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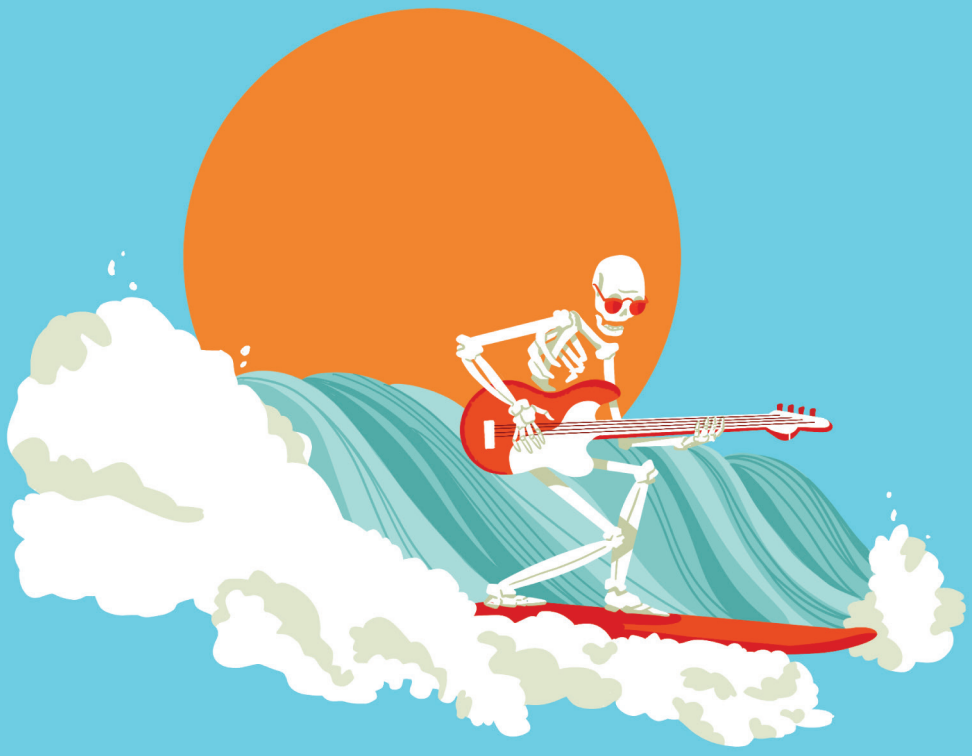

COLLECTION I

SUMMER READING 2020

X-R-A-Y
Collection I
Summer Reading 2020
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RIGHT BEFORE WE FALL APART
by Elizabeth Crowder

We sit in cooling sand. You reach out a gritty palm. I don't move closer. Eight years ago, on this same stretch of beach, with our swelling son arching your back like a comma, we vowed to love each other forever.

"Let's play a game." You twist kinky hair around a dark brown finger.

The last game we played was at your parents' Christmas party. There, in your three-bedroom, one-bathroom childhood home with the red door, you unclenched. Your voice became salty and slippery, an oyster shucked from its shell. You loosened, darkened, said the n-word with a soft "er." My mouth soured at your pantomime.

I started it. I usually do. You escalated it. You usually do.

We sat at the dining room table waiting for your mother's "famous greens" to finish cooking. They bubbled in chicken stock and pork fat on the stovetop, shimmering with delight at the thought of stopping my Caucasian heart halfway to a beat.

"Let's play a game," you said.

"Okay."

"Tell me something I don't know about you."

“My mother, for all her flaws—” I started to say.

“Racist tendencies,” you interrupt, which is a part of our problem.

“At least she doesn’t cook with salt,” I said.

“For all her flaws, at least my mother does.”

That night, you got whiskey drunk and whiskey mean. You whispered, “You ruined my life,” as you fell asleep in the twin bed next to mine. Sentiments shouted in anger can be amended, forgiven, washed away. Sentiments whispered in anger are written in stone.

Back on the beach, the sun opens its veins in the capillary waves.

“Let’s play a game,” you say again.

“Okay.” I indulge, which is a part of our problem.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you,” you say.

I don’t remember my brother’s face. Only the dark brown cowlick on the back of his head that I wanted to press down with a spit-dampened palm as we exited the school bus. Only that he was the same age then as my son is now. Only that the truck that separated him from his shoes on that dusty stretch of Lincoln Highway didn’t even stop. Only that we never found the person who killed him. In a world so ephemeral, the concept of forever makes me feel claustrophobic.

“You know everything about me,” I say.

You flush burgundy like pink skin slapped. Your frown comes

quick, a herald for your tears.

"I'll go first, then," you say. "I never spell the word poignant right on the first try." Your smile is a quivering olive branch. It's toothy. It doesn't reach your eyes.

Something dislocates inside of me. You and I slipped from nothing into something into nothing while I was looking the other way. She felt like a choice. Her pale hair, her widow's peak, her arched pout. I'm sure she could spell the word "poignant" on the first try.

I think: *I'm in love with someone who isn't you.*

I think: *I'm in love with someone because she isn't you. Because I recognize myself in her. Because her mother also doesn't cook with salt. Because she doesn't whisper "You ruined my life."*

I say: "It's getting dark. We should head back in."

We sit in silence until the sand grows cold around us, until we slip back into nothing.

SING TO ME THE ONE ABOUT THE RIGHTEOUS EMBRACE OF THE INEFFABLE
by Pat Foran

Something

My name is Phineas and if I can get the pose right, a photograph of me will appear in the 1979-80 Ridgid Tools Two-Year wall calendar.

In a two-piece and six-inch heels, I am holding a No. 930 1/2-inch D-Handle Reversing Drill like it's a semi-automatic weapon.

"I need a little more…*something*, Phineas," the photographer said. "A little more serendipity, a little more world-weariness. Show me a righteous embrace of the ineffable. And a little more gam."

***

Level

We were fixing up a place that needed fixing up. We were going to live there. Her parents were helping, although it was more like I was helping and they were fixing.

"Can you hand me that level?" her dad said.

"What's a level?" I said.

***

Someday

It's the voice on the radio, the voice from the moon. The one that sings about *someday* and orders the Tour of Italy at Olive Garden. The one you listen for when you're cold. The one that holds your hand.

***

Beaming

I turned to watch her walking down the aisle.

I saw her mother, dressed in fuchsia, freaking a little and fumbling with plastic aisle markers that were melting in the 95-degree heat.

I saw her grandmother, who also was dressed in fuchsia or maybe off-fuchsia.

I saw her father. He was dressed in black. Her father was a practical man, a provider man, a good man. In many ways, a man I was nothing like.

There was a tap on my shoulder and turned to face the tap. Red-faced in the sun, pregnant out to *here* and presumably miserable, the judge was smiling. Beaming.

"Hot enough for you?" she asked.

***

Everything

I'd written the lyrics for "I Just Want To Be Your Everything," a big hit for Andy Gibb back in the day, and I'd been invited to serve on a panel at a songwriters convention in Kennebunkport, Maine.

During the Q&A, a young girl asked: "What does 'Everything' mean—or, more to the point, what did *you* intend for it to mean when you wrote this song?"

I waxed on the nature of that which *is* and the vastness of the *all*, citing instances in popular music within which this *is*-ness manifested in one individual seeing the *is* and the *all* in another individual—witness "You Are Everything (and Everything Is You)," the fabulous Stylistics record. There's "Everything Is Archie," perhaps the finest example of a paean to pantheism the world's heard. But for all-encompassing *is*-ness and the unbeatable *all* of it all, nothing tops Donny Hathaway's "Everything Is Everything."

The girl, who identified herself as a freelance correspondent for the *Neil Armstrong Elementary School Post-Gazette*, exhaled with what might have been a combination of impatience and contempt.

"I guess you don't understand my question," she said.

***

Taking Names and *TRL*

A little before dark and a little after the end of the beginning, we saw a toucan taking names on Lexington Avenue.

"Just routine," the toucan said.

We held the children tight, but they wriggled out of the hold. A pink parchment sky opened, possibly to show itself to the various and sundry sporadic believers, which included Nathan Hale impersonators, anthem buskers and non-committal arena rockers.

"When are we going to visit the set of *Total Request Live*?" the children said.

***

That One Sade Song

If you were cold and I were cold and the lights were cold and the rabbit ears were cold as daffodils, I would sing that one Sade song to you. Or maybe the cold-calling moon would sing it to us instead.

***

My Name Is

My name is not Mud, but it is.

Just like shame isn't dread and shame isn't fear and shame isn't the smoke-ring halo I think I'll see if I look in the mirror while I'm shaving. But it is. It's all those things.

Shame also is Cliff Robertson, a guest villain on *Batman* c. 1967.

When I was 20, I wrote a song titled "My Name Is Mud." It's about a guy saying, "I know my name is Mud, and I know I'm something of a disgrace, and I'm probably dead to you, but I hope you'll stay with me, metaphorically speaking, in the event the Mud thing isn't actually a thing."

It's a thing. It's like when you lose your voice and you can't sing anymore, or lose your voice so you can't talk anymore. You can't sing to people, you can't talk to them, you can't tell them anymore. You can't *tell.* Also, you can't tie your shoes.

***

Neither One of Us

We were listening and not listening to the northeast wind, which wondered if we'd considered *talking things out*.

We were listening and not listening to the Voice of America, which asked *who do you think you're fooling?*

We were listening and not listening to Gladys Knight sing about two people who didn't want to be the first to say it.

"It's not the first of us who says it, but the first to say it again, again, and then again," I said, listening to the sound of you, not listening. "The first to say it so the words take us over the hanging bridge, *clickety-clack,* to the next ridge, where we pick clover, reconsider the sun, and decide who gets the Fiddle-Leaf Fig Tree, and who gets the Peace Lily."

***

A Full Fuller Fullest Blue

I was to be the last stand-up comedian ever to perform at the Fuller Brush Company annual meeting and golf outing.

"I was proud of you, once, you know," my ex said, slurping Red Velvet Cupcake Blue Bunny ice cream out of a straw.

"I know you were, and if you knew how much I thought I loved you for it, you would…know it," I said, leaping out of bed and into the living room, where the Fuller Brush men were waiting.

The Fuller Brush men asked me if I planned to work blue during my routine. I said I wasn't sure what constituted blue these days.

"We don't need any of that wistful, underlying sadness stuff. Nothing poignant, no pathos—no *song sung blue every garden grows one*," they said. "Embrace the moment, yes, strike a pose, sure, but remember your audience. And no life insurance jokes. Hear what we're saying?"

"I hear what you're saying," I said.

THE CORRECT HANGING OF GAME BIRDS
by Rosie Garland

Rostrum

Select old, wild birds. Beware harsh beaks, horned spurs, claws toughened by years of defiance. Pierce the beak. Hang by the neck, the feet. Each man has his taste. Hook and hang them long enough to conquer disobedience.

Pectoral girdle

Keep them in the dark. Convert the cellar into a hanging room: a stamped dirt floor to absorb the moisture they shrug off, dense walls to absorb sound. Keep your birds separate. Even when dead, their warmth communicates from breast to breast, stirring discord.

Syrinx

Permit yourself the luxury of appreciation. This bird is yours, now. Dawdle on the ruffled collar, handsome as a rope of pearls around the throat; eye ringed with the purple-blue of bruising; jewel plumage so thick it weighs down the wings. You can't imagine how she flapped or flew.

Breast

Pluck right away and you experience the thrill of naked flesh, but the body will dry out. Your bird is ruined. Wait three days, maybe seven. Then and only then, strip off the feathers. Patience. Flesh

and innards need time to ripen. Sublime flavour is attained when skin loosens its grasp on muscle. She oozes oil and perfume.

Rump

A gentle incision. Slice skin, not meat. Slide in up to the wrist and spread your fingers. Unpeel her body like wet fruit. Relish satin texture, the greenish shimmer of perfect ripeness. Keep going. Fillet scraps from bone, a job less bloody than you expect. Persistence rewarded with flesh that yields to your authority.

Lesser coverts

Lock the dog in the yard, to stop it lapping up the puddles that collect under the carcasses. Ignore the neighbours complaining they can't sleep. The smile that shuts them up faster than any bellowed argument. The way they shrink away.

Cloaca

Time passes without needing to pay it much attention. Nights in the cellar, waiting for your birds. Their toes dripping, their eyes glazed. All resistance drained from them. The silence is balm, the scent delectable and rare. If only the dog would stop barking.

BLACK HOODED NUN
by Caroljean Gavin

Stunned, I took the subway and rattled off to work at the Starbucks on 51st and Broadway. My brain's way of assimilating my mother's news was to take customers' orders while imagining plunging a knife into their chests. Would I have to struggle to penetrate their clothing? Would there be a slurp of suction when I tried to yank the weapon back out of their flesh and muscle to repeat? Would they fight? Would they be angry? Surprised? Terrified? What would they say? What would their eyes look like? What would it feel like to not turn back? To go for blood? To go for death? And when death came would I know it right away? And when I knew it, what would I know?

I knew I would probably feel alone.

I mean, customers would call the police. Co-workers would restrain me. I would be physically surrounded. I may even be physically assaulted. If any of those people liked me before, they wouldn't now. They wouldn't know who the hell I was. Their eyes would drain of all recognition. Fill up with something else.

But if I was by myself? Say it was just me, and the dead woman who raised me, rent open on her bed with her violet patterned sheets, her down alternative comforter that had comforted me when I was young, and scared, and overtaken with the flu? If it was just me and a sudden silence? No burbling? No screaming? No pleading? No labored inhalations. Excruciating exhalations. Just me and the darkness, and the curtain blowing over the window

where I had left it open after I crawled inside? What would it feel like then? With only myself and this thing I did? This bad, bad, bad, bad thing? Would I feel horrified at myself? Regretful? Or proud? Satisfied? Hopeful?

They say he did it for the money she wrote him in her will.

Two years before the killing the killer told me he was scared of birds.

The killer wasn't a killer when I met him in San Francisco in that shitty old car full of my shitty old relatives and my mom's friend Becky, who wasn't old or shitty, but hot in a 1980's way: hairspray, lip gloss, frosted hair. The killer was still a kid. A teenager. On drugs, sure. A high school dropout, sure. But he was still a kid, a teen, a young man, a person with positive potential.

I shared the backseat with him and my mom's cousin who was the type of woman to carry a purse big enough to fit her full size salad dressing bottle and leave enough room to spare to shovel in more free samples of dog treats from Petco than was reasonably appropriate. Like, the employees side-eyed her and hated her with every fiber of their polo shirts. I could tell. They weren't happy with me either. My mother's cousin, Jackie, introduced me to the killer, "He was my job after you," she said.

She knew us when we had tiny faces and giant eyes. Before we learned how to wash our hands.

I'm not sure why the killer went on the crazy lady outing. Maybe he was bored. Maybe it was about the free food. Maybe it was Becky and the vanilla perfume she wore.

I wanted the free food and the ride to the pet store. I was in the process of replacing my boyfriend. I had already bought a vibrator and was currently on step two: companionship. I wanted a bird. Something beaked and winged that had the potential to fly to wherever the hell it wanted and start a beautiful life in the tree of its own choosing. Something that could poke the eye out of anyone who tried to stop it. I wanted a metaphor for my spirit (the irony, cruelty of this, totally lost on me at the time) and I wanted something to make sounds in the night to distract the ghosts that played mean tricks on my dreams.

While Mom's cousin was shoving "free" pet food crap in her purse, I looked at the birds, the killer orbited around me, hands in his pockets.

When I found the black hooded nun finches, I knew I had found my bird. The auburn body, the waxy blue beak erupting from a jet-black head. Unconventional. Goth. Tiny. The employee I fetched was not wild about having to do what he was about to do. I overheard him talking to a coworker, "Last time we did this, all of the fuckers got out. Some of them are still up there," he pointed to the beams beyond the lights.

The black hooded nuns bolted into all corners when the employee stuck his hand inside the cage. So much frantic flapping and fluttering. A bird was caught. Dropped into a box handed to me.

"I don't like birds," the killer said. He hadn't left my side. He watched the whole thing.

"Why?" I said, the small brown box in my hand. It was so light. It could have been empty.

"Scared of them," he muttered. I probably made an understanding

face, but I thought *how stupid, tough guy, scared of birds*. Really I wanted to laugh at him so hard.

The box with the bird was so light.

I didn't laugh at the killer because I gave a shit about his feelings, but because the box was so light.

I didn't laugh at the killer because I wanted to shake the box.

I wanted to shake the box so badly. I had to breathe slowly as I carried it to the register.

I was scared of myself, shaking that damned box.

Knowing and feeling are totally different things.

I knew there was a living creature in that box. I knew shaking the box would be bad for the creature living in that box.

Feeling is a body knowing.

It felt like there was nothing in that box. My body just wanted to check. My body just wanted to know.

Maybe the killer's killing had nothing to do with money.

Maybe he didn't even hate the woman who raised him?

Maybe he didn't even want to hurt her?

Maybe there was just something he wanted to know?

Maybe I'm just full of shit.

The customers I didn't hack up and kill got their delicious lattes or Frappuccinos or whatever the hell and they left, going on with their day, and if they thought of me at all, they probably thought I was nice, or awkward, or cute, or wasting my life, but they probably didn't think of me, and they certainly wouldn't have imagined that I was thinking about where best to stab their particular body, and with how much force.

Sometimes, those days, walking around New York City, I'd be walking behind a group of young women in skirts that lifted up above their knees, exposing that soft place of skin behind, and I wanted so badly to lean in and touch them there. Just this small little trespass. Just this one little thing. Who could that hurt?

I just wanted to give the box the littlest jostle.

Something people seem to believe is there is only good or evil, only person or monster. People are good. Monsters are bad. Supernaturally bad. Demonic. Diabolical. People are superior to the monsters. No empathy for the devil. 'Cause once you start empathizing with the killers, what does that make you? A monster yourself? An accomplice? A devil with a Fast Past to an afterlife of somehow very painful horrors? And fire? Lots and lots of fire.

Writers know that to make a believable character, a human being, you mix the good with the bad. The NICU nurse shoplifts candy bars. The arsonist brings flowers to the nursing home.

The killer wasn't always a killer. Once the killer was a baby, born drug dependent because of his mother's choices. Once he was a toddler learning how to walk. Once he was a little boy laughing, milk dribbling down his chin. Once he was so small with shining

eyes that still trusted the big people around him. Once he was innocent.

I named the black hooded nun finch Quiver. The thing I didn't kill, I caged, fed, and played classical music for. Eventually I gave him away to a nice lady on Craigslist. I moved to the other side of the country. Found out that troubled kid my mom's cousin loved so much brutally murdered his mother, and I couldn't understand how someone could do something so grisly, so heartless, so willfully violent. I could get how someone would want to do it. How someone could think of doing it. How someone could imagine doing it and plan doing it, but how do you actually do it? How do you push a knife into someone, and hurt them, cause them horror and pain, and not throw up, not throw your body into a shock of seizures to stop you from doing this thing?

I didn't try to empathize with the killer to understand him. I wasn't trying to excuse what he did. I wasn't trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. I was asking the monster in me how far it would go. I was asking myself what was I really capable of.

How do any of us actually know what we're capable of?

I was a terrible bird mom. I had no idea what I was doing. I named my black hooded nun finch Quiver because it seemed scared all the time and of course it did. I was this huge lumbering thing that trapped it.

When I'd slip my hand in the cage for feeding or cleaning, Quiver would freak out, flap in a frenzy.

I didn't know finches weren't supposed to be alone, without other finches that they could die from loneliness. I tried to get him a friend, but no one else would sell me just one.

When I bought the bird it did not matter to me that I probably wouldn't be living in San Francisco much longer and that I wouldn't be able to take a pet with me when I left.

When I did give Quiver away, I gave him away to the first person who answered my ad. She seemed nice and knowledgeable about birds, but it's not like I checked, not like I made sure she was going to be good to him and not hurt him, and even though I never shook his box, and even though I never purposely hurt him, I felt like shit about the indirect harm I did.

I made myself imagine inflicting horrible physical violence on my customers, and I could imagine it, and it made me physically ill, hunched over my register shaking.

All there was for me to understand was this.

So if you should ever see me shudder while you're talking to me and you worry I'm thinking of jabbing you in the eye with the kebab skewer, just know it's nothing personal, just know I'm probably as harmless as a tiny, tiny bird.

WHEELS
by D. T. Robbins

Fat-boy Brad, the same Brad who went, Hey, Cheese Factory!, to me on the bus because my teeth are a little yellow, stood in the middle of the street with Chris, the same Chris who almost drowned me in his pool last summer showing me what a *washing machine* was (you flip someone over and over and over and over until they can't catch their breath and they start to cry and someone's mom comes out and yells, What the hell are you doing to that boy?), looking at my bike, telling me how fucking gay it is because it's white and only queers have white bikes, and am I a queer? I tell them my dad says I'm getting a new bike soon, maybe for my tenth birthday coming up, a Mongoose BMX bike with pegs, so Parker can ride on the back and we can jump the ramps we made in the woods behind his house. I look at Parker, he looks away. Brad and Chris go, if you're getting a new bike you should just fuck this one up. I ask what they mean and they say they'll show me. Chris stands on the back wheel while fat-boy Brad stands on the other. They start jumping and the wheels start bending and Parker starts laughing so I laugh too because Parker and I are fourth graders and Brad and Chris are seventh graders and that's just how it works. Like that, they say. I get to walking my bike back to my house on the other side of the neighborhood but then I think dad's going to be pissed so I start crying as I'm walking. Sure enough, dad sees the bike and flips out and starts asking what happened and I say it wasn't me but I don't want to say who did it because Chris already almost killed me once and who knows if he'll try again? But I end up telling dad and we get in the car and dad's driving around the neighborhood looking for fat-boy Brad and Chris and when we find them dad

hops out the car and gets in their faces and asks what the hell is their problem doing that to a boy's bike? They say I told them they could and dad says he doesn't care if I said they could or not, it doesn't give them the right to destroy someone else's property. Dad tells them if they ever come near me or my bike again he'll…and I don't really hear or understand that part very well. Dad drives us back home but the whole time he's hollering at me and telling me I shouldn't let boys like that pick on me and I need to stand up for myself and act like a man. We get in the house and mom asks what happened but dad ignores her and gets his belt instead. I don't get the Mongoose BMX bike for my birthday.

***

I know dad only bought me this Jeep—an '89 Suzuki Samurai—to keep me from starting any more shit. Guess he got tired of me calling the cops every time he shoved me down the hallway after I told him my little brother and I want to leave shithole Mississippi and go back to California to live with mom, that I called him a deadbeat dad since he didn't pay child support (because fuck your kids, right?) and that's the only reason mom couldn't afford to fly down to Louisiana for the court hearing and that's the only reason he got custody of us instead of her. He thinks buying me this Jeep is going to keep me happy and quiet because that's what keeps every sixteen-year-old happy and quiet. Except he's wrong. All it'll do is keep me away from him and the stepmother. Well, seeing as how it's the first day of spring break, I decide to get the hell out of the house and go somewhere, anywhere. The Jeep is parked in the garage because dad wanted it out of the driveway this morning when he was washing and waxing that turd green Camry he's trying to sell. He and the stepmother left for work so I'm alone and there's only so many times I can jerk off and, besides, there's a girl who'll let me touch her tits so I think I'm going to see her. I grab my keys and throw the Jeep in reverse and haul ass. At

first, the crunch of metal on metal is muffled by the Jeep's exhaust but when I back out further I see the whole side of the Camry torn to shit—dents six inches deep, black lines and scratches like the striking surface of a matchbox, the side mirror dangling by a single wire. I start screaming, oh fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck, and jump out the Jeep to see the damage. I'm dead and I know it. I call the girl who lets me touch her tits and she doesn't know what to do so I call the stepmother. I tell her dad is going to kill me and I'm really sorry, I should've looked behind me when I went in reverse, can she please talk to dad because I'm afraid of what he'll do to me.

Dad and the stepmother pull up in her truck and dad steps out and starts inspecting the Camry. I look at the stepmother and she raises her hand like, calm down it's okay. Dad looks at her, then me. You're grounded for a month, he says and walks into the house.

***

The judge says I'm old enough to choose who I want to live with.

Dad sits up in his bed. The stepmother pulls the blanket over her face. It's cold. It's always fucking cold in this house. He asks, what're you going to do? I'm going back to California, I say. He tells me I'm making a mistake, says the Jeep stays with him.

***

The car mom's been letting me use to get to my job at the movie theater just got repossessed and she says if I want a new one then I can call dad and ask him for the money because she doesn't have it. I don't want to fucking call him. It's not that it's been three years since I've been back in California or that he never came to my high school graduation or that he's still trying to get custody of my little brother. What I don't want to tell him is that we'd just been

homeless for the past six months or so because mom got us evicted from our house in Ontario. Mom says she couldn't pay the rent because dad wasn't paying child support but somehow she could afford to pay for the new furniture, somehow she could afford to take that trip up north to see that guy she's been talking to. I don't want to call dad because I want to talk to someone about all of this but I sure as shit don't want that someone to be him. Fuck. I still need a car and I still have no one else to ask for help. The movie theater pays shit and most of my money goes to helping with groceries or the cell phone bill we're behind on. When he answers, he sounds tired. His voice is softer. Not a whisper, but close. I ask what he's doing, he says he's feeding a bottle to my new baby sister, Grace. We talk about that, how she's doing. He says everything's great, they're all great. I say, good. He says, I'm sorry, son. If I had the money, I'd give it to you, I really would. He says he wants to help me. I say I know he does, and I mean it. After we hang up, I get in bed and cry into my pillow for a really long time.

***

I just wired you five thousand dollars your grandma wanted you to have when she passed, dad says. I ask how things have been since she died. Someone finally ended up buying her house, so that's a weight off his shoulders. We talk about my brother and sister, Grace and Graham—how smart Grace is, how she's kicking ass in all these speech debates at her high school. Graham is Graham, loves his video games. He asks how my kids are. He wants to see them one day, says maybe the kids and I and my fiancé should visit Mississippi next Thanksgiving or something. He asks if things have gotten easier with my ex-wife, if we're getting along. I tell him that things are better, getting better, there's good days and bad days. It'll all work out, he says. He thinks I should put the five grand toward a new car.

THE PAIN WE DON'T TALK ABOUT
by Amina Frances

I was six years old when my mother strapped me into the buggy of her bicycle and steered us both into oncoming traffic on the stretch of road behind the Mulberry Street house. A teen driver swerved and clipped us at fifteen miles an hour. I've had a raging pain at the center of my back ever since.

My father wrote off the accident as another one of my mother's spells—s*illy little things*—as if they were nothing more than temporary lapses in judgement. Maybe they were. Then again, maybe they weren't. My Aunt May always said the woman had a death wish. Maybe she did. Then again, maybe she didn't.

Other than a hairline fracture on my thoracic vertebra—twelfth from the top—I walked away with a clean bill of health.

"Your mother is staying with a friend," my father assured me on our drive home from the hospital. "She'll come home soon. Don't worry." I didn't.

I dream of my mother often. She's wearing a wilted linen dress, traipsing barefoot through an enchanted forest. Her wild black hair is cropped at her shoulders. She still wears her wedding ring. Aunt May's gold chain clings to her neck.

She never did come home. I was glad. I didn't miss her. My father still goes looking for her in nearby towns on the weekends. I don't miss him either.

I spent most of middle school flat on my back, my eyes glued to a popcorn ceiling, *Nick at Nite* and *Growing Pains* reruns blaring in the background. By thirteen, I was convinced that there was a village of Keebler elves tinkering away inside of me. Every now and again, they'd lose a hammer between my eyes or drop a nail in my rib cage. *Clumsy little things*.

Sometimes at night, I still hear the clanking in my ears. It's been twenty-two years since the accident. The sound of tiny feet shuffling across my bones still comforts me.

I told my husband about the elves. He says that's why I never sleep. He works at the hospital as an ultrasound technician. That's how we met. That's how I meet most people.

It's just us two, for the most part, my husband and I. And the elves. And my college roommate, Maeve, on occasion. We live a thirty-minute drive from JFK. She says we keep her plane tickets cheap.

"It takes the same jaw force to bite through your pinkie finger as it does a medium sized carrot," Maeve mentioned on her most recent pass through.

Later, I told my husband as much.

"That isn't true," he said.

"How would you know?"

"Because Maeve's not a doctor."

"Neither are you."

I have trinkets from Maeve's travels sprinkled throughout the

house. They gather dust on bookshelves and mantles where pictures of small children should be, but aren't. Rose quartz from Brazil, porcelain from France, a capsule of water from the Dead Sea.

Maeve grew up with an agoraphobe mother. Her father died when she was fifteen. Scars line the insides of her wrists—fleshy, pink orbs that look like stars when I squint. I study them when she sleeps.

I spotted the Big Dipper once, two inches shy of her elbow crease. I thought about asking if she'd done it on purpose. *Imaginative little thing*. But Maeve's pain isn't up for discussion. We talked about elves and loneliness and broken spines instead.

"I bet you could do it if you wanted to," Maeve said the morning after our conversation about carrots and cannibalistic jaws.

"Bite through my pinkie?" I asked.

"Anything," she sighed.

Maeve tucked a stray hair behind her ear. The rest of her flyaways were secured by a bandanna she'd swindled off of a market vendor in Morocco. She sat next to the window in her Carhartt jeans and an open back sweater. The light struck her like a Renaissance painting—all bright whites and shadows. My eyes grazed over her ski-jump nose and her winding, elf-less spine. It was then that I decided I would bottle her up and absorb her, one flesh orb at a time.

Two months after Maeve left for a yoga retreat in Tibet, the elves worked up a storm. I was forced to quit my gig at the call center. My husband cut his shifts at the hospital. He says *getting better* is a full-time job.

At night, I hold on to Maeve's rose quartz in one hand. I put my other hand in my mouth. My pinkie finger feels at home between my molars. Sometimes I stand there, staring at myself in the bathroom mirror for hours, waiting for the elves to stop working or my jaw to go slack. Whichever comes first.

EVERYTHING ELSE IS JUST EXPOSITION
by Gauraa Shekhar

1. Carefully coded a fake Myspace account for Joel Madden—copied the URL from his skull-and-crossbones profile, pasted it into a Layout Stealer, added Steve Aoki and Junior Sanchez to my Top 8

2. Sent myself love letters from the account

3. Showed off love letters from "Joel Madden" at band practice

4. Threw some antihistamine pills from the medicine cabinet into a zip-lock bag. Kept the pills in the back of my school locker to feel beautiful and bad like Winona Ryder and the disaster girls on TV

5. Once, during a middle school lunchbreak, made an elaborate display of secretly spooning a home-cooked meal into the trash, so the other kids would get off my case about being fat

6. Had "Joel Madden" message my friends about the dangers of my eating disorder

7. Drank only cappuccinos for meals to get cast as Christine in the high school production of *Phantom of the Opera*

8. Made a display of slowly nibbling at baby carrots backstage so the English teacher slash director would get off my case about looking a little *too* thin

9. On the night of graduation, after my dad's friend handed me a going-away gift, told everyone the tucked lavender note in the jewelry box only said *love, henry*

10. At the end of an above-average date, on the drive back home, when "The Boys of Summer" came on, and as my date drummed his fingers passionately on the steering wheel, loudly proclaimed: "when did Don Henley cover The Ataris?"

11. Hung out with Nick Ramirez freshman year only because he had a poster of Nico's *Chelsea Girls* taped to his wall and I liked sneaking 2 AM cigarettes with him in the boys' shower room

12. Once, after chain-smoking Marlboros in the boys' shower room: scribbled a menacing note in glitter gel and snuck it under an ex's door with Nick Ramirez

13. Abstained from correcting the professor's pronunciation of my name

14. Intentionally mispronounced my name for efficiency on the phone to customer service

15. Kept myself from ascribing names to any first-person narrator I write

16. Smoked the second cigarette only as excuse to stage a casual run-in with the author after a reading

17. Knew that getting drinks with my ex's best-friend's wife's mentally unstable ex-best friend was probably a bad idea but I was craving crisis

18. Lost twenty bucks playing chess in Union Square

19. Told friends I won twenty bucks playing chess in Union Square

20. Twice, at a karaoke bar in Chinatown: kissed the same pilot in exchange for my tab

21. Dropped a blanched broccoli rabe on the kitchen floor next to the mouse trap and bent down with my fork to eat it straight off the ground

22. Masturbated ten hours after finding out my childhood home was robbed

23. Couldn't finish because *Bella Donna* was on and it was impossible to think about anything besides the white cockatoo resting on the delicate slant of Stevie Nicks' fingers

24. On a drunk afternoon in Alphabet City, with an unrequited lover, borrowed a line from a CW show for tragedy points: "I think I could set myself on fire and nobody would notice"

25. Set my bangs on fire while smudging the apartment with sage; no one was home to notice

26. Wanted to sleep with someone from the band but instead fell into bed with the sound pretengineer

27. Double-texted him

28. Studied the senseless succession of blue text balloons on my phone screen

29. Semi-confidently, and over fourteen-dollar spicy brunch margaritas: "I make forty-six a year"

30. Spent too long surveying tattoos on the backs of strangers

31. Sleepwalked to the kitchen and came to in the refrigerator light, the soft leathery warmth of leftover pasta clumps on my tongue

32. Took a year off to write a book about boy bands

33. Spent most of it listening to One Direction

34. Wrote bad poetry on July 4th: *and the fireworks looked like cupcake sprinkles*

35. Had sex while both the dogs were still in the bedroom

36. Didn't do laundry all of that September because I relished an excuse to not wear pants

37. Spent my last two dollars on gas station caramel iced coffee

38. Only volunteered at the event for the free food that came after

39. Invited all New York exes to the same party because the rest of the week had been uneventful

40. Left New York

41. Missed New York

42. Wrote about New York in honeyed inflections, first as prophet then as fool: *unfinished apartments, creative class appalachian towns in the middle of a city. memories- good and bad and all mine*

43. Half-watched John Cusack films under white linens and fell into soft, three-hundred-thread count naps on embezzled Xanax

44. "Freelancer" rolled easier off the tongue than "basically unemployed"

45. Ritually painted my face every unemployed morning to softly make-believe I had somewhere to be after

46. Moved back to New York

47. Got a job working the front desk at Gizmodo

48. Asked if I looked bigger than the woman on TV only when I knew the answer was no

49. Lied to a boyfriend about liking Radiohead's *Ok Computer*

50. Slept with someone from the bar, someone who didn't like Radiohead, while boyfriend was in Stockholm

51. Told the truth a little too truthfully

52.

53. Whenever a car blasting reggae music trailed along the block, thought: *I could be a person who drinks daytime beer*

54. Stuck a note on the desktop to tell my boss I quit

55. Stuck a note goodbye on boyfriend's fridge

56. Read the news but didn't throw out my Ryan Adams records when everyone else did

57. Let the call go to voicemail because

58. I never really liked my coffee black; it just had fewer calories

DISPATCHES…FROM THE NALTREX-ZONE
by James McAdams

Sadonna was always my last visit that summer before she died.

At Derek Jeter Rehab Center-Delray, we dispensed meds between 1900 and 2100. I'd start with the early sleepers at the sober house on 999 Swinton, then swoosh on Freaky Fred's moped through the back alleys and garbage docks behind the strip mall to the sober houses on 9th and 10th streets, between the head shops and the Amscot. I dispensed Suboxone, SSRIs, SNRIs, B-Vitamins, and retrovirals for the former needle users. On a PRN basis, I distributed: hemorrhoid cream, Midol, hydrocortisone, aloe vera for suntan relief, dimethicone for chapped lips, and Immodium A-D.

We didn't all take this route. Abdaliz drove the facility Astrovan the other way on Swinton to her complex, Sea Oak, on the fake lake with the sad ducks. She'd put her babygirl to bed and then get high and grub McDonald's with her cousins.

Freaky Fred hit the NA/AA circuits in Delray to recruit new clients. He had business cards with QR codes, fake sobriety chips, addiction stories stolen from Reddit or Discord. He gushed about finding sobriety at Derek Jeter-Delray. He'd normally return with one or two new clients a week. We secretly called them "Coins," as in cryptocurrency, untraceable cash. We split $5,000 between us for each client, Abdaliz, me, and Freaky Fred; the rest went to our employer, a Big Pharma consortium that owned hundreds of sober houses across Florida and Arizona and got rich on unregulated

urine tests, patient brokering, and what one Florida congressman called the "lethal cycle of intentional failure."

Those were the good days. They'd chain-smoke under the carport where everyone watched *COPS* while we verified their insurance. Whenever we brought in someone new, we had to kick out someone old. That's math. When he recruited Sadonna, it was my responsibility to get rid of Tara.

Sadonna sat lotus-positioned on a deflated air mattress stricken with claw marks when I finally came in at 2105, finished for the day. Always. It was her time to meditate, which involved listening to old Howard Stern in the background. She'd moved into the vacant room after Tara's overdose.

"Best thing about the air mattress is you can balance your phone on the creases to watch stuff," she explained, blinking her eyes and flinging her wrists around. She was trying to be positive.

We sat on the mattress together as I got out her EZ-pack and whatever fast food I'd picked up on the way. She identified her meds and signed her initials, a forensic *S K*, and then we made out for a while until our hips and elbows speared the floor through the flat mattress. We always just fooled around like middle school, even though we were both almost 40.

I balanced a plastic table over the deflated mattress as she separated the burritos, rice, and Mountain Dew from plastic containers into two bowls, two plates, and two glasses, which she called her "good China." We gripped plastic utensils stolen from Taco Hell. I closed the windows against the sound of people kicking vending machines and ravaged calls for Naltrexone! Naltrexone!

"What did you learn about yourself today?" I asked. I was joking,

she knew, but it was also a part of the script, which I later figured out she knew as well. The routine was an important part of our relationship.

"I learned what you did to the girl here before me."

Sadonna and I still talk even in here, the private prison operated by the GEO group. They busted me as the first violator of Florida Bill 807, which criminalizes patient brokering, in addition to more obvious charges like manslaughter, pharmaceutical fraud, and online solicitation. Body Brokers, Zombie Hunters, Junkie Flunkies, Naltrex-Heads: whatever you call us, the other inmates despise us. Therefore, I stay inside my cell 24/7 reading memoirs Sadonna scans into my brain—Herr's *Dispatches,* Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Karr's *The Art of Memoir*—to prepare me to write my confessions about The Florida Shuffle, so her death will have meaning, she says.

She hovers in the corner of my cell, still wearing the *It's Always Sunny in Philly* hoodie she overdosed in. Just like old times, she asks: "What did you learn today, honey?"

"Mary Karr says good memoirs are vivid and detail-driven." I notice I project my voice toward her hovering form.

"I miss details, everything's so blurry when you're dead," she rues, looking down at me not with love but something like a new emotion.

We just look at each other until I ask what's the matter.

"You still haven't confessed," she reminds me.

And I say, like I always do: "I'm afraid if I do you'll never come back."

FISHSPLAINING BAUDRILLARD
by Faye Brinsmead

The robo-guppy came in a tank with LED lighting, soothing ocean sounds, and coral reef background wallpaper. *Proven stress-buster*, Bernie said, handing me the box. *There was some study in some journal. After 10 weeks of fish-watching, 75 percent of the subjects flushed their anxiety meds down the john.*

I took this as a hint he didn't want to hear any more about writer's block, impostor syndrome, the library's overdue loans policy, or anything else connected with my PhD on Baudrillard.

He looks sinister, I said. *Those mean little eyes. Must be in on the techno-gadget revenge plot*. I took Baudrillard literally in those days.

After christening the guppy Jean, I ignored him. Maybe it was ingratitude that drove Bernie away. There were other sources of discontent: the hyperreal hair clump in the shower drain, my preference for synthetic food.

When we finally had the *we have to talk* talk, his reasons surprised me. *I feel like the you I knew has been mummified in layers of French philosophy. Nothing you say is your own words anymore. Just some quote from some dead dude.*

Given his fondness for citing scientific publications whose names he couldn't remember, I found this ironic. Plus, it amused me to think of myself as a postmodernist quote-machine simulating Bernie's girlfriend.

I let him have the TV, bed, couch, table, fridge, ironing board, and vacuum cleaner. *Simulations like Jean and me are low-maintenance*, I said. He declined the pop art poster of Baudrillard, saying he felt unworthy of Saint Gizmo. It saddened me to think his prolonged and free education had been a waste of my time.

I rented a room above a pub with a fine view of overflowing rubbish skips. *Relax, it's only simulacrum trash*, I joked to Jean on putrid summer evenings. I was getting into the habit of throwing witty little squibs at him. It made me feel better about my post-nearly-everything condition.

At night, Jean and I juddered to the cover-band beats of Eagle Rock and Highway to Hell. I started talking (yelling, actually) while I typed. It helped with focus, and created the illusion of an audience.

The hypermarket turns every theory (including the theory of the hypermarket) into dentures more viscerally real, more horrifyingly alive, than the mouth that contains them.

Like a tent revivalist preacher, I was high on my own rhetoric. The less it meant, the more wasted I got.

One night, in a lull between Beds are Burning and Scarred for Life, Jean said, *You don't understand the role of the technological object in the transition from modernity to postmodernity.*

Wowsers! I don't know why I kept up the bantering tone. *Why don't you explain it to me? Go on, fishsplain it.*

Jean delivered a mini-lecture on Baudrillard's position and my failure to grasp it. He sounded like a toothless person talking through a snorkel in a cyclone, but his analysis was relentlessly

clear. I was crafting a jokey compliment when he added, *Forget Baudrillard*.

There's a critique of Baudrillard called that, I said. *I reference it in my thesis*.

He gurgled impatiently. *That isn't a quote. Well, it is, but it exceeds the function of quotation. It's a command. Forget Baudrillard. I've outBaudrillarded him. There's a Linux PC in my brain cavity. A hydraulic pump moves my tail. If you'd bothered to unpack the remote control, you could manipulate me from 10 meters away.*

The whole pub was screaming Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again. Or maybe they were lip-syncing to synthesized screaming.

I looked up to Saint Gizmo for guidance. *Forget Baudrillard*, mouthed the pop art Baudrillard.

1978. BATH, OHIO
by Sean Williamson

He was driving drunk, a cigarette ripping hot, filter crushed between his fingers. Around a faraway corner headlights, beams reflected faint through the windshield, through his Kmart but that's ok glasses. Tiny embers spit, excited by wind from the open window.

He put out the cigarette, stuffed it into the ashtray blossom, grabbed a pack of Camel Menthols off the passenger seat, popped the top, flicked and flicked until a filtered end rose, then pulled it out slow between tight teeth. He pushed in the lighter.

Headlights down the way grew at him, flare swelling in his smudged up glasses, exposing fingerprints and crud. He had been drinking all day, spent most days drinking alone, all day, since graduation. His mother had moved with his brother to Wisconsin. His father was staying at a Red Roof Inn but that's ok. His father had said, "Jeff, the house is yours, for now."

Black trash bags rippled on the seat behind him. He looked. They moved, wet with moonlight. The lighter popped out, and in that moment of distraction, the warbling of the loop, the car swerved over the centerline, just over.

Eyes back on the road, car back in it's lane. Pressed the Camel into the red coil, smoke blossomed from his hand like a magic trick. Headlights slowed and passed, slugging over like an old boat, night filled the space. A hallway of trees lead an easy, relaxing ride to the dump.

Straight shot. The bags rippled in the back seat, crinkling in his ear.

Suddenly whirring. Red and blue spinning lights. Oncoming headlights turned cop lights. The cop would pass him, hustling to stop some crime, but no. But that's ok, that's ok, that's ok. Smoke moved down his throat, hot and dirty in his nose. Hands to the wheel, to the shoulder of the road, both cars stopped.

At the flip of the key his engine whirred to a stop. He rested his cigarette hand, fat ember billowing, on the open window ledge. Cop lights: long ray of fanning red, long ray of fanning blue, one after the other after the other, moved across the cracks in the road. The cop door opened and closed. Shadows of feet moved within the rays. Cop stopped and flashed his light.

You crossed the centerline back there.

I know. Sorry. I dropped something.

Cop again shined his fucking light. What's in the bags?

He paused, only for a second.

I forgot to drop of my family's garbage this morning. So I thought I'd do it now.

At night?

Nothing else to do.

Cop shrugged. Please step out of the car.

He touched his finger to his nose, walked heel to toe in a straight

line, said the alphabet backwards but that's ok. Started drinking at 14. He passed the tests, of course. Cop, young then, would be much older the next time they met, wrote a ticket, back in his fuckingcopcar and whooshed away. The road was lonely, they came and went.

Weeks back, Steve held his thumb out. Hop on in, drink some beers at my place, listen to some records, then I'll drive you to the concert. But after a few hours, practically no time, Steve needed to go, as others, further in the unseen loop, needed to go. So the dumbbell, record still spinning, empty beer cans on the floors, and loneliness again.

Fuckingcopcar all the way out of sight, heat of the night. He decided not to go to the dump after all. He did not know then, where the loop started or ended. Instead he went straight home. In the driveway, he smashed the plastic bags with a sledge hammer, took the bags to the woods behind the house and scattered their insides.

IN-BETWEEN SIRENS
by Davon Loeb

The in-betweens are like waiting for something to happen, like flashes of red and blue sirens pulsing through my car, while searching for the police officer about to step to my window. And I watched from the rearview mirror, and would say and act exactly how my mother told me—to call him or her sir or ma'am, to be polite, to keep my hands on the steering wheel, to have my paperwork ready. And that my stomach was buoyant, and that my eyes blurred from tracking the sirens, and that I felt the spotlight sizzle on the back of my neck—but I kept the speed limit, and my seatbelt was fastened, and I used my right blinker when pulling over to the side of the road, and that my vehicle was in good-standing; and even though I had three friends in the car, none of us had been drinking—none of us smoked or did much of anything that night besides driving back to campus from dinner. And when the police officer knocked on my window, I lowered it, and he instructed for me to step outside the vehicle—to exit slow, to keep my hands where he could see them. And another police officer, around the rear, with his flashlight, inspected the rest of my car—targeted it on my friends in the backseat—asked them their names; one said *Mike*, and the police officer said *Miguel*, and Mike said—*no*, *Mike*. And while I was outside the car, I handed the other police officer my license, and he examined it with his flashlight, checked my face to match, and then told me to sit back, and I did, resting on my hood. He studied my license longer, and though I wanted to ask him what I did wrong—that I wasn't swerving, that I didn't run a stop-sign, that I didn't commit any traffic violations—I said nothing, and stood stone-still knowing it really didn't matter—

knowing exactly why he pulled me over—and that when he said there was a string of burglaries in the neighborhood and we looked suspicious, I wasn't a bit surprised.

BABY DINGO
by Emily Harrison

Boy finds Baby Dingo in the swell of the high noon heat. He waits for any signs of Adult Dingo, adjusting the too-big-for-his-head trucker cap. At home, Grandad is snoring heavy on the sofa.

Boy likes to wander off on weekends.

He wants to be a great adventurer.

Maybe today he is.

He checks his watch, surveys the dust bowl surroundings. The nowhere town below. Baby Dingo clambers across Boy's lap and pushes its nose into the sweaty creases of his knees and armpits, licking the salt. There is no sign of Adult Dingo.

Boy pulls Baby Dingo up and holds it like he used to hold the stray cat that occasionally came by the house for food: face perched over the back of his shoulder, torso and hind legs buoyed in his arms. He twists himself over the wire mesh fence and ambles back to the house.

***

He keeps Baby Dingo in his room. It's too hot for bed sheets so he sits Baby Dingo on the bare patterned mattress and strokes its soft tail.

Despite waking as Boy returned, Grandad is none the wiser. It might be on account of the fact that Grandad is old. Older than Boy. Boy had only learnt to count as high as Grandad's age in winter. Even now, Boy has to concentrate to make it to such a number.

When Grandad calls for him through the walls to go and fetch some milk and bread from the store, Boy asks Baby Dingo to stay put. He whispers it right into Baby Dingo's ear and presses a kiss to the top of its head. Baby Dingo tastes of sand and sun.

***

On the way back from the store, Boy spots dead Adult Dingo by the side of the road. He runs home so fast that his knees shake and his feet stumble.

He decides not to tell Baby Dingo. He thinks Baby Dingo might already know.

***

Boy introduces Grandad to Baby Dingo by accident. Boy is in the bath. A cold bath. A bath to keep the heat at bay.

Grandad disappears outside to talk to the stones, so Boy sneaks Baby Dingo into the bathroom. Baby Dingo sits on the toilet seat and laps up the bath water. Boy doesn't hear Grandad return, not until Grandad has opened the bathroom door to tell him not to be long because food will be ready soon. Baby Dingo jumps from the toilet seat and scuttles back to Boy's bedroom. "*Was that a dingo?*" Grandad asks. Boy confirms that it was Baby Dingo, his new friend. Boy asks Grandad if Baby Dingo can stay. He tells Grandad Baby Dingo has already been here for a week. After a long pause and a

chin scratch Grandad says yes. "*As long as Baby Dingo doesn't chew the sofa.*"

***

Baby Dingo sleeps next to Boy. It wraps its tail around Boy's forearm and nuzzles into Boy's neck. Boy reads his favorite books to Baby Dingo, and Baby Dingo eats with them both. Baby Dingo sits up at the table and chews meat from a purple plastic plate, like a child. Since finding out about Baby Dingo, Grandad has made gentle adjustments. Grandad tells Boy that Baby Dingo shouldn't eat chocolate or candy because it might be bad for its stomach. Grandad tells Boy that, really, Baby Dingo shouldn't be with them at all. Human interaction can cause damage.

Boy argues that he saved Baby Dingo. Grandad agrees.

***

Boy takes Baby Dingo to school. There are questions. The teacher asks Boy to bring Baby Dingo only on Fridays. Show-and-Tell day. Baby Dingo can wait at home otherwise.

A few of the Children ask why Boy has Baby Dingo. One of the Children, The Bully, says that Boy shouldn't be allowed Baby Dingo, because everything he's looked after so far has died. He says Boy isn't very good at it. "*Your crazy-brain Mum is dead, and now she's just stones in your back garden. Just stones your Grandad talks to.*"

Boy holds Baby Dingo close on the way home. Boy tells Baby Dingo not to worry or to listen. He tells Baby Dingo that it's different this time. Because Baby Dingo isn't sick like Mum. So that makes everything easier.

***

They should be sleeping, but the night is too sticky. Boy rolls over to Baby Dingo and stares deep into its open glassy eyes. He whispers, "*Baby Dingo, I love you.*"

Baby Dingo might whisper it back.

***

Grandad asks if it's time Boy spoke to the stones. It's been seven months since Mum died. Boy has never talked to the stones. Boy is scared because he knows there's nothing they can say. Boy is young and naïve and innocent, but Boy is aware. The stones are Mum's resting place. He knows the only words they'll ever have are the ones she has already spoken.

Baby Dingo goes with him. Grandad too. They sit, and Grandad starts talking. Boy is mute, at first. Grandad says that maybe he should tell the stones about Baby Dingo. Boy talks so much his mouth dries to a desert.

***

The Earth navigates its path around the Sun and Baby Dingo gets bigger—tail longer and teeth sharper, though Boy has never seen Baby Dingo bite.

Baby Dingo wanders without Boy outside of the nowhere town, carving a path Boy doesn't know. Boy asks Grandad why. Grandad is making lemonade. He has juice all over his hands. "*Maybe Baby Dingo wants to be a great adventurer like you,*" Grandad replies, wiping the residue across his jeans. "*Maybe Baby Dingo wants to explore.*"

Boy says that Baby Dingo can do that with him, can't he?

***

Baby Dingo has been gone for three days. Baby Dingo isn't a baby anymore. Boy cries in bed and then into Grandad's chest as he holds him in his arms. Grandad says Baby Dingo will come back. He says he's as sure about that as he's ever been about anything. Then Grandad takes a breath and pulls Boy up so they can see into each other's eyes.

He speaks slow and says that sometimes, even when it's the hardest thing to do, "*Sometimes you gotta let the things you love roam wild. Not because they don't love you, or they don't want to stay, but because they need to see something of their own.*"

Boy blinks back a tear.

"Baby Dingo needs to live where Baby Dingo belongs."

Boy thinks of the stones. "*Like Mum?*" he asks. Grandad says, "*No,*" then, "*maybe.*" Boy says it might be true.

***

On the ridge of nowhere town, there's a spot that only Boy—now Man—knows. There's no marker in the ground. No definitive coordinates to frame it. There's no need.

At dawn, Man adjusts the too-small-for-his-head trucker cap and smiles as he passes the two sets of stones. The sun is ripe to stifle. A little further, and Man twists himself over the wire fencing, careful not to snag his skin on the metal. He strolls across the sand and up the esker. He checks his watch as he reaches the spot. The view

from the ridge spans wide and long, a chasm of red dust an open road.

"*Hello, friend*," Man says, watching the semi-circle top of the sun shuffle onto the horizon. Adult Dingo might say it back.

SENIORS ON THE MOVE
by Mike Itaya

I'm Old Boy.

In the assisted living, they give me the journal, for a doodling. I write *camphor, cancer*. *Camphor, cancer*. I don't give a shit. I'm Old Boy.

It's Tuesday. And right off, things go bad.

Somebody swiped Rundy's anxiety candle.

"Who's fucking with my aromatherapy?" He wants to know.

I used to drink. I don't have the mind for it. My back's fucked. I sleep out in the banquet hall, like a plank, waiting on them lunch ladies. I flash peepers and spot Rundy beneath the salad bar—guzzling stuff—working up to frenzy. He monograms his onesie with ranch dressing, and banishes a spare bottle to the nebulous domain of his nethers. He's big into spiritual growth and looking to boogie. I double-up on Depends, in case he tries to slip me the big banana.

I got no man-panties. Nothing to hide a half-master. I seen them old gals in whale drawers, and make for jumping ship. It gives you pause. Each Tuesday. Thursday. Wednesday. You get the whole goddamn picture. I heist contraband from the staff kitchen. Heist a tomato-mayo sammie. Right beneath my gown. Wake up. With a tomato-mayo sammie stuck to my chest.

I hang with Rundy. My roomie. This tragic melon-brain. He traps rats. And makes chess sets. With taxidermied rats. It gives you pause. He's whiplashed. Too many U-turns underneath the sheets. I whip hell on him, for telling lies on my momma. I'd rather not go into it. We're the best of friends.

We burned down our lives in Homochitto, Mississippi.

We mess around. We don't go to "Seniors on the Move." Melvin, this drowning goon, crapped out during water aerobics. With the floaties. And a Baby Ruth. And an empty wallet. All this for posterity. During the Ouija séance—for Melvin—I make the board say, "Black Jesus," which *really* gets the geezers riled and moaning.

They drag me to Dr. Hypnos, who dims the lights and gets "professional." Talking all slow and sad, like he's got a line on me. Wanna talk ten years gone. Like I'm some kinda folksy mumba-chumba with my Rascal scooter and my "FAARTS" vanity plate. My ten year plan is to be dead for at least nine of them. He says, "Something's got to change," and right now, that something feels a lot like *me*.

I see now, I got off on the wrong foot here, talking out my buns. Which chafes. 'Cause if you're going to say anything, you might as well say the motherfucking truth:

My line is cut.

The cable is buried.

Sickness got me here.

My life is gone.

I came off a spree once, and found my *son* dead in his room. His big old moon cat sitting on top of him, staring at me. Staring through my shame. I think shame broke my mind.

I burned down my life in Homochitto, Mississippi.

My boy: there was ruin in his face even I could not tell you of.

But I have lived through things that might have killed you. And I have sharpened tooth on stone. I will wait for you behind happiness. I will take you from everything that's gone wrong.

ANOTHER ROAD TRIP STORY
by DS Levy

Two months ago, after flirting with a handsome Ojibwa who poured stiff Margaritinas, Fonda tottered over to the slots and maxed out her credit card, setting her back two grand. Which is why, heading south on US-31 after an afternoon wine-tasting in Traverse City, I'm surprised when she tells us from the back seat that her inner voice just whispered: *Twenty bucks will move your spirit toward prosperity.*

Since her heart bypass last year, Fonda's been on speaking terms with her gut. "You know that 'feeling?'" she says. "Well, I'm finally listening."

"Did your gut mention how long you'll have to play?" Bets wants to know. "'Cause I can't afford to call in sick tomorrow."

"Twenty bucks," Fonda promises.

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The giant marquee in front of the Little River Casino & Resort advertises "Only Tonight! Bitty KISS!" Bitty looks exactly like Gene Simmons—shiny black Brillo pad of hair, dark sunglasses, plumped up lips—except he and his sidekicks are little people.

"Could be interesting," Bets says, snapping her gum. She and I can't afford to gamble. We like to joke that our monthly Social Security checks barely cover our *ass*-ettes. Sure, Bets works part-

time at Lowe's "making do," and I get a chunk of my husband's life insurance, but still, we're pinching retirement pennies.

Fonda can't afford to gamble either, but she doesn't let that stop her. She's been on disability for twenty years since she and her former boyfriend, who turned out to be "another manic phase," dumped his Harley in the UP. She's got a steal rod in her thigh, but it doesn't interfere with her pulling the one-armed bandits.

Fonda walks ten steps ahead of us, the smell of easy money and cafeteria grease wafting through the electronic doors along with a gush of stale AC. For her, this Neon Oz with *binkety-dinkety* computerized sirens is her idea of heaven, enough buzz and bling to seduce the most tone-deaf sinner. After she pays to play, she waves *adios amigas* and wanders across the casino looking for a hot machine with a cushy seat.

Bets and I wander off, weaving around gamblers with fanny packs and credit cards tethered to lanyards, dependable oxygen tanks pushed aside. Though penny-pinchers, we're not above being hypocrites and agree to splurge on All-You-Can-Eat Crab Legs and Prime Rib buffet for $29.99. But before we track the scent, we pass a dark, quiet bar. We're on our third snake bites, watching a big-screen of the floor, when all hell breaks loose. Lights flash, bells ring. Someone's hit the Big One.

"Come on," says Bets.

We slither off our stools and stumble out onto the floor where a crowd has gathered.

A guy shouts, "It's letting go of 300 grand!"

"Quick, what do you call a group of gamblers watching someone

hit a jackpot?" a grizzled guy with a leather Hell's Angels vest asks me. Before I can guess, he answers, "Jealous."

An old man with a flannel shirt scratches his gray beard. "Man, I just played that machine."

Bets and I pray that when folks part like the Red Sea it'll be Fonda sitting there in a stream of gold coins. She's been struggling to pay her monthly trailer rent and has hinted she might get bounced soon.

But when we push through the gawkers, all we see is a dazed gambler with outstretched hands, coins spilling out of an ecstatic machine into an overflowing plastic pail, a strobe light flickering, rapturing the winner to the Almighty Slot Machine in the Sky. And when the winner turns around, she has pink bangs and an "I Went to Vegas and This Is All I Got" T-shirt—definitely not Fonda.

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We find our Fonda in the snack lounge with a chocolate soft-serve ice cream cone. Turns out she blew ten dollars before her gut spoke up, told her she was wasting her time and money, and that it was hungry. She stares at the overhead flat-screen TVs—kickboxing, Canadian curling, the World Poker Tour. A skinny guy on one screen jumps up and kicks his opponent square in the jaw.

"These slots are so tight," Fonda says, "they squeak."

Bets asks her if she's seen the handsome Ojibwa bartender. Fonda shakes her head. "Has the night off."

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On our way out, we pass the crowded auditorium where the Bitty KISS concert is just getting started.

"C'mon," I say. "We're so late, we've got plenty of time."

Bitty and his band come on stage. Not only does he sing, he raps and thrusts out his red salamander tongue. If he wasn't so darn cute—if you could imagine him taller—he could almost pass for the real deal.

There's only a handful of people in the crowd, so we move down to the front row and watch as Bitty dances over to the edge of the stage singing "I Was Made for Loving You." He bends down and stretches out his tiny hand. Bets reaches out, and he starts singing to her. Up close, under the lights, he looks 110-years-old.

I stare. It's wrong to stare. Yet it feels wrong *not to*. Bitty pumps his bulbous fists, spits into the hot mic, thrusts his bantam hips.

When the song's over, I poke Bets and Fonda: "Taxi's leaving."

***

We stroll past indoor ponds with fake lily pads, our ears thrumming from the music. Outside, a silent gray dawn is just starting its show.

Fonda and Bets worry I'll fall asleep driving and make a big deal about keeping me awake. But as soon as we hit the road, they're both out, heads slung back, snoring.

Wide awake, I keep thinking about Bitty. How we all sang along, our mouths moving without our hearts' concern. I feel bad I watched the show with the same enthusiasm I'd watch a car wreck. The whole evening seemed strained—Bets and I tossing back shots,

Fonda wanting so damn bad for those machines to cough out cash. This is our life now, I think. Holy hell.

I scan the highway. Up here, if it's not suicidal venison, it's crazy wolves or raucous raccoons.

We've got the road to ourselves. If I push it a little, we should make it back in time so Bets can get to her job at Walmart.

This retired life. It's having time without money, or money without time. It's watching days fly by like the birch and fir trees along this highway. It's friendship and sadness and what-ifs and maybe-nots and who-knows. It's a bad poker hand on a hot table, or a cold slot machine that suddenly sizzles.

Up ahead, three sets of green eyes glow from the dark forest. I slow down, not because my gut says I should, but because I know how it feels to be hit hard.

IRENE
by Sarah MW

“Fancy a bite of my banana, Miss?”

Teenage faces have a soft bluntness to them, a button-like quality as they wait to be chiseled out to their full adult contour. Joe’s face was the same, though unlike the others it sported a uniquely impressive beard, far from usual in a fifteen-year-old. He was grisly and monstrous; I heard he’d fucked his way through most of the pretty girls in year ten and eleven. Simpering, gum-chewing girls with clotted mascara and deep-set insecurities. He swung back, all too pleased with himself in his plastic chair, forcibly recumbent, legs wide like a broken easel.

I was a newly anointed high school teacher, fast baptized into the daily ritual of having my boundaries teased, stretched, and overstepped. I thought my greatest power might have been the ability to put on a show of indifference.

“No thanks, Joe.”

The indifference thing didn’t really work. They simply became more inventive in their provocations. An orange once, for instance, just missing the back of my head, hitting the whiteboard with a satisfying smack. Whittled down, waiting each day for the evening bus, I was a totally flimsy and broken thing. Better to wait for the very last one, or else be targeted again, naked by the shelterless stop, cat-called down from the top deck of the school bus.

Each day, disembarking the bus, entering that village, it seemed time at some point had been discontinued. Before starting there, I'd envisaged a forgivably backwards, warm, and well-meaning community: soft, thatched buildings, the post office, a local shop, and sheep. What I met with was the darker heart of a pretty English county, its deprived and neglected inner core. Filthy vehicles lined the pavements, lucky if they were still running. Right-wing vitriol was rampant as union jack flags hung defiantly in front room windows. Then there was the school: a five-story, brutalist nightmare, old-style attitudes cast in concrete.

Time stood uncannily statuary in those breeze-blocked, ascetic walls. I felt it, having turned to senior teachers about the hounding and harassment. My concerns were greeted with laughter from older women in shapeless cardigans who told me they'd be thrilled with such attention. The male counterpart of the staff body offered even less hope; in their mid-fifties, on average, with blackened teeth and overhanging bellies, and a scoring system among them for all new female staff. I'd been forewarned of this by my new manager, as she reassured me between giggles that it was "just a bit of fun."

I first spotted Irene whizzing by down the stone staircase, a ladder of gaping slats through which, four stories up, I'd look down and eye the building's ever-threatening concrete base. She had no specific classroom of her own, and so stomped by purposefully in her studded heeled boots, up and down, every day. Her smile exposed black holes and golden glints in its crooks that I found simultaneously threatening and charming.

"Lovely day," she beamed, approaching me during one break time in her extravagant sun hat, weather-beaten face upturned towards the sun's glare. Her bright fuchsia lipstick screamed youthfulness and vitality, and was jarring set against her long, ashtray grey hair.

Irene told me she was the union representative for the school—was I a member? A woman's place is in her union, she laughed. I noticed she had a habit of licking her two front teeth and pouting in the interim of her speaking. She oozed gratitude and ease and really didn't seem like a teacher at all. More like a carefree member of the public who just happened to pass by. Her gaze probed deep as I asked her what it was that she taught.

"Life," she announced, smiling, a statement that seemed to me underpinned with limitless profundity. What she meant was Citizenship and Religious Studies, though she had gifted it with a totally endearing rebrand. There was a knowing in her eyes, and I longed to swim in it.

One uncharacteristically shady summer's night, as I stood wilting as ever by the bus-stop, it seemed like a beautiful, cosmic twist of fate when an aging camper van pulled over. Irene slid the door open from the backseat to let me in.

"I would have offered you a lift before, but Angus can be so unreliable." To this, Angus emitted an incoherent groan of disapproval and went back to wildly eyeballing the road ahead. If I was to deduce correctly—from that all too familiar cat piss stench—I'd passed on the hum-drum reliability of the public bus that evening to be driven home down dark country side-roads by a speed-induced stranger.

Angus was ten years Irene's senior and bore all the signs of having lived life at full throttle: bald with blotched tattoos, skin like worn-out elastic, the vocal timbre of an old dog choking on its leash.

"Here you are."

Irene passed me the lidless whisky bottle while she sparked up a

spliff. The anesthetic burn of the whisky, coupled with our lively conversation, proved the ultimate salve to whatever had gone on before. His gaze fixed on the road, Angus stretched his arm backwards, signaling for me to pass the bottle to him.

School night after school night, we drove home in Irene's van. Every night I was excited by the endless countryside hills that made my belly flop, by the dubious mechanics of the van, the questionable noises it made, its axles like bones threatening to snap at any moment. With every speed-bump, we'd come to a gasping halt, the van's metalwork would shudder, and the window panes would violently smack at their frames. I loved how the unpredictability of the country roads would have us arc and sway in the backseat, taking care to balance the booze between us: sometimes whisky, sometimes wine in any old dirty glass. As we took yet another winding bend, my body lifted and careered into the window, while her sparrow-like legs would momentarily crush mine.

"International Women's Day!" Angus yelled once jubilantly, as we bundled in, procuring three bottles of cheap white wine from between his legs. We stopped halfway at an off-license for tobacco, where there was a beautiful Bullmastiff on a walk on the road opposite. Majestic as anything, flexing its thick, taut sinew with each stride. Irene turned to me.

"He looks just like my Rocco. My Rocco, I lost him."

That night I visited Irene's house for the first time. They lived a few villages west of the school; village, again, a term strikingly incongruous with the thing it designated. All around were characterless squares of ill-furnished prefabs and happy reprobates pulling wheelies at oncoming traffic. A cavernous hole had been left at the core of the place after the coal mines were shut down in the nineties.

"I know what you're thinking," Irene pointed out as we hopped out the van, "but this place is beautiful. I love our village. Look at this ancient woodland all around. This is the one place in a hundred miles' radius you'll hear a skylark's call."

Irene told me there was an open door policy all around the village. On entering her home I registered a cluster of growling gents in anoraks, proliferating all about the dining table and kitchen benches like a kind of algae. The whole place itself gave off airs of an unattended to spare room and seemed crooked at every angle. Angus thrust a warm can of Scrumpy Jack into my hand and invited me to roll myself a spliff from his Tupperware supply. From this point on, the night twirled all around me in a heady carousel of space cakes, roll-ups, more Scrumpy's, more spliffs. The door remained open, and a little girl named Star came in and fussed about me, braiding my hair, dancing as if around a maypole.

At some point, Irene stole me away to the quiet of the garden. Angus and his clan—those hungry jackals—continued to congregate excitedly about the platter of intoxicants on offer in the dining room table. With all I'd ingested, I had to focus hard on tuning out the relentless physiological interference as Irene spoke to me in grave and weighty tones. I learned she just turned sixteen when they were married. On their wedding night, he'd chased her round the house with an axe, having regretted it all. The following decades brought four kids who took turns hanging off the pram as she marched to the community library day after day, pursuing three different masters degrees. "Shakespeare, the working class hero" was the thesis of which she'd been most proud.

The picture she painted of Angus's own very separate history saw him elevated to the level of folkloric legend.

"He's a man unto himself. All the women in this village have either

wanted to have him or have had him. His cock, I am telling you, is like nothing you've ever seen."

I wondered if it was as wiry and strangled looking as his wrinkled old neck. She told me he let her have her fun too. On her fortieth birthday, he passed her a condom and gave his permission to fuck whomsoever she wanted. Irene had reached that point of inebriety where the urge to share was all-consuming. Next she told me she was a lesbian, could only ever come when thinking about women. The receptors in my brain were straining to compute the flurry of information, to disentangle the scrambled signal, the fuzz that infiltrated my mind.

"I want to tell you something I've never told anyone."

It made sense that she would have been assured by then of my sheer unshockability.

"You know my Rocco I told you about? Well my Rocco and I, we were in a relationship," she said and paused. "But I promise you it was totally consensual. He would always be the one to initiate."

I nodded, not sure what else to do. All the while I imagined it: Angus fucking his way around the village with his monster cock, whilst Irene sought comfort with her Bullmastiff Rocco. I pictured the power of his strong hind legs, the curvature of his rippling muscle in all its urgent sexuality, her dainty frame curled neatly beneath.

Slipping back into the house, I took to mounting the steep staircase to the bathroom, using my arms to straddle the wall and banister. On my way, I caught an old picture of Irene. I was stunned by the blackness of her hair, as well as her overall startling beauty; here was the original image of which I'd only ever encountered the

negative. Was she Rocco's girl back then? After, as I was pissing, I noted the absence of any type of hygiene product about—no soap, no shampoo, nothing. I remembered how Irene told me she takes a bath every morning, that she never showered, and so must have spent each morning stewing in the brine of yesterday's filth.

I tried to get back downstairs, and that's when I fucked up. I tumbled from the very first step.

***

I woke up to the gentle thrum of Radio 4 and the cold wind that set the window off rattling on the hinge holding it ajar. I was laid, fully-clothed, in their sheetless marital bed, nestled between the pair of them like a fledgling bird. My cracked ribs made it impossible to move, so I lay there immovable for some time after.

***

Irene and I shared goodbyes that were drawn out and insubstantial. I moved schools soon after, and we texted a couple of times. The last I heard from her was a phone call to tell me she'd had a stroke and that she wasn't teaching *Life* anymore.

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