

Neuro Magazine
presents:

Hello again!
Issue #2

Edited by
Iarlaith
Cunningham
and Yelaina
Anton



Editors' note

Well, hello there. If you've been here before then I say welcome back, if not, well then, just welcome to you. But in all seriousness, thank you very much for being here and for reading these words, if indeed, you are. I think that editors' notes get skipped a lot, well, at least I skip them a lot. I digress, as we mark the second year of Neuro Logical I would like to do some thanking and some announcements.

I am very proud of what I started, every time we get a poem or short story in, it makes me glad that someone knows who we are and what we do and trusts their work with us.

I would be remiss, of course, not to mention the incredible work done by the co-editor Yelaina, her work for the site has been dedicated, consistent and just down right impressive. She has handled the short fiction section of the site with such ease and confidence that I am put to shame with how effortlessly she works. However, her talents are not just reserved to the editorial type, she is a fantastic writer, friend and graphic designer. She was the one who designed our new logo after all!

That brings me to my next point. Partly out of necessity and partly out of ease Neuro Logical is changing. With this issue we shall be known henceforth as Neuro Magazine. Although the URL will still need to be updated and that may take some time due to the fact that I run this whole thing out of my own pocket, and from the generous sums sent in from other writers. This change comes from the want to remove any confusion of our name from the algorithm on google and twitter, we find the name to be smoother to say and more distinct. Another reason for the change is that we, as a journal, are changing how we publish and would like the new name to reflect that.

This will be the last yearly anthology of Neuro Magazine. From this point we will be publishing pieces bi-annually. While I don't want to leave our weekly publishing behind the amount of work we get in creates months in backlog in regards to published pieces. This is not fair on those of you who wish to see your work put out there. Yelaina has short fiction out to the end of next month!

This is a big change for us and will take some time to adapt, but adapt we will. As long as you stick with us. This past year has seen many journals close or go on hiatus due to people going back to their lives. Know this. I am dedicated to this, all of it, I will try my hardest to make this magazine a place worthy of the truly extraordinary writing that you are about to read.

Thank you for everything. Now get reading!

Iarlaith Cunningham

Hello readers,

It's me, the other editor now. I don't have much to say, thanks very much to Iarlaith. I just wanted to write a little note to say thank you to anyone who has ever looked at our little magazine for more than a second or two in your very-busy lives. Neuro has grown so much since I joined—no credit to me, I'm just observing here—and it's because of you wonderful people. So thank you!

It's always a delight reading the work that our writers trust us with, even if it doesn't end up on the front page of the magazine. The talent that Iarlaith and I see on the daily is remarkable, and it constantly humbles me. So thank you to everyone for being so welcoming of me joining the team, and an even bigger thank you to Iarlaith for this lovely little job I have.

That's all I've got. Keep writing, and see you soon!

Yelaina Anton

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POETRY

Gardenias

Geer Austin

Unashamed, their fragrance smacks me
like an extravagant greeting as I step out of my car
into my parents' Carolina Garden—hedged, abundant,
Dionysian—and suddenly I'm slow dancing
at a senior prom, tacky decorations overhead,
like a scene from a movie I didn't see,
or maybe Carrie before the conflagration.

My mother's beloved camelias, out-of-bloom,
stand like scene fillers, and lofty magnolias suggest
parental authority. I take a selfie in front of
the lavish gardenias and notice in the background
my parents' neighbor hacking them with garden shears.

When I turn, she apologizes for her theft. Oh please,
who really owns flowers, I say, and she looks at me
as if I am nuts. Maybe she covets punishment—
us demanding she hand over ten cups of sugar
or ordering her to rake our leaves in autumn.

I watch her retreat to her house with an armload
of flowers. What would Carrie do, I muse,
and for a moment I imagine the neighbor's house afire,
although the scent of the gardenia's drifts unabated

and their blooms blaze white in peaceful surrender.

Fruitful

Helen Sulis Bowie

at the end of it all they told me that you / were a cluster of cells, nothing more / while I had
you, everything but you / was a cluster of cells, where I was / held / close /and I loved you
from year / zero / tolerance / the language of policing /applied to my body / and yours /
forbidden / fruits / don't drink / don't smoke / don't stand / don't sit / don't paint the nursery /
don't don't don't / don't eat the forbidden / fruit / on a chart marks the weeks / 4 poppy
seed / 5 apple seed / 6 sweetpea // you were a sweetpea when i met you and you'll always
be a sweet pea / 7 blueberry / 8 raspberry / 9 green olive / 10 prune / 11 lime / sharp / sour
/ 11 lime / 11 lime / forbidden fruit / grows no more//

Generational

Michael Chin

I learned more about my father
from my son
than I would have imagined.

I learned from the tantrums.

My son, crimson-faced,
pulling a drawer and
overturning it
to empty foam tiles,
so he can throw the drawer itself
across the room.

He screams his rage
his disappointment
his significance.

My father's rage and
disappointment
a dark cloud at the ceiling.

My father's significance
everywhere.

Pocket Money Love

Daragh Fleming

We only work on the weekends
like full-time students with
part-time jobs.

There is no 9-5, no Monday
through Friday version of us

I can't even imagine you existing
on a Tuesday afternoon.

This is pocket-money love
which will keep us afloat until
we graduate to become real adults
and find real adult love.

The Broken Column

Nolcha Fox

Frida, dear Frida,

how did you

stand the pain?

What earthquake

cracked you open?

What disaster

smashed the stanchion

of your spine,

filled the air

with dust and rubble?

A monument to will,

corseted and sewn

together, nailed tight.

The Great Escape

Bianca Grace

We lock your gastroparesis
in the Disney hotel room
you have spent a week
recovering in
after we arrive in Florida
to play at Animal Kingdom.

We run through the gates,
and fly through the sky
on the back of a banshee
to your freedom.

At the 3D bug film,
you pretend vomiting
your entire existence
down to a skeleton
is less bloodcurdling
than the tarantula
reaching across
the room for your face.

When we arrive in Japan
I take the tubes
from your backpack

that were the bullet train
to your stomach
and place your camera inside.
No longer is your five-foot-eight-inch
figure malnourished
but ravenous to take photos
of the temples and shrines
in Tokyo.
I lug your equipment
around my shoulders
while you fill up
on your dreams
once dashed.
It's the lightest
weight I will ever carry.
When we land home
in Australia
we arrive back to reality,
and realise we never left
the four walls
of your lounge room
loaded with medications,
feeds and a diary
full of appointments.

But I will always travel
with you, hand in hand
to any challenge
you can't muster
the strength
to withstand alone.

Crossed Hands

George Held

How bare they looked, my mother's hands,
Without her wedding ring, after she'd pulled
It off and placed it in a small envelope
And handed it to me, imploring,
"Please pawn it for whatever it will bring.
We're broke and I no longer need this ring."
Mom was pushing eighty and bedridden
With the virus that would bury her,
And Dad was long past the age when he could
Work, and, never more than sporadically
Employed, he had no savings to tide them
Over, and I was just a school teacher,
With no big bucks, so I didn't make a fuss
But took the envelope from her withering
Hands and went to Emporium downtown
And got a couple hundred for the ring
And put the four Grants into the envelope
With four more of my own and returned
The gift to Mom, and she took it to her heart
And said, "You were always a good boy, Georgie,"
And before the year was out, she died,

And I made sure that in the coffin, hands
Crossed, Mom wore that same band upon her
Ring finger, a symbol of her dutiful life.

乖

Cheng Him

(kuai, from mandarin, meaning well behaved, usually used on children)

in a dark alley in taipei a cleaner lady puts a pack of kuai kuai biscuits on top of a vending machine. it is a nondescript machine filled with off brand drinks ever since it was first placed there, though those who know of the machine swear its drinks are sweeter than any other machine's. on its end, the machine makes little note of this, replying each idle compliment with the steady thrum machines of its sort are predisposed towards making. till date, no one has wondered how the lady manages to reach the top of the machine almost twice her height, yet each time she comes by the machine is just short enough for her to reach its top to wipe it down in its entirety, and when she coos “乖, 乖,” and puts yet another packet of biscuits atop its head its lights glow ever so brighter and all its drinks become just that much sweeter. this goes on for years until one day, the lady does not show up and the national broadsheets murmur about a rich man's son who was let off too lightly for getting behind the wheel of a lamborghini after an evening at the KTV. shortly after the machine vanishes and no one thinks to ask where it has gone; after all, things change so much these days, and who will miss a single vending machine? but those who used to frequent it will

grumble about how the drinks from the other machines just don't taste the same. in the days to come, the broadsheets will scream about how the scion to the largest companies this side of taiwan was found bludgeoned to death in his own bed, his body reduced to gristle, how the investigators came in and were stumped to find a vending machine standing atop the wreckage of his body, plugged into nothing, thrumming happily nonetheless, as it was wont to do.

Female Hysteria

Rebecca Jane McMonagle

Never have I ever
seen a woman
taken by the throws
of her own emotion
like a babbling brook boiling
over chafing tectonic plates
or like a lobster
singing as she heats
an uncontrollable
fact of life
of which I've never seen
hysterical women;
a manmade dream.

Song for a Seedling

Cheryl Snell

If the dark weighs you down and crowds you in
on all sides, you might have potential.

To make sure you're not
a metaphor, attend to what's winding
around your southernmost tip. Loosen
your entanglements. Wire clippers
are good for this. Otherwise,
spin the situation, pretend to believe
in your sturdy foundations.

They won't last forever,
despite the fiction of biodegradables.

And sooner or later
your head is bound to swell,
the green bursting to where the sun
pulled the sky close against winter.

It will open you like a canopy.

It will announce your name to the world.

Sad Girl Funeral Song

Natalie Wang

For Sylvia Plath

CW: Suicide ideation

I think sometimes of how I would like
to be remembered. For loyalty,
for competence, for generosity
to friends, perhaps. For creativity
in the kitchen, for the number
of drafts I would take - and as such
even if the detractors would not agree
on my skill, would not at least at my
seriousness with craft. But I know
what I would be reduced to if things
go the way of my sleepwalking dreams.
There are no more gas ovens
and the undercurrent of our thin rivers
are surely not strong enough to drown
me, no matter how many pebbles
I were to fill my pockets with. But
we do not lack high buildings here.
The call of the ground is a siren that
comes in unceasing waves; sometimes gentle

laps, sometimes strong enough to knock
me over my feet, the same as the pills
that night, but still I am here, if for little reason
other than spite, at the thought that this
would be all I would be remembered for
if I were to follow that call - joining a rank
of women poets, hysterical poets, poets who
had complex lives but with inevitable ends -
reduced to those ends and shamed for them
by the same kind of men in the same
dismissive breath. And worse still

I think about a blank-faced stranger thumbing
through my diary, the letters I have kept,
sending them off to be read by the world
and how everyone then would read them
thinking Fool, poor fool because they would
find then - even if there have been thousands
of books I have read, a hundred topics I am
eloquent in - none of that would matter
because they would find that the only thing
I could write about was you.

**When my dog was very young, I gifted him a pair of my
socks**

Amanda Williams

he held them gently in the cradle of his mouth
like a Faberge egg suspended in the sky on sterling spoon
his tail a cyclone lifting dust from sandy carpet
now he covets the ground I walk on, socks in his mouth a souvenir
commemorating how it feels to rise each day
with more love than you started with
I hand him a wad of them: fresh cotton
acid earth, a hint of camembert laced
with dewdrops of sweat and shea
his lion mane, sweet belly upturned
to pastel heaven as he buffs out my jagged corners
my anima mirrored in inked pupils
silken plush under my fingers, I wonder what it's like
to love unencumbered even
the noxious parts of me

FICTION

The Glacial Borne

J. F. Gleeson

I wonder what those early first Beringians packing cold across the Strait, set after by those panting long legged bears, following shivering those herds of hulks, think to this fruit of theirs, histories growing and histories old, warped inside out almost with fright and cowering: that it will never live, that it will not touch, that it is trapped and trapped, that sleep may only be achieved fraught and as result of panics, that setting foot onto some other celestial surface is of equal likelihood to warmth or space shared with some beloved, that this is the same likelihood of second dates or of being desired, that this is all very pithy and tiring, completely lost in so much wondering without moving.

Vicarious Calligraphies

Ronan Fenton

The actor had been brought into the studio for a private discussion with the woman whose life had inspired their most recent film. Two chairs were set back-to-back in an otherwise empty room, facing floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on abandoned sets.

A mouth opened and began to speak.

you weren't there you didn't try to find me to know what it felt like you didn't have to earn my name to bear the weight of it like car headlights on a dark road where you're lying face-down waiting for the glow to become you and for you to become the glow you didn't interview the friends and family I've come to acquire in the years between now and then you didn't make rooms from the crime scene photographs and inhabit them like a home you have no concept of the time I slipped through months elapsed in a dark box scratching tongueless cries into the wooden panelling with my untrimmed fingernails breathing nothing but my own scent you left out the claw-marks I scrawled on my eyelids when I was trying to tell if they were open or shut you forgot that little detail didn't you or you never made the effort to learn you took a cut of the profits instead of a flat salary you monetized my trauma you gambled on its mass appeal you walked beside me from a distance and thought you knew me when my sand is pulled from the white grasses of an alien crater and yours is gold and familiar you put sugar in my coffee when I wanted it black you used prosthetics for scar tissue and not a razor blade you can't even look me in the face can you I wonder are you mouthing my words as I speak thinking you're a fraction of a second ahead of me thinking you know me better than I know myself because you're outside me and that gives you unprecedented closure on what happened way back then but you weren't there when I had to learn how to sleep how to speak for myself how to trust how to love you only pretended to be living it during takes and then fell away from

the pain like I never could you didn't forget your mother's face her voice how the moon looks on a clear night how hard it can be to count the stars without losing track of which are in your pocket and which are flung out through the night you weren't there when it happened or before when you were just yourself and not defined by what was going to be inflicted upon you/

I was somewhere/

don't interrupt this isn't about you everyone was somewhere once but only I was in that exact place at that exact time only I saw my future petrified into an arthritic bough that fell from the tree and landed between my feet so small so frail so slender so crooked you weren't thinking of the wind or the air as a spectre you weren't dreaming of simple things like a slice of sponge cake resting on a jade plate on what you imagine might be your kitchen table if only you could remember with your mother singing something by the sink and your father pollarding the trees in the back garden sawing through the time you have left in the real world and not the world he would cage you in you were somewhere but not there not really not like I was you didn't want to meet me until after you'd finished filming to avoid my reality impacting your conception of my character but I am not a character and never have been you spoke of me like I'm not myself like you were in touch with the real me while I was too distanced from myself because of the trauma and the media circus and the process I undertook of rebuilding myself from nothing you wanted the blank slate I was turned into and not the person I have become

The actor started to say something and then stopped, shook their head. They stood up and left the room, muttering something about artistic licence, about integrity, about how no one understood the true nature of the work. Another actor, the one who played the woman's father, entered the room and sat down.

The Milkman

Mick Shawyer

'Times are 'ard young 'un, there's nowt goin' round yere,' was all anybody had to say.

Michael had been knocking on doors for three hours, every farm and business he could find but Saturday jobs were scarce and his legs ached as he walked along Ashton Lane.

An electric-engined milk float with Legards Dairy emblazoned on the side turned through a pair of gates, the empty bottles rattling and bouncing like teenagers at a rave. *Maybe there could be something going at the dairy* he thought, perking up as a second float hummed past, turning in a tree-lined drive.

Five floats were parked in the yard, off to one side the milking-parlour, evidenced by its unique aroma - two milkmen nipping in and out with crates of empty bottles. Someone was singing about Speedy Gonzales. Michael looked around, the voice was coming from behind the nearest float. A rattle of bottles and a third milkman stepped out, crate of empties in his hands and halting mid-Speedy.

'What's on nipper?' And adding suspiciously, 'What's funny?'

'I'm looking for a part-time job Sir. I was smiling at Speedy Gonzales, it's my family's favourite song. We sing it to my dad when he's driving.'

The milkman slid his cloth cap back, scratching at wispy brown hair. *A job! This skinny sprog couldn't lift a bottle of milk, never mind a crate.* 'How old are you?'

'Twelve, Sir.'

'Twelve! Does your mum know you're out?'

'Yeah she does. Why?'

'You're too young to be gallivanting around looking for a job.'

Michael puffed his chest out, 'I'm nearly thirteen and reliable, *very reliable.*'

'Very reliable? Who says so?'

'My sister. She always says get Michael to do it -he's *very reliable*.'

'Hmm. . . What about your mum, what does she say?'

'Gizz on out from under my feet - time you got a paper round.'

'Gizz on?'

'Yes Sir, she's from Cornwall. It means get out of here.'

'Have you got a paper round?'

'No Sir, there's none going so I am available to be your milk-boy.' He beamed like the milkman had won the lottery and he was delivering the cheque.

'Can you get out of bed in the morning?'

'Yes Sir.'

'I need a hand four hours Saturdays and Sundays. Can you run at 5:30 am?'

'I can sir, I'm quite a fast runner for my age.'

'Fast?' The milkman thinking of customers with dogs. Or geese.

'I beat Roger Wilde, came first on sports day.'

'Roger Wilde? The Tinker's Bottom lot?'

'I don't know where he lives but no one's beaten him before; he wasn't happy. He wanted to fight me.'

'Did you?'

'Did I what?'

'Fight him.'

'No Sir. Adrian Ponting told him I beat up Michael Hopgood.'

'Bloody hell.'

The milkman had encountered the Hopgoods more than once and took a fresh look at the would-be milk-boy. 'You do mean them by the flour mills? Those Hopgoods?'

They were a proper handful and the milkman didn't want any complications with this family of thoroughbred thugs.

'I'm new here so I don't know families or anything.'

'His dad and brothers are always up before the beak.'

'What's a beak?'

'Where did you fight young Hopgood?'

'At school, we got caned. He was hitting Adrian Ponting, making him cry. I don't like people crying.'

'John Gimblett still the headmaster?'

'Gimbo? Yes Sir.'

'He's a fan of corporal punishment that one. Did you cry?'

'Why would I cry?'

Because it hurt, the milkman re-living a caning he'd received at primary school and glancing at the scars on his hand. 'What about Hopgood - he cried?'

'He screamed and hopped good. I put my hand under the cold tap.'

'He hopped good?' The milkman imagining the scene, a cartoon image and still grinning as he manhandled the crate back on the float.

'Come here son,' and pointing. 'Can you lift that?'

The twelve-year-old locked eyes with the milkman as he raised the crate to his waist. 'How high?'

The milkman flapped his hand at the ground, 'That'll do. Put it down, put it down.'

'Wanna see me run?'

'No, you're fine. Be here tomorrow at 5:30. I'll give you a try this weekend. Don't be late, pay's two bob. My name's Ernie, Ernie Hill.'

'Thanks Mr Hill. I'm Michael but everyone calls me Mike, apart from my mother. That's two shillings each day?'

Ernie nodded.

'So eight hours over the weekend. I deliver, you drive?'

'You've got it Mikey.'

'Sounds like it should be half a crown each day, five bob for the weekend's work. After all, I'll be doing the running, you'll be sat in the driver's seat.'

Cheeky beggar Ernie thought, hiding a smile. 'It'll be two bob, a tanner bonus if you make me laugh. *And* you'll get a thick ear if you break anything.'

'Best I can do,' he added in a take it or leave it tone and Michael shook his hand.

'Agreed. Thanks Mr Hill. I'll see you tomorrow morning.'

'Call me Ernie. And Mikey? A beak is a judge.' The youngster waving an arm as he raced home to share the news.

Ernie shook his head, smiling as his new milkboy disappeared from sight. *He can run all right, very reliable? - We'll see.*

Michael hurdled the gate, skidding on the gravel by the back door and bursting in the kitchen. The door bounced off the wall.

'Ooops, sorry Mum.'

'Sorry's too late doesn't fix broken glass,' his mother nodding at the stacks of rock buns and pasties fresh from the oven. 'You need to slow down boy, you'll do yourself a mischief.'

'Gotta job,' he announced proudly. 'Milk-boy, two bob a day plus bonus. Ernie calls me Mikey.'

He grinned cheekily, full of himself - 'Reward,' and scooping a rock bun from the trivet, warm, fruity and a crunchy sugar topping.

'There's a bonus?'

'Mmm,' Michael nodding as crumbs from the rock bun showered like confetti. 'A tanner every time I make Ernie laugh.'

Who's Ernie?'

'The milkman. He's really funny, sings like Pat Boone. And a beak is a judge.'

His mother wondering at a job interview that paid a laughter bonus and involved judges as the door closed and the clatter of his feet shook the ceiling.

Michael slid to a halt at the bedroom all three sisters shared, access by invitation only and he rattled the handle, 'Viv, Viv.'

No reply and he pushed the door, prodding the homemade bedspread. A head poked out, fingers pushing auburn hair to the side - one-eyed squinting at the sunlight. Viv wanted to try a swear word she'd discovered but her mother might hear. Anyway, this was her favourite brother - *no one swore at him*.

'What?'

'Gotta job with the milkman, start tomorrow.'

She couldn't hold the upside-down smile and twisted, pushing the pillow against the headboard, eyeing the rock bun. 'Give us a bite.'

He broke it in half.

'Two and six a day, can you believe it?' He'd decided the bonus would be inclusive.

'Eff off!' Viv attempting the word and feeling grown-up, 'Half a crown!'

'Yep, I'm gonna be rich.'

#

The next morning he ran up the drive to the dairy and the moo of lactating cows, wondering if they were talking about the weather or what was for breakfast and he let out a long moo, jumping as Ernie rode past on a jaded black bicycle that creaked in harmony with his pedalling.

'Mooo,' imitated the milkman and his boy upped the pace, running alongside. Ernie pedalled faster, irritated by how easily the runner stayed with him and grunting, 'Smarty-pants.'

The yard was busy, school-playground busy, five milkmen racing to load their floats and Ernie firing questions, 'How many in your family?'

'Eight.'

'Eight!'

'Yes. Three girls, three boys.'

'How long have you lived here?'

'6 months.'

'Where did you live before?'

'Malta.'

'Malta!'

Is he deaf, wants everything said twice? Better speak up a bit, like for Nan.

'Yes.'

'What were you doing there?'

'Fishing and stuff. School.'

'No, not you. Your family.'

'My Mum looked after us, we all went to school. My Dad went to work.'

'What does your dad do? Is that why you went to Malta?'

'Yes, my dad's job. He works for the government.'

'The government - he's a spy?' Ernie smiling.

'I don't know what he does - Prime Minister?'

The milkman cackled. You're the oldest?'

'No second youngest.'

'How long were you in Malta?'

'Three years.'

'No need to shout son I'm not deaf,' the milkman admonished, ushering his new milkboy in the cab. 'Stand there and hold on.'

He moved the lever and the electric motor groaned into life. 'Does your dad still work for the government?'

'Yes!'

Michael wondered if the milkman had a list of questions written somewhere, ticking off the replies - *did a lightbulb flash for correct?*

'Where does he work?'

'Flowerdown. It's near Winchester. We're waiting to be allocated a house on the government base.'

They pulled up at a block of three houses at the end of a short track. 'Two silver tops, number three. Run fast, they've a big hairy dog. He almost ate Michael Hopgood, my last milkboy.'

Pity it didn't, the new milkboy grinned - *it would have saved me a caning.*

Number three was the end house, a lazy plume of smoke from the chimney and guardian gnomes waiting inside the gate. He squeezed the latch, pausing as it clicked and waiting for the big hairy dog. Nothing and he tiptoed past the silent guardians and recycled chimney pots that overflowed with flowers.

Not a sound and he slowly lowered the crate on a "WELCOME HOME" doormat. A bright-eyed robin perched on the windowsill, inquisitive head twisting as Michael swapped the bottles. The big hairy dog was sleeping. . .

Big hairy dog you doughnut, there's no dog! Ernie made it up, one of his jokes and Michael relaxed, the empties clinking as he sauntered past the gnomes. I like this job - fresh air, running, which I love and a funny boss.

There was a howl from the back garden, a black and tan missile hurtling around the corner, paws scrabbling for grip. The milk-boy leapt for the gate, slamming it shut as saliva-dripping teeth snapped and snarled.

Blimey - that was close. How does Ernie deal with that monster? What'll I do tomorrow?

He walked to the float, wondering at the sound of water gurgling down a plughole and getting louder. He looked under the milk float. Nothing. *Weird*, and he climbed in the cab - the milkman bent forward, coughing and spluttering - *the noise, it was him, he's choking!*

'Ernie. Ernie, what's wrong?' Michael sure the milkman had swallowed a fly like his sister last summer - their mother slapping Viv's back and the fly shot out.

How is it mum's always know what to do?

Tears poured down the milkman's face, Ernie mopping them up with a pillowcase-sized handkerchief. Michael worrying and out of his depth - he'd never seen a grown-up cry, didn't know they could.

Have I got to cuddle him? Say, "There, there. It's all right?"

'Where does it hurt Ernie, shall I call a doctor? Did you swallow a fly?'

'Oh Mikey, funniest thing I've seen in years.'

'Funny?' *He's not crying?*

'You jumping the fence, Rex trying to bite you.'

'*Rex?* You know his name?'

Ernie was still wiping, searching for a dry bit on his pillowcase handkerchief, 'Yeah. I meant to tell you, give him a dog biscuit and he'll be your friend for life. I always carry some in my pocket.'

'Forgot? I don't think so,' Michael realising the laughter meant one thing. 'That's a bonus!'

Ernie smiled between the sniffles - it was worth every penny. The milkman's only companion was a fertile imagination and he didn't laugh at home. His sour-faced landlady would call the men in white coats.

'Next one Miss Blume four gold tops,' Michael reading from the book as he eyed the double cream pushing at the foil caps.

Miss Blume lived at "The Bakers Dozen" a short concrete path meandering between citrus-sweet honeysuckle that jostled with the flowers - a black tail-lashing cat glared from under a heart-shaped rhododendron.

No dogs and the milkboy uncrossed his fingers - *I've earned a bonus, maybe I should ask for danger money as well. Surely there's nothing scarier than Rex?*

The front door opened, a thirty-something female dressed in a froth of multi-coloured lace startling the 12-year old.

What strange clothes, he thought. *Does she wear them under her other stuff?* He tried to look whilst not looking and Miss Blume's eyes sparkled - someone different bringing milk to her door. She took the bottles one by one, her eyes never leaving his as she lined them up along the windowsill.

'Thank you,' and she searched over his shoulder. 'Where's Ernest? He usually comes in for cocoa on Sundays.'

Ernest? Oh she means Ernie and he pointed toward the road as she fired questions like a suspicious teacher, 'Who are you, what's your name?'

His mouth moved silently, this strange and intimidating female was unlike any he'd met.

'Come on boy, cat got your tongue?'

'I'm the milkboy.'

'Well done, you got that bit right. What's your name, milkboyyyy?' Her voice dripping with honey and his unease grew.

'M-M-Michael.'

'Pleased to meet you M-M-Mickey,' she teased. 'Some of my regular visitors like to call me *Miss Blume*.' She winked. 'You can call me Sue.'

She drew the last syllable into a pout and moved closer. *She's scarier than Rex*, he thought, torn between running for his life or searching for pointed teeth. Parma violet breath tickled his nostrils.

No, no. She can't be a vampire.

He wasn't sure about Parma violets or what vampires ate but he knew they didn't drink cocoa. The idea of bloodsucking fangs wouldn't let go and he retreated, taking a large pantomime step backwards and wishing his mother were there - she'd whip out her crucifix and drive the vampire back in its lair.

He fumbled at his neck, gripping the silver St. Christopher as she moved in.

'Would you like to come in for a cup of cocoa Mickey, like Ernest does?' She extended her hand.

'Err no, no thanks Miss Blume,' his eyes popping at the blood-red fingernails and trying to make enough room for a quick exit with another pantomime step.

The vampire followed.

Save me Lord! The milkboy wishing he'd got a paper round. Or a farm boy. Anything but a blood sacrifice - *he'd wake up tomorrow with fangs and be scared to go out in the sunlight for fear of turning to dust.*

Call me Sue,' she whispered and Michael's imagination took off - *she is a vampire! I deserve danger money - IF I get out alive.*

He took another backward step, hurried this time and his foot hit the gate. Miss Blume up on her toes and closing in. Flecks of red lipstick on her teeth.

She's just snacked on someone!

'Come on, my cocoa is the best,' making it sound like an exotic cocktail as Michael fumbled at the gate-latch behind his back.

Mum, mum help. . .

'Tell Ernest he's naughty. A naughty, naughty boy and Miss Blume will see him Tuesday.'

He turned tail, whipping the gate open and feet spinning in a blur as he raced for the safety of the float. Images of blood dripping from pointed teeth, red fingernails, arms raised to grab him. . . *Come to me M-M-Mickey M-M-M Mouse - fangs sinking in his neck. Aaaagh . . .*

He jammed his feet in the grass, skidding to a halt alongside the float - empties in the back and jumping in. Ernie eyed him quizzically. 'What's the rush?'

Neither of them noticed Sue Blume clutching the gate post and giggling.

'I want danger money.'

'Danger money?'

'Yeah. And what's a baker's dozen?'

'It's from olden times Mikey, bakers gave an extra loaf of bread when someone ordered twelve. A baker's dozen means thirteen.'

'Why?'

'So they couldn't be accused of selling loaves that were too small. They would get a whipping.'

'So why is *her* house called a baker's dozen?'

'Miss Blume's old man Bernard. He was a baker, top man. Worked down at Stainers Bakery - near the school.'

Michael's curiosity was still piqued. 'What does she do with four bottles of gold top every day? That's a lot of milk for one person and a witch's cat.'

The milkman's lips twitched but he managed a knowing wink.

'Well Mikey,' one finger tapping his nose. 'Miss Blume has become very sociable since Bernie passed on, leaving her penniless. She's very good at cocoa.'

'Not a vampire then?' Michael's hopes of danger money evaporating. 'Her teeth seem quite pointed, there was blood on them.'

The ultimate proof for a twelve year-old - pointed teeth and a witch's cat.

Ernie was unable to get a word out. *This nipper'll be the death of me* and imagined his heart bursting with laughter - they would carve on his headstone, "*Ernie the Milkman - he died of laughter.*"

'No Mikey, Miss Blume is not a vampire.' And the milk-boy relaxed.

'She said tell Ernest he's a naughty boy and she'll see you Tuesday as usual. Why does she call you Ernest in a school-teacher sort of voice? Actually, she said you're a naughty, naughty boy as well. Why would she say it twice, like that? Does she give lessons - like a teacher?'

Ernie turned purple, mopping his face and mumbling in his handkerchief. All unnoticed by his milkboy who wasn't waiting for an answer.

'Oh I understand now, she's a cocoa expert who dresses funny,' and nodding to himself. 'She must be good at it and very kind. She offered me a cup, said she's the best at making cocoa.'

Ernie's foot slipped off the pedal, his leg shaking uncontrollably and the milk float stop-starting as the bottles danced.

'She said I can call her Sue but some of her visitors call her Miss Blume. That's very polite of them. Perhaps we could both get one next weekend?'

#

The sometimes two-cups-of-cocoa a week milkman stared through the windscreen as they followed a bumpy track to the next drop, Sunny Hill House. The milkboy running in with four silver tops, a mum hanging washing on the line and waving, 'Money's in the cup.'

He waved back, noticing a foliage of female fripperies on the washing line.

'She left the money out,' handing it to Ernie. 'Does everyone make cocoa around here?'

Maybe the fripperies were part of some cocoa-drinking ceremony?

'Why'd you ask?'

'The washing line, it's got stuff on it, same as Sue wears.' Ernie fighting the urge to ask what Miss Blume had been wearing.

'They're a big family, four teenage daughters. I feel sorry for the parents, the girls are a proper handful - well known down at the youth club. I don't think they make cocoa.'

#

At the next drop potted bushes bordered the drive - Michael counting twenty-two each side, the number forgotten as they approached the mansion house. A Rolls Royce Silver Shadow was on the drive. 'That's a tasty motor, does someone rich live here?'

The milkman's head bobbed in time with their passage. 'Yeah a farmer, John Parrot. He made a smart move, married old money.' He snorted, 'You'd laugh, talk about chalk and cheese. His wife Margot's posh. Very hoity-toity.'

The milkman's voice took on a well-spoken tone, *'I say milkman one is having visitors today, leave an extra gold top, there's a good chap.'*

Michael grinned, an adult talking to him as a friend and it felt good.

'John likes a beer down at The Lonely Duck every Friday.' Ernie switched characters, *'Oooarr Sandie, Oi'l have a paint a boilermaker Luv, a propa glas' wi' an 'andle.'*

'What's a paint?'

'That's how he speaks, he means pint. He often has more than one.'

'Does he take Margot?'

'Not on your life, she'd never go there. I've heard talk, young Jack 'im that's a bodybuilder, calls round Fridays. They have cocoa in the greenhouse. Several cups, so the housekeeper says.'

'Blimey, Cocoa is very popular around here.'

'It is,' Ernie agreed as a flock of geese stormed from the service entrance.

They weren't as quick as the two-tone missile from number one Brickmakers Terrace but still a scary sight, wings raised and flapping. Ernie's laughter re-ignited at his milk-boy fleeing from the feathered guards.

'What's old money?'

'It's money that came through the family, handed down.'

'What's a boilermaker?'

'It's a half a brown ale mixed with half a mild.'

'And hoity-toity means posh?'

Bugger me this kid's mind is all over the place, questions, questions, questions. I love it - wondering if he'd ever have kids of his own. 'Yeah sort of, snobby fits as well. If you wrote a book hoity-toity goes well with old money. Make sense?'

Michael was sure he'd missed something, after a moment shaking his head. Alan, his eldest sister's latest boyfriend drove a convertible Humber Hawk. He was a good fit for hoity-toity.

Ernie was at least three *laughter bonus* tanners down but Michael hadn't been counting the laughs, the milkman distracting him as he whistled, "When the Saints go marching in," and encouraging the milk-boy to sing.

The return journey was down a steep and narrow lane, overgrown with trees and blind corners, the high spot of Ernie's day. He urged the float faster, rear wheels lifting and Michael hanging on as the milkman screamed, 'YESSSS.'

The locals kept clear of this hill whilst his comedian brother sang songs describing him as the fastest milkman in the west.

'Have you ever met someone coming up the hill?'

'There was the time I met old Joby with his tractor and trailer from School Farm.' Ernie chuckled, 'We ended up in a bit of a tangle, blamed a runaway horse. The insurance coughed up.'

'Was Joby Ok?'

'Oh yeah, I arranged for a cup of cocoa from Miss Blume, he was very pleased - smiled for days.'

'Crikey what a bargain, a cup of cocoa did all that?'

'Well, it *was* gold top, Mikey.'

Gold top must have magical powers, the milkboy not believing a cup of cocoa could fix so many different things - *even if it were gold-topped*.

'All I can say is her cocoa must be good, If you're not naughty anymore perhaps she'll give us a cup sometime?'

Olympia

Hally Winters

We had moved so far South we could've escaped God, but now we were back. All my memories of Olympia were no match for the intertwining feeling that being back seemed to reanimate. Feeling touched memory and memory colored feeling. To a baptized Californian, the color of water was green, and green was everywhere. The very light coming through the high canopy filtered in green like a kelp forest. I could go so far as to say it smelled green. Kelsi and I were moving back to Olympia, our last-ditch effort at our marriage ever since my certain activities, and because we both wanted to buy a house it seemed ideal.

“It will be nice.” She said, “Having your parents so close.”

I could only picture problems with that, but I nodded and squeezed her hand.

The house had been bought based on 23 photos online, so as we pulled into the driveway of our new home she said it looked bigger than she anticipated, and I agreed. The furnished house stood alone except for an acre of green green grass on all sides. Other houses and trees pushed out the perimeter leaving our house particularly lonely, a luxury.

“After we settle in we can have a drink out here,” Kelsi said motioning to the wicker chairs on the front porch.

“That will be nice.” I said, “Ready?” And I opened the door.

*

The window in the bathroom was a little low for comfort. I sat on the toilet and let my eyes fall on the other houses, our new neighbors. Lawns made up of grass and ferns and waist-high fences filled out the flatlands. About a quarter-mile away I noticed a thick tree with a rather

large burl. Its shape looked oddly familiar, and I wasn't sure if it was a resurfaced memory. My eyes tricked me into feeling like the tree was looking back, an ominous fog descending like finding a well in the middle of the forest, and I wavered between not believing it and not wanting to find out.

“Are you almost done?” She was checking up on me.

I rolled the toilet paper roll. “Yes,” I said as she walked away.

*

“I think I know this place,” I said. “Like I used to hang out here.” I walked down the porch past her reclined body, to the front of the driveway. A narrow creek wound through town, so I suggested we go for a walk if only to get closer to the tree.

“Yes, I used to play right here with a kid I knew.”

“Awe, how sweet.” She seemed mildly interested like I was telling her about a dream I had the night before.

“She was my best friend. We were what like nine or ten and she taught me how to smoke a cigarette.” I mused. The girl was also my first love, and so she started it all for me. When I think about my type it seems irrevocably tied to how I remembered her. Straight black hair with bangs and a bow in her hair. She always wore the most feminine dresses and white tights. She was a nice girl, but she smoked cigarettes, the punctum in my childhood fantasy. That's right, she stored the cigarettes in the burl of the tree.

I walked about the tree, and gingerly put my hand into the crevasse of the burl. Nothing was there. A flash of the possibility of us meeting again, as adults, pulled my hand away. The scent of the creek and the nearby willow trees sent shock waves of memory through me. I

looked up to the house across the creek with brown trim along the second story. That was her house.

“I’m ready to go back when you are,” Kelsi said.

“Yep,” I said. I could see walks becoming a regular thing in my routine.

*

In Kelsi’s attempt to lay down roots as she called it, I found myself being lugged along to each house in the neighborhood. At one or two houses we left a plate of cookies and the card on top.

A woman with short sleek black hair, not a strand out of place, and too much makeup opened the door.

“Hello, we just moved in right over there,” Kelsi turned away to point at the house, and the woman’s eyes flickered toward mine and back to Kelsi before she noticed. “And we just wanted to come by and introduce ourselves. I’m Kelsi—”

“And I’m Josh.” I cut in, “I actually used to live here when I was a kid.”

“Did you?” She smiled.

“In that old blue house just up the road. My parents still live there.”

“I think I know them.” Her eyes met Kelsi this time. “Well, glad to see you back,” but the woman was talking to me.

“Josh was telling me about a friend that lived here that he used to play with, do you...”

“Hmm, that must have been my daughter, Olivia. She passed away twenty-five years ago this June.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kelsi said.

“Well, I better let you go.” The woman’s mood changed completely, “Thank you for the cookies.”

“No problem. Hope to see more of you.” Kelsi said, and I sheepishly waved at her as she met my gaze.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I told Kelsi as we walked back. “Twenty-five years this June. I was around nine or ten when I met her, right?”

She said nothing.

“That was twenty years ago give or take.”

“Maybe she got the date wrong.” She argued.

“No,” I said. “Mothers don’t get the dates wrong.”

“Well, she probably has cancer or something.”

Sometimes Kelsi didn’t make any sense.

*

I looked from the bathroom window toward the tree where Olivia and I used to play. I didn’t have her last name, so I was typing, “Olivia Olympia death” and random searches came up. I tried it with “tragic” and “little girl” but only aimless rabbit holes. I was positive I had played with the girl. I hadn’t bought the cigarettes, myself. My parents didn’t know about her, so I couldn’t ask them. They used to let me loose on the neighborhood as a kid. We moved into the big blue house when I was eight years old, so I knew I hadn’t gotten the dates wrong. Twenty-five years ago, I would have been living in Lakewood and only four years old.

I woke up early the next day and left our bed quietly. It rained in the night, and the sky was a dim blue, a perpetual twilight. I walked to the tree in the silent morning. The cricket’s verse hadn’t ended yet. I paused before the tree, my shoes soaked, and embraced its maternal figure. I didn’t care that I was missing some detail to make my childhood make sense. My hand groped the dark tree for the crevasse, and I thought of the way Olivia would lick the cigarette

and hand it off to me. Then I remembered our first kiss, my first kiss, in the dip of the creek, the water lapping at our feet, my arm hanging idly over her. I withdrew myself into the cover of the creek.

“Where were you?” I asked Kelsi. The sun had started cutting through the clouded canopy.

“With Mrs. Goodall.” She said, “She asked about you.”

I instantly felt insecure. “Yeah?”

“She asked how you were doing and I said fine.” Kelsi paused, “And then she asked me what else you said about Olivia. She said she missed her daughter.” She glared at me. “It was embarrassing.”

“Why?” I grew defensive.

“Because you never tell me anything these days.”

I paused. “You’re never interested.”

“That’s not true. I’m just done carrying the conversation.”

“Maybe if you asked questions.”

“I’m not the problem,” Her words were loaded, “And I’m not in the mood.” She walked away. I knew that meant I was going to have to deal with it later in some capacity.

*

I got up early again, this time from insomnia, and decided to go on a targeted walk. I went by Mrs. Goodall’s house and saw there were no lights on. I knew she stayed up late because I did too. Excuses kicked in while I walked onto her property. There were no fences. Her garden of dahlias ornamented the garden pink and yellow with alyssum and lobelias filling in the space. How could I not enter her garden? It was quiet again, and the misty morning made the silence denser. I peered into her windows and saw nothing out of the ordinary. The kitchen with

hanging spoons and a coffee maker in the corner. Then I heard a noise and ducked. A slice of a shadow moved over the garden. I held my breath and crouched toward the street. My heart beat a thousand times per second. I walked as fast as I could toward my house, until I was far enough to seem inconspicuous. I turned my head for just a moment and saw her on the front porch, wearing a robe and a head wrap. A flicker of light broke between us.

I burst through the front door and woke Kelsi up. She was frustrated, but I didn't care.

"Why did you say you thought she had cancer?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Goodall? Why did you think she had cancer?"

She rubbed her eyes. "Because of the wig."

I stood silent and Kelsi asked, "Why?"

"No reason." I said, "Sorry for waking you up. I'm going to go for a run."

The wig. I tried the words between my lips. "The wig."

*

I ran in the opposite direction of both houses. The world was slow around me like I was running through water. Then it hit me. It was her. It had always been her. I thought of the ribbon she always wore, and the knowledge fit neatly within me like I had always known. When I had gotten far enough away, I hid behind some bushes and tried to break it all down. I wasn't sure what this truth had done to me. I thought of Olivia's dead body rotting in the ground. Her clothes being left behind in the closet growing dusty. Her shoes still muddy and her mom putting them away for the last time. I thought of her bedroom smelling stale like a museum. Then I wasn't sure which came first. Me playing in Mrs. Goodall's yard, or Mrs. Goodall slipping her daughter's tights on, her fitting a straight black-haired wig on and tying a bow into

it. I thought of the cigarette she smoked perfectly and never coughed from, and how I thought that was so cool. Then I wasn't sure if these memories were being washed clean or out of sight.

The rain softened by the time I made it back to my house. Small streaks of light shot through the clouds, but they didn't feel warm like they would have in California. For the first time, I noticed how everything in Olympia wasn't sun-damaged like it was in California, the cars driving by, the paint on the houses, rusty, but without the long-term effects of UV light. I wondered if it did the same thing to skin. I thought of people who drive the same route every day in their truck and how one side of their face grew weathered, the other stayed taut. I wondered if the same would happen to me in my half a life spent in California, the other in Washington.

I opened the door to Kelsi standing over boiling water wearing a robe and slippers. She took one look at my face and said, "You look like you've been cheating again, haven't you?"

rain rain go away come again another day little children
want to play...

Arusi Quera

The birds never stop speaking to me. Not the birds in the sky, it's those ones that perch on trees, walk on our grounds. Yes those birds never stop speaking to me.

Today, I am neatly dressed in a cute blue dress. I regained my consciousness briefly, I asked and answered. So I did the first thing that felt right, I cleaned up. Now, no one knows I am a mad woman, at least not until I start to run down the streets or talk back to the birds.

Until then, I pretend to be interested in the man who gave me this dress and soap to wash. I will give him my body, I know from his stares it's what he wants. Yes, he's one the crazy ones that would do anything for money.

A Normal Workday

Daniel Addercouth

Dear God, thank you for letting me take this shower. Jason pressed the button on his waterproof speaker and the audio book that Ashley had given him for his birthday began. She was probably asleep already, so he kept the volume down. *The chaplain looks around at the men in the crew lounge and begins his prayer. "Almighty Father, protect those who scale the heights of Heaven and carry the fight to our enemies."* He wondered if Ashley had meant it as a joke, but that wasn't her style.

He concentrated on the feel of the water against his face, enjoying the warmth. This was one of the lessons he'd learned from the mindfulness seminar they'd been forced to attend at work. For once, the training course had been worth it. He no longer got stomach pains, and he was sleeping better instead of roaming around the house during the day. Even Ashley had commented on how he was less stressed.

*

Elaf put his papers into his bag as the morning sun streamed through the window of his home office. It was going to be hot again today. He had a meeting in town that morning. He would have preferred to work from home the whole day, but his boss insisted on face-to-face meetings. It was going to be a difficult conversation. Elaf needed to ask for more resources for the project his boss had assigned him. He wasn't going to like that: the organisation was struggling already. Elaf wished he could have declined the project, but it didn't work like that.

He went into the kitchen, where his wife was sitting with their two sons, who were tucking into the flatbreads the cook had made for breakfast. He kissed each of them goodbye.

*

Jason paused for a moment as he passed Emma's bedroom. The door was open a couple of inches as usual, and he could hear the little grunts she made when she was sleeping. *Dear God*, he thought. *Thank you for letting us have our daughter.* Practising gratitude was something else he'd learned in the mindfulness seminar. The trainer had suggested they thank the universe, but Jason preferred to thank God. If the universe was intelligent and conscious, then wasn't that the same as God? Jason had been raised a Catholic and still went to church when he could, even if now it was mainly for Emma's sake.

He fixed himself some granola for breakfast and made a salad to take to work. He was used to eating breakfast in the late evening: working nights was part of the job. And it meant he got to spend time with Emma during the afternoon. He was aware these years would pass quickly. Each day with her was a gift.

He sometimes wondered if Emma would follow in his footsteps. There were worse things she could do with her life. He liked to think that in his own small way he was making the world a better place.

*

Elaf was surprised to see his driver had his daughter with him. Head bowed, the driver explained he wanted to take her to the doctor in town. Could he do it while Elaf was in his meeting?

Elaf liked his driver and tried to help him when he could. He believed it was important to treat people decently. He gave his consent. The driver bent forward in gratitude. They got into the SUV and set off.

*

One advantage of working the night shift was there was never any traffic. It was pleasant driving the empty interstate listening to the new audio book. *On this warm August morning, Sachiko Yamamoto should be at work. But she is ill and has stayed home.* He wasn't entirely sure what was going on, but hopefully it would become clear later. Ashley liked these difficult books. He readily admitted she was smarter than he was. That was another reason why he was grateful to her for taking time out from her career to look after Emma. Jason would have liked to take parental leave himself, but breaks were frowned upon in his unit. You had to keep your skill set sharp.

*

As they drove, Elaf looked out the window and watched the hills and fields slide past. It was hotter than usual for this time of year, and the leaves on the trees had turned brown. Climate change, he thought. He knew he was contributing to it by driving around in the SUV, but he

needed transport and the big vehicle was good on the potholed roads. In any case, the organisation's goals were more important.

*

Jason concentrated on the moving objects on his monitors. He imagined the electronic signals bouncing from server to server around the globe, and thanked God for letting him have the technology to do his job.

*

The meeting had gone better than Elaf had expected, and he was feeling content as they drove home. He was confident the operation would be a success, now his boss had authorised more resources. His driver had got medicine for his daughter and seemed happy. Elaf was looking forward to having lunch with his family. The cook was making chicken the way he liked it. The road was quiet. They would be home in half an hour.

*

Jason was aware of his pounding heart and dry mouth. The mindfulness techniques worked well at these moments, keeping him calm. He reminded himself it was just a normal workday, and concentrated on the images on his screens.

A line from the audio book echoed in his head. *New shadows of people appear on the ground; only the shadows will remain.* He made his mind go blank. Another skill he'd learned.

The higher-ups had given the green light. He was ready to go. The black rectangle of the SUV inched across the map. The crosshairs locked on.

He pulled the trigger.

1 Thessalonians 4:16

Matthew Pritt

When my dad died, the crematorium gave us his remains in a plastic bag.

“Like a sack of flour,” I commented, but it wasn’t the time.

He didn’t say where he wanted his ashes spread. Probably didn’t care. We picked for him, a creek on his grandmother’s property where he used to fish. There was a ceremony where we said our goodbyes to Flour Sack Dad, tested the wind so he didn’t blow back on us, and dumped him in the water.

I didn’t watch what happened, whether he clumped together into a dough ball and sank to the bottom or dissipated and peacefully became one with the creek. I was more concerned whether we needed to give the bag another shake. It wasn’t completely empty; there were bits of ash clinging to the plastic, begging not to be forgotten but living forever in a non-biodegradable home.

I felt wrong for finding humor in the tragic moments. What was wrong with me?

Afterwards, a cousin in the clergy read a passage meant to give us hope. “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

And there was me, laughing at the image of Dough Dad rising. This is my body, take and eat.

Brush

Cade Stone

New parking lot going up. Time to do laundry. Your registration is expired, your filters need replacing. Three square meals per day, chew before swallowing; one point two bowel movements per day, wipe before flushing. Forget to wash your hands, forget to brush your teeth. Your parents seem older. You count six cranes and two houseless people. You overhear a dreadful conversation about these here folks moving and the kiddos getting into it over rooms ya know and oh boy the seller, this divorced Dad downsizing—nice guy, the paranoid type, looked right through them. Another button falls off another shirt. Call the exterminator again. Brush your teeth. Mow the lawn. Learn to sew. Make resolutions. Drink three to four to five cups a day and make ‘em black but you don’t notice them anymore unless they’re cold brew. Text that acquaintance back you read her message like two months ago. Pick an outfit, maybe the black shirt and black pants, brush your teeth. Hot again today the roadkill is flat and reeking it looks like a squirrel. Cross the boiling street by the well-beiged State building. Pay your taxes. Do your laundry. Fix your crib sheet. Call Grandma she’s been asking about you. Brush your teeth. Avoid the squirrel, avoid silences at the bus stop, try podcasts. Watch your salt intake. Maybe get into gardening, get going, get gone, go ahead get up get dressed no time to shower or floss and maybe the black shirt and black pants again though it is hot again today so unseasonable ha ha avoid the rotting squirrel avoid the one point two shits distending its spilling guts brush your teeth until your gums bleed learn to sew text her back jesus fucking christ please call grandma call the exterminator your registration is expired. New parking lot going up.

Anger Management, a Guide: told by Three Patients

CJ

CW: brief mention of suicide

— Patient Six:

I feel like, like you should, *[PAUSE]* get it out in a healthy way, you know? Be normal about it. Yell, scream, tear up a piece of paper. There's nothing much to it. Kick a ball. Throw a chair. Nevermind. This question is feeling really stupid. I'm at a fucking anger management class: how the hell am I supposed to know?

[Patient Six slams their fists against the desk and kicks their chair. They look about ready to commit a very serious crime. Make sure to note: patient should not be left near any objects akin to a chair, a ball, or a piece of paper.]

— Patient Seven:

Just don't deal with it at all. Why be angry when there's so many other emotions? You're just wasting your time, being angry and all. I don't want to sound like a people pleaser, but I hate being angry at other people. See, the way someone looks at me when I get angry? Hell, I'd never want to see myself again. So, I'll say it again: why be angry? My partner cheated on me! Well, I got nothing to be mad about! Maybe they saw something in *[REDACTED]* that I don't have. My dad killed himself when I was sixteen? Come on, now, it's a sensitive subject—but

I'm not angry at all. Maybe he... Well, I hate talking about it so I won't say anything else.

My whole point here is that people need to learn how to repress their emotions! Take a breather, deal with it yourself for a change. Just look at me: smiling and in one piece! No harm, no foul.

[Patient Seven stands up and starts pacing in the room. They're tomato red and breathing heavy. Make sure to note: patient has not felt a single emotion since 1991. Very talented at bottling.]

— **Patient Eight:**

When I'm angry, I breathe in and out: *one, two, one, two, one two*. Then, I center myself and ask, *why am I feeling this way? How has this person hurt me? Was it the action, or the person?* More often than not, I find myself being hurt or angry at the action, rather than the person themselves. I communicate this with them instantly: *you've hurt me, but I'm not angry at you. Rather, I'm angry at your actions*. I try to be mature about these things, considering my age. I've come to understand that being angry is normal: everyone is angry at *something* at one point in their life, and it's going to come out one way or another, no matter what we do.

You seem to deal with your anger in a healthy manner. What are you doing here? Oh, nothing. My Saturday nights are free. I used to date a philosophy professor. Before that, a therapist. And before that, a yoga instructor. You can see where I've learned to wax poetic about emotions. Anyway, I thought this class would be fun. I find people very amusing. It's genuinely worth the \$40 per session.

[Patient Eight sits quietly and folds their hands in their lap. They're definitely more calmer than any other person that's gone in. Make sure to note: patient is only here because they have nothing better to do on their Saturday nights. Pretentious, a bit demeaning.]

On Christmas Day

Matt Hsu

“Ho Ho Ho,” he sings, followed by “Merry Christmas”, and then the crash of wolfskin boots against our sheathing.

I’m filled to the brim with chestnuts. They pulse against my throat like a mass of plums that have collected in the bottom of a burlap sack. Outside, cocaine has begun to collect on the windowsill, doodling seashells and angelfish along the glass. I want to brew a mug of black-pepper tea, but Dad won’t let us into the kitchen past 8:00. There’s nothing to do except lay in bed, pulling the cabbage-patch quilt over my bloodshot eyes.

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Mom buys her butter from the 99 Ranch Market two blocks away. It comes in a clear purple dish that chomps at whoever’s fingers are closest. She uses a Sephora lipstick container to divide the butter into heart-shaped buttons and sets them placidly on slices of sourdough. The loaf comes from this online bakery called *Une Tranche de Pain*, but I’m pretty sure the owners are from Texas. When I eat the bread, I have to pick razor blades out of the dough.

My presents are wrapped in gold aluminum foil and purple butterfly bows. Half of them are empty shoeboxes. The rest are filled with blacktop chunks and shards of broken glass. Mom catches me looking too closely for any hidden gifts, and throws a paperback erotica novel at my head. When she isn’t looking, though, I find a dead moth in one of the shoeboxes, and color the wings with a blue Crayola marker.

Santa comes later that day, but for some reason he’s skinny and dark-haired. His suit is the correct color, but the muffs at the wrists are missing. The reindeer wait outside, digging their

snouts into the garbage bins tossed along the side of the road. I inspect his beard, reaching to pluck the ticks from the entanglement, but he shoves me aside and uses my glasses as a bottle opener. He forgets to take his beer with him when he leaves, and when I sneak a sip, I discover that it's actually car lubricant.

For dinner, we eat paper cranes and gooseberry ice cream from black tubs. Mom tries to say grace, but Dad counters with the Pledge of Allegiance, hands planted on his hips. Soon they're both shouting over each other, so I take my ice cream and return to my room. I hold it in my cupped hands, take a bite, and then toss it out the window, bowing modestly as the pigeons drop by to take a nibble.

I made my toothbrush myself, from a pair of bamboo chopsticks and a collection of belly fur an alley cat left in the backyard. It almost looks like what the pretty women advertise on television. Plus, it tastes good with the fireplace-ash toothpaste my family uses. After brushing my teeth, I wash my face with bar soap and cough up a couple of pennies in the process. It's important to get a good night's sleep, because tomorrow will be Christmas.

Summer Storms

Steve Gergley

Fat summer snowflakes swarm the wilting blue glow of the last streetlight, but we can't stay.

Soon, the storms will swallow this place too.

Biographies

Poetry: In order of Appearance

Geer Austin — Geer Austin is the author of *Cloverleaf*, a poetry chapbook (Poets Wear Prada Press). His poetry has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Fjords Review*, *Main Street Rag* and others. He lives in New York City.

Helen Sulis Bowie — Helen Bowie (they/she) is a poet, performer and charity worker based in Glasgow. Their debut pamphlet of playable poetry and poetic games, WORD/PLAY was released by Beir Bua Press in July 2021 and their second pamphlet EXPOSITION LADIES will be released by Fly on the Wall Press in September 2022.

Michael Chin — Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and currently lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. He is the author of three full-length short story collections and his debut novel, *My Grandfather's an Immigrant and So is Yours* came out from Cowboy Jamboree Press in 2021. Chin won the 2017-2018 Jean Leiby Chapbook Award from The Florida Review and Bayou Magazine's 2014 James Knudsen Prize for Fiction. Find him online at miketchin.com and follow him on Twitter @miketchin.

Daragh Fleming — Daragh Fleming is an author from Cork in Ireland who uses a conversational style to delve into complex themes which emerge in everyday life. He has two collections of short stories published by Riversong Books; *The Book of Revelations* (2019)

and *If You Are Reading This Then Drink Water* (2020). Recently he was the winner of the Cork Arts 'From The Well' Short Story Competition. His most recent story features in *Époque Press'* é-zine. His debut poetry chapbook launched in February with Bottlecap Press. His second chapbook arrives in July and his debut in nonfiction arrives in November.

Nolcha Fox — Nolcha has written all her life, starting with poop and crayons on the walls. Her poems have been published in *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *Alien Buddha Zine*, *The Red Lemon Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *Dark Entries*, *Duck Head Journal*, *Medusa's Kitchen* and others. Her chapbook, "My Father's Ghost Hates Cats," is available on Amazon.

Bianca Grace — Bianca Grace is a poet living in Australia with drop bears hiding outside her house. She is also known for racing down the street with kangaroos. Her work has appeared in *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Selcouth Station*, *Capsule Stories*, *The Daily Drunk Mag*, *Postscript Magazine* and elsewhere. Follow her on Twitter: @Biancagrace031

George Held — George Held's work has appeared in, among other periodicals, *Blue Unicorn*, *Spring*, *Transference*, and *Two Cities Review* and has received eleven Pushcart Prize nominations. Among his 22 books is the poetry chapbook *Second Sight* (2019); his forthcoming book, *The Lucky Boy*, collects nine of his short stories. He lives in Sag Harbor, NY.

Cheng Him — Cheng Him's work has been featured here and there. They are from Singapore.

Rebecca Jane McMonagle — Rebecca Jane McMonagle is a chemical engineering graduate from Derry, now based in Belfast and working as a data analyst. She is currently working on a documentary project about climate action on the Island of Ireland called Climate Action on Film. Her work will be published in Books Beyond Boundaries' upcoming *New Worlds, New Voices* Anthology. She can be reached at @climateonfilm

Cheryl Snell — Cheryl Snell's poetry includes chapbooks from Finishing Line, Pudding House, and Moira Books, among others. Her work has been nominated seven times for the Pushcart and Best of the Net anthologies, and recent poems have appeared in Eunoia Review, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, One Art, and Words & Whisper.

Natalie Wang — Natalie Wang is a Singaporean poet. Her book *The Woman Who Turned Into A Vending Machine* is a collection of poems on metamorphosis, myth, and womanhood. You can find her at www.nataliewang.me.

Amanda Williams — Amanda Williams is a neurodivergent American writer, poet, and late bloomer. Her work appears in Streetcake Magazine, Brave Voices, Moss Puppy Magazine, Rough Diamond Poetry, and elsewhere. She lives in the UK with her husband and puppy. You can follow her on Twitter @amandainengland.

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Fiction: Alphabetical

Daniel Addercouth — Daniel Addercouth is a Scottish writer based in Berlin, Germany. His stories have appeared in Briefly Zine, Levatio, The Ekphrastic Review, Nanoism and Seaborne Magazine, among other places. Find him on Twitter at @RuralUnease.

CJ — CJ is a young, Filipino-American writer. They enjoy writing about their passions: chess, kitchens, fruit, and fungi. They hope to move others with their writing, in any way they can.

Ronan Fenton — Ronan Fenton is an Irish writer living in London. He has an MA in Creative Writing from UCD and a BFA in songwriting from BIMM Dublin. He writes fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama and art criticism. His work has been published in Poetry Ireland Review, Violet, Indigo, Blue, Etc., Selcouth Station Press, Strukturriss, and Coven Poetry, amongst others.

Steve Gergley — Steve Gergley is the author of the short story collection, A Quick Primer on Wallowing in Despair (LEFTOVER Books '22), and the forthcoming novel, Skyscraper (West Vine Press '23). His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Atticus Review, Cleaver Magazine, Hobart, Pithead Chapel, Maudlin House, and others. In addition to writing fiction, he has composed and recorded five albums of original music. He tweets @GergleySteve. His fiction can be found at: <https://stevegergleyauthor.wordpress.com/>

J. F. Gleeson — J. F. Gleeson lives in England. His work has appeared, or will soon appear, in Maudlin House, Ligeia, Overheard, Weird Horror, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, ergot., déraciné, Bureau of Complaint, Sublunary Review and other places. He has a website: deadlostbeaches.blog.

Matt Hsu — Matt Hsu is a student from San Francisco, California. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and he's published or forthcoming in *Roanoke Review*, *(mac)ro(mic)*, *Longleaf Review*, and *The Lumiere Review*. Currently he's querying his first novel: a twisty, thriller-mystery about a crafty assassin. You can find him on Twitter at @MattHsu19 or at his personal website matthsu156538437.wordpress.com.

Matthew Pritt — Matthew Pritt is the author of *The Supes*, published by Future House Publishing. His work has also appeared or is forthcoming in Potato Soup Journal, Sunlight Press, and The Bear Creek Gazette. You can find him on Twitter @MatthewTPritt.

Arusi Quera — Arusi Quera is a storyteller & writer of West African origin; constantly interrogating the human condition. They exist in liminal spaces.

Mick Shawyer — Mick, father of three, grandfather of ten, is a Cornishman currently in South Africa and writing a manuscript about township life. He's living in Umlazi, the biggest township where the pop, pop, pop of weekly gunfire and very loud music go hand in hand. A sense of humour runs throughout his storytelling, now over 50 short stories strong. He's an emerging author with no writing qualifications.

Cade Stone — Cade Stone is an emerging writer from Austin, Texas, where he studied liberal arts at the University of Texas before fleeing to Washington, DC, to avoid moving back in with his parents. He now works in communications there and writes in order to avoid thinking too much about that. His work has been published in *Blood Pudding*, *Full House Literary*, and *The Daily Drunk*. More of his work can be found at cadestone.me or on Instagram at [@cade_stone_](https://www.instagram.com/cade_stone_)

Hally Winters — Hally Winters is a writer living in Los Angeles. Hally was awarded the CalArts 2022 post graduate fellowship and will be attending Kenyon Review Writer's Workshop Summer '22. Her work can be found at *The Laurel Review*, *drDOCTOR*, and more.