressing from one horizontal plane to another. And this thing, this stranger, in the midst of walking down a different kind of stairs in a different kind of interior landscape, encounters *poof* a new set of stairs! Your stairs. Instantaneous materialization has never been easier. Yours for \$7.95 (factoring for intergalactic exchange rates). To the stranger, this doesn't matter. This new set of steps (that is yours, might happen to be yours, or exist in a three-dimensional pocket you consider to be yours) isn't quite the excitement they planned for but they continue walking down as if all stairs, regardless of interdimensional teleportation, are the same.

Let's imagine the materialization itself, a red tinged halo fuzzing their bowling pin figure and their hair something out of a 90's rock music video from the States but extraterrestrial. The hair itself, metaphorical, as they don't consider tendrillike head growth to be hair but a long and pliable show of topside whiskers. Peach fuzz filter, up close shots of a wide blank face (said whiskers a bit meaty like catfish barbels), angst and cigarette ambiance (the voguish vaporous leftovers from their home atmosphere) wafting in gray aerosol. Tiny blubbery oval openings, lining both sides of their bulbous body, mimic buttons straining at the edge of a skintight flesh suit. Lateral Jets, they call them, ordinarily reserved for copulation or preliminary displays

of amorous intent that in this new environment blast out steam all at once in one large miasmic *whoosh*. Behind them, said steam gathers into a flowing gaseous cape.

Whew.

It's cheating to assume they'd look even close to human. But whatever.

What do they want? What do all interplanetary beings want?

You take a deep breath.

You don't meet them at the bottom of the stairs because some part of you (perhaps you yourself display a fine array of flesh sections fixed together by a similarly fine mesh of mucilaginous membrane, thin and supple, refreshed with indefinite gelatinous liquid pushed through even finer torso holes than your outta' space friend) affirms the prompt advent of someone (thing) not made of this realm. Affirms as in, registers minute shifts in vibration. In fact, your refusal to move isn't for your sake but the stranger's. Your wrath has many names. All known, all sung by the many islands of the Sweltering Sea. Your glorious deeds are so numerous the Three Queendoms defer to abbreviation when reciting odes. Your children and grandchildren, all varying in mental and physical prowess, are not yours. Not by blood. Nonetheless, you love them. It's not that you can't have children. But after countless conquests, pillages, droughts, wildfires, floods, grain shortages, plagues, over sea to land and yet, more land, you realized legacy is shit. The concept. Imagine going through all that pain just to pop out a mere child? As one of your final creeds as last Supreme Sovereign Ruler and Public Servant of the Ktte people, She who Remains in Good Faith of the Unvarnished, Grand Autarch of the Law dynasty, Sponsor of All Who Shines Truly and Eternally, you've given up all sins of the mortal flesh for higher Ascendency and urged your subjects to follow suit. Adopt your peers and they will do the same. Now old, you look back and soak in your last moments in comfortable anthropoid delusion.

The world jostles for space.

You're a despot who conquers for the irony of it. Subjugation, the greatest irony of all; people who kill people so their people bear more people to kill people. You've heard of death. You've heard of war. Violence, when accessible, will make you do inane things. And if value is a gift, why, perhaps you're the only one with it. Ah, genocide. Hecatombs. To be born just to be snuffed out. On the cusp of annexation, you find caring is simple faux pax.

But...

What if the person on the stairs above you isn't a stranger. They still come from a planet irreconcilable from the one you and your house live in (Is it your house? Have you ever owned a house? Could you own a house? A two storied house?) but there's something chummy about their countenance. Someone who resembles a carbon copy of a dear friend, family member, or romantic partner you'd expect to see coming down your stairs in a house you're (perhaps vaguely) familiar with.

Someone who still walks down the stairs the same, coughs that little cough on the third step down (always the third, never the second or fourth) and whose knee pops on the seventh step (tiny gas bubbles building and bursting in their joints) yet deep down, is missing something biologically and anatomically extraordinarily significant that would otherwise complete the person you think they are. They're all there physically but they smile differently. Look at you differently.

Anyway.

~~What is...~~

You're still on a couch – a bit restless, still looking up – not seeing but sensing the coffee table to your right, coffee mug on top.

~~a couch?~~

Or is it a plastic cup? Mason jar?

Not coffee but tea? You were never much of a coffee drinker anyway.

What then?

You see ghosts.

You see dead people.

You got the powa'.

It's light outside.

The sun shines on the (white) mug of tea and the (brown) coffee (tea) table, producing a nice yellow (honey) razzle dazzle. There's a window (possibly) nearby that allows said sun to shine so brightly. And if you listen closely, there are birds chirping outside. Something about nests. Mates. The whole debacle seems tasteless. You've never been so numb. You probably, most likely, undoubtedly, created extra décor and sensory detail with your one-of-a-kind mind.

Oh wait. You turn your head. ~~Frustrated, you~~

As it happens, the couch you're laying (dozing, musing) breathing on is actually next to a window. And it's a big 'un. The kind of 'big' folks want to gawk out of.

But hark.

E.T from another city nears the last step. They've reached ground level. In the infinitely long yet short time it takes to travel from one step to the next they've already begun to realize their whereabouts. Or lack thereof. That they are a half formed (relatively) sentient being poofed from one land (ocean?) to the other, and their normally luscious tentacles lost their luster due to Earth's terminally ill climate. In a panic, they secrete a flurry of small white glutinous blobs from another line of stomata on their back. Plump (slimy) blizzard.

"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas"

Shit.

Presents aren't really your thing. You're an economically conscious motherfucker who doesn't give a damn about Christian bourgeoisie (materialistic, avaricious) rituals.

think

You're a capitalistic wretch. You put the moo in moola.
 You're a privileged pawn. Puking puppet. Cat's paw.
 You're a witch bewitched by paganism. Hail Saturn.
 You're an ethically morally politically green tree shedding its last leaves as human.

You're what some people would call a *some*-no-body.
 You're a tea sipper. Coffee gulper. Water guzzler.

~~there's beauty~~

You're someone prone to staring.
 You're someone afraid of anything and everything emitting sounds over 50 decibels.

~~in~~

~~nihilism~~

You forget how humans do it.

~~You're someone expiring from the wrong mix of neurochemical goop.~~

Where you're from, they rip out chunks of the sky just to spell their sorrow. They cut air with large dorsal fins, hurl their bodies, steaming and viscous, till the very ether is scarred with ice and frozen (snapped) flipper tips. They crush cities with their bodies, push mushroom clouds through dirt and debris. They puff words through one large ovoid gill and flutter (wetly) through snow. Their lips smell of winter and salt. They grow onyx tusks just to dash them on the ground. How loud it *cracks* is a sign of things to come. Their diet consists of stones, regardless of size. When they grow old, they fly to each of the six moons, bury themselves in scree and scream till violet shoots swell from their graves.

They can't imagine life without violent disturbance. They can't imagine life without conflict. Loss by the hundreds, thousands, millions. They can't imagine life as anything other than what it is and what it should not be. The black and white of whatever it is that makes life tick. They...

They only understand grief. All other emotions are simply the product of it.

~~You'd like some clarity, some final bastion of free will. Your therapist had the right idea but you're starting to feel anxious at the prospect of not feeling anxious. You didn't travel light years away from your home just to shrivel up on a long stretch of furniture.~~

Psychiatrists say what psychiatrists say.

~~Death is a fraud. A swindler.~~

Families say what families say.

And that's the thing with finality.

When you think about it, when you put your mind to paper.

Doesn't feel right. Doesn't sit right.
So you sit on a couch.
It's not your couch. It's not your house.
But you hear someone walk down the stairs.
It feels intense. Whatever it is.
And you wonder.
Useless, pointless, senseless.
Is this what it's like?

Poetry



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Mohammad Mansournejad

THE UNSETTLING PREMONITION OF YEARS TO COME

Seventeen juvenile fish
swim
back and forth
in the rivers of my veins

Three confused wolves
have lost their pack
one is hiding
behind the eardrum
of my right ear
one is scared to death
running around
somewhere in my stomach
the other is nowhere to be found

Two sick owls
sitting behind my eyes
have never seen any light
and every night
when dark enough
for my eyelids to be useless
I can hear
the unsettling sound
of their wings
flapping without mercy
as one gets on top of the other

Within me
seventeen juvenile fish
and three lost wolves
fear the fertility of two sick owls

THE ONE THEY THOUGHT I WROTE

Slant one pad
of the foot in
front of the other,
feel the seashore paspalum
reject your gravity and
scrape bent, weakened legs
until the ink spills out
all over the injurious jury of rotted roots,
extend into the endless layover,
attempted explanations to
gatekeepers of greenery result in
refrained toil, dappled sunlight bleeds
all over a hardened countenance,
find verdant peace with the fact that there
is no chance of regaining that which was sacrificed
Sure, try to scream but come
back from from the flagrant fantasy
that there is a force of nature that shall
keep you protected from a calm and
calamitous catastrophe, just keep
scraping along, inch by inch, losing fingernails
in the process from the
pressing pressure of the growls
holding down your tail,
digits close your eyes,
prickles exposed skin
open to the austere simplicity of a carved
cradle of yew, climb into the trunk
feel the silence kick into grievous gear
mussed moss softens aches
and quiets the air quotes
bring on the permanent rest
let the foliage cover the core,
cover the clouds and
the red left

KLΛ:S/ CLASS

klɑ:s/

Class

/ˈʌtər/ [enˈdʒæmmənt]
 /æz/ /əˈpouzd/
 /tu/, [enˈʒɒmbmənt]
 /dɪˈstɪŋktli/ /priˈtɛnfəs/
 /ˌdɪfəˈrɛnʃəl/ /bʌt/
 /ɪn/ /ə/ /ˈdɪkʃəˌnɛri/ /wɪð/
 /ˈoʊvərˌkraʊdɪd/ /jɛt/
 /ˈspiʃləs/ /ˈfoʊnɪmz/
 /ɪf/ /ˈlɛtər/
 /ˈbʊkɪŋ/ /ɪt/
 /frʌm/ /ðɪ/ /ˈʌðər/
 /ðə/ /ˌhaɪpəˈθɛtɪkli/
 /ˈfʊlɪʃ/ /pɪn/ /drʌps/
 /ænd/ /stɪl/ /ɪts/ /ˈrɛtɪsənt/

Utter enjambment
 as opposed
 to enjambment
 Distinctly pretentious,
 differential but
 in a dictionary with
 overcrowded yet
 speechless phonemes,
 each letter
 booking it
 from the other,
 the hypothetically
 foolish pin drops
 and still it's reticent

/dɪˈfaɪənt/ /ˈsɪlvər glɪnt/
 /ˈpɪrsɪz/ /waɪl/ /rɪˈmuviŋ/
 /ˈkæləst/ /ˈdɪdʒəts/
 /enˈkeɪst/ /ɪn/ /ˈæˌsfɔlt/
 /ʃʊd/ /bi/ /hoʊm/
 /noʊ/ /plɛɪˈkeɪʃən/ /ðoʊ/
 /ˈtɑmi/ /vaɪəˈlɪn/ /ˈviəlɪkəl/
 /ˈsʌmˌweɪ/
 /ˈpleɪŋ/ /ɪts/ /ˌɪgəˈtɪstɪkəl/
 /sɒŋ/ /fɔr/ /ən/ /ˈɪŋɡlənd/
 /dɪˈvaɪdəd/ /baɪ/ /ˈæksənt/
 /ænd/ /ˈdaɪəˌlɛkt/
 /ˈmɪnˌwaɪl/
 /ðɪ/ /ɪˈluːʒən/ /ʌv/ /ˈbɜrˌθraɪt/
 /steɪlɪz/ /ðə/ /maɪnd/

Defiant silver glint
 pierces while removing
 calloused digits
 encased in asphalt,
 should be home,
 no placation though,
 tiny violin vehicle
 somewhere
 playing its egotistical
 song for an England
 divided by accent
 and dialect.
 Meanwhile,
 the illusion of birthright
 stales the mind

/fərˈɡat/ /ðæt/ /wɪv/
 /ˈɔlˌweɪz/ /bɪn/ /θɪvz/
 /ænd/ /naʊ/ /wɪr/

forgot that we've
 always been thieves
 and now we're

/dɪ'vaɪdəd/ /baɪ/ /tu/ /'meni/
 /dɪ'naməˌneɪtərz/
 /soʊ/ /aɪ/ /'saɪləns/
 /ðə/ /vɔɪs/
 /'skriːʃɪŋ/
 [teɪk ðə pɪs]
 /ɪn'stəd/ /ʌv/
 /'meɪkɪŋ/ /fʌn/ /ʌv/
 /'evəri/ /pleɪs/ /aɪv/
 /'desəˌmeɪtɪd/
 /baɪ/ /'lɪvɪŋ/

divided by too many
 denominators
 So I silence
 the voice
 screeching,
 “take the piss”
 instead of
 making fun of
 every place I’ve
 decimated
 by leaving

Nadine Ellsworth^h-*Moran*ⁿ

PRINCESS ALEXANDRA SWALLOWED A GRAND PIANO

—a delicate instrument made of glass.
She walked with caution, sideways
through doors, avoided crowds, averse
to jostling lest her fragile temperament
fragment—she moved tenderly in her
small, cushioned world, determined
never to break. I swallowed a queen
who built a glass hive deep in my viscera
where wings of drones, the sound
of chandeliers beneath a steady
breeze sing. The hive surrounded
by the solicitude of blood shivers my pulse,
such fragility should be a warning. Yet,
I welcome the wrecking as it swings
heavy, crashes into my body and shatters
me wholly, holy, alive—

INCIDENTS IN ORDINARY TIME

The sign outside the chapel door says *Enter in Silence*. Everyone's sneakers squeak on the marble.

I can hear him behind me, his lips parting, the *puh-puh-puh* sound of some words, otherwise his prayers are incomprehensible.

*so our eyes are on the Lord, our God,
till he shows us his mercy*

The man across the aisle from me rises and walks to the center. He kneels, places his hands on the marble floor, presses his forehead to it. When was the last time this marble, quarried and polished, received such warmth?

All things gather our senses to themselves and what we receive is our perception.

8:00 o'clock is the beginning of the Grand Silence. My internet stops working at 8:03.

I'm beginning to understand Lucrezia's Italian videos. They really do say *diciamo* a lot.

I find a Blockbuster card at the Atlanta aquarium. It hasn't expired. This feels like a rift in the space/time continuum.

The beluga whales can blow perfect water circles just like my friend, Etienne, can do with cigars and smoke. I have no idea what happened to him.

A sea otter named Gibson gives me a double fist bump, so I feed him raw shrimp which he peels before eating.

A whole avocado is in the fruit basket of the hotel lounge on the 25th floor. The color contrast is nice but otherwise there is no explanation.

The cats corner another palmetto bug by the back door and I think of Clarice Lispector, although it ruins my appetite for several hours.

I wake up realizing I'm the one in the box. I thought I would have figured this out by now.

Peter Cashorali

ESCAPE FROM STATIC, 1968, MARK TOBEY

Hush. The writing is on the wall, the diagram is on the blackboard. Be silent in front of your betters. We see more by not speaking. A feeling the size of landscapes opens in the dark cupboard of the body. We are outnumbered, finally outnumbered. No one could expect us to house these multitudes. Take down the doors and windows, let the endless numbers come and go as they do, so that soon what is inside you and what is outside are the same. It only seems like we are ruined. In truth we are being made stronger and stronger, like those Roman houses that roofless have outlasted nations, like Atlantis lasting longest of all by never having existed.

THE GREAT BLUE HERON

...like all of its species is five stories tall and from crest to pectoral plumes to upraised flight feathers made of bricks and mortar in an orderly running bond pattern. No matter that it beats its vast wings or the speed of its passage, each brick keeps in place. It glides above our mutual earth and carries within it small apartments with full kitchenettes, at reasonable rents. Here new adults conduct their research, combining textbooks and heartbreak and ideas never thought before by anyone. The results are often explosive but the heron's body is proof against them and fatalities are few. To be present when it first unfolds its blue wings and lofts its many million pounds-- never forgotten. How do bricks fly and not fall? What purpose do any of us serve, serve more faithfully than we know, sky larger than the earth even though making itself so small, so close? The heron, the great blue heron, glides in what will be next though to us here on the ground it seems a Muybridge film, flying and flying while remaining just where it's always been.

Christian Hanz Lozada

A BIRD IS NOT JUST A BIRD

I send a picture
of the Guam Kingfisher
sign to my Pacific Islander
wife, who works
while I zoo.

I write *the bird is too far
back for an unpixelated
picture. It's like real-time
colonialism. The bird is
extinct in Guam,
but we have one
at the San Diego Zoo.
I'm sorry for all
I have done.*

A HIDING PLACE BEHIND THE EARS

we serpentine through hotel hallways
walk past the fitness center lunkers—
who bug-eye at our not-gym-attire
pants and clicking shoes—to fill
water bottles at the drinking station

only two generations separate us
from empty tubs and treks to the day's
fresh water source, so asking ourselves
are we poor / desert people / or ecological?
carries validity // I saw a brown snaky river

as we flew over Houston and wondered why
they let it curve so much because my rivers—
grey and rigid—sit well on grid lines // panic
we say we “lost” the Manong generation but really
oceans / lands / and laws concerted erasure

outside the hotel we watch a hackled rooster
leap and claw at his reflection in the glass door
of an abandoned gas station // with each
successful strike / he shakes off the concussion

Linda Michel-Cassidy

AFTER SOME TIME IN THE DESERT, BUT BEFORE CHECKING THE WEATHER, A COLD SWIM

Someone says something about good to see you and someone else says something about spring ha-ha. And I think, yes, I am shivering and sopping and shaky-hungry, and yes, I pause in a cross-wind, peek at the oversized numbers on the thermometer attached to the thrashing third buoy. Fifty-eight degrees, a whole other deal when it's wet, then a handful, a waveful of briny water slops into my mouth. Before me, the mast of a disused ship we use to mark laps sways at ten-and-two. Despite its anchor and longtimeness I do not go near. I let this be the thing that scares me today, rather than the undertow. Rather than the tests, medical and uncomfortable, that have been put off. Again. Or the news which I cannot read while out on the bay, pushed from my mind—like magic—by a bobbing buoy and the Golden Gate Bridge made hazy by translucent fog. Another swimmer says they always open their eyes to see what's there, which I never do, not for fear of what's below but because there is so much else to think about.

NONE OF US WAS EVEN HIGH

Someone said everything is a poem, and someone else got mad. Then a third said nothing is a poem—that a poem is impossible. We were spread-arms-prone, on our backs, looking for falling stars in the New Mexican sky. We thought our lives could be this loose—as if one of us wasn't already seeding a tumor, and someone else's wife wasn't already packing her bags, and another hadn't gone off their meds *just to see*. We were ablaze for that brief moment because the dark did not yet reveal how we were, in pieces, already dying.

George Kalamaras

READING ALEIXANDRE IN MARRAKECH

All the religions are dead, and only the air tonight
is alive. One breath, two. And you're inhaling
not hashish but the fog of evening fires.
There are turns of phrase not even books
know. Nor that their words can hold. And it's not just
because you walk this foreign land with a tongue
caught in iron combs. Or because the rooster in the market
is dead. Or because your name contains an index
of first lines you've spoken into the mirror and want
to throw away. Something inside is wrong,
like stepping into a sparse temple without removing your
shoes. You've not done that, nor traded your stash
of sparrow saliva for water, but inside are the slow depths
of your name. Sinking like drops of despair. If you type
a letter wrong, you're suddenly Hungarian, not Greek,
known to the world only as *Georghe*—not *George*.
But in preparing for Madrid, you turn again to the poems
of Vicente Aleixandre, knowing you must lay them
next week upon his grave. *Destruction*, you mouth into the sky,
or Love? So you're in Marrakech, not Madrid, reciting
one of his book titles, weighing the sincerity of an orange
the blind man in the souks tried to sell you. The world,

you saw in the film of his eyes, is sweet and sour at once.
Your lips cracked from the sand of the desert

you can only imagine gathering in the slow foam of the teacup
on the table before you. Aleixandre writes of the soul

departing then staring down longingly at the body. Or up?
It is difficult to tell when the only sound is the ringing

of a bell that seems to come from inside you. All the religions
are wrong and right at once, but only when you learn

to bow to the desperate before you. You've read Aleixandre
over and again for forty-five years or more.

And all you hear are the chthonic sounds scraping off
of his words like bees in prayer beckoning fire.

You need his words, you know, but maybe not again
until next week. Marrakech is now, and Madrid

is waiting like a bruise to be renewed. One blind man
in the maze of souks can enter your underworld

with an orange. Snow on the Atlas Mountains lies like a shroud
fringing the sky to say the horizon is right. The horizon,

the horizon, always close but out of reach. You step around
pigeon poop on the cobblestones before you, knowing

full well you need to bow unto all that is dropped from this hurt
or that to be here now and finally make things right.

MARIA EFSTATHIADI AMONG THE STARS

Open the stars.
Massage the wound.
Go to the office and make it a nature preserve.
Even if they don't let you speak, Maria,
tell them that their mother is dead.
There are many ways to do this:
write a poem on the wall of the bathroom stall;
wear white slacks to work; leave red nail polish
in the sink. The stars are coagulating in your blood
again, ordering you a mouth of sun-baked stones.
Allow your mouth to make the world
beautiful. Stand by the coffee machine
at 10:32 a.m. and recite the prose of your hero
Platon Rodhokanakis—often misread
as immoral. Measure your breathing.
Make it sound like a poem. If you kill anything
long enough, it too will have rhythm,
muted and swanned. Convince the world
the truth—that you are a screech owl on a pine bough.
Promise them all that what seems like a poem
is *not* a poem, and that you will die opening
the closed blossom of a dead flower.

WHAT DOESN'T STAY IN VEGAS

The king is adjectivally unmodified, the cannibal is an example and what doesn't happen doesn't happen in a vacuum. Let that be a lesson. Better an ad hoc committee be than standing by. To the defenders of the faith I say, Surprise me. It's a cake walk *and* a horse race. Nominees are lining up only to be let down. A legal representative will be appointed for you if you can't afford one. Prior to dining, I'll be read my rights. On individuating credibly, I'll pitch a tent beneath the freeway interchange and be the remnants' friend. To grasp at singularities or clutch at plurals is to boldly split infinitives where no one's boldly split infinitives before. As reading the arena is to be serene, as of this morning God's the good one. Multiple agendas may have generated this chain of events. Your soul is showing, I thought you should know.

AN ODE TO AN ANODE

There's music in the elevator and the aisle but none to sing along with. There are lizards, lizards everywhere nor one to touch the flailing tail of. You will know it when you extra-sensory perceive it. Probability is just a number. Blest are they with perfect pitch for they shall learn to love another, and another, blest the raptured lest the rapture happen in a vacuum, lest thou bless them incorrectly and they fail to make a change. Among the trolls who don't know how to take a joke the troll who does know how to take a joke is king. Think, king, outside of space and time and the outside of space and time will think outside of space and time with only you. Without a syllogism the millennium would never end, my other car is in the chop shop and the joke is practical that serves a purpose. Suddenly a cul de sac, an end of expectation. With a whistle and a switch, constituents are of intrinsic worth. As is tautology to contradiction, grievance is to gratitude, staccato to glissando and today's the day intelligent designers have their blissful picnic.



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Contributors

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NADINE ELLSWORTH-MORAN lives in Georgia where she works in full-time ministry while pursuing her love of writing. She hopes to continue listening closely and writing about the shared experience of life in these times, with particular interest in the joys and struggles of coming to understand the history, identity, faith, and culture of the modern South. Her poems have appeared in *Valiant Scribe*, *Structo*, *Theophron*, *Rust + Moth*, *Thimble*, *Sonic Boom*, *Emrys*, *Kakalak*, and *The Wild Word*, among many others. She shares her home with her husband and five unrepentant cats.

HEIKKI HUOTARI wrote their first poem the morning after the major died in the adjacent bed. Since retiring from academia/mathematics they've published more than 500 poems in literary journals, including *Pleiades*, *Florida Review* and *The Journal*, and in six chapbooks and six collections. They have won one book prize (Star 82 Press) and two chapbook prizes (Gambling The Aisle and Survision Press). Their Erdős number is two.

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REESE LANOVOI has lived in Barcelona, Lancashire, and now lives in Burlington, Vermont. She came to poetry through Chaucer, who felt less like a historical figure than a friend overheard. Lanovoi's poems move through access and exclusion, authenticity and internality, shaped by years of navigating places not entirely her own.

CHRISTIAN HANZ LOZADA aspires to be like a cat, a creature that doesn't care about the subtleties of others and who will, given time and circumstance, eat their owner. He wrote the poetry collection *He's a Color, Until He's Not*. His Pushcart and Best of the Net nominated poetry have been published all over the world, including in *Bamboo Ridge*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Emerson Review*, *After Happy Hour*, *Does It Have Pockets*. Christian has featured at the Autry Museum and Beyond Baroque. He lives in San Pedro, CA and uses his MFA to teach his neighbors and their kids at Los Angeles Harbor College.

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BALAZS NAGY-LACZKÓ is a Hungarian cultural anthropologist and short fiction writer, originally from the same small town as recent Nobel laureate László Krasznahorkai. His work has appeared in Hungarian literary journals, where he is known for fiction that explores coming-of-age narratives and posthuman themes through grotesque imagery, dark humor, and occasionally more lyrical, image-driven prose. "The Wild Grasp" belongs to the darker strand of his work.

KEN POYNER lives in the lower right-hand corner of Virginia, and is married to a world champion female power lifter. He spent 33 years herding computers. The latest of Ken's twelve collections of poetry and flash fiction is "Science Is Not Enough," speculative poetry. See him in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *The Cafe Irreal*, *Blue Unicorn* and another hundred or so places. www.kpoyner.com.

MARIE W. B. is a writer with an MFA from the University of Notre Dame. As the 2024 recipient of the Heartland Journalism Fellowship, she's published nonfiction in *The Common Reader*. Her fiction can be found in *River Bluff Review*.