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Teresa Milbrodt

Teresa Milbrodt is the author of a short story collection, *Bearded Women: Stories*; a novel, *The Patron Saint of Unattractive People*; and a flash fiction collection, *Larissa Takes Flight: Stories*. Her fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction have appeared in numerous literary magazines. She is addicted to coffee, long walks with her MP3 player, frozen yogurt, and anything by Sherman Alexie or George Saunders. Read more of her work at: <http://teresamilbrodt.com/homepage/>

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On Waiting

[Teresa Milbrodt](#)

I'll admit it now, I'm a hypochondriac. The good part is that I'm fully cognizant of my irrational fears and so is my hypochondriac husband, so much so that we wrote the following provisions into our marriage vows:

I will love you when you're sick, when you're healthy, and when you're anxious about being sick. I will Google all of the medical conditions you think you might have, and assure you that you don't.

We are people who believe in preparation, though I tend to be more vocal about my worries. My husband usually suffers in silence, but he has been true to his vows. During the five years of our marriage he has looked at more pictures of skin cancers and lesions than a dermatology student. This is how I will forever define true love and commitment.

I was trying very hard not to worry about the odd white bump that had appeared on my chin in early May and failed to look like much of anything that my dear husband could find on Google images. Part of me worried that it was cancer, but part of me worries that everything is cancer. My husband said it didn't look like anything serious, certainly not an evil melanoma, so I should just chill. While chilling I bought some concealer to cover the odd little zit, but whenever I try to conceal anything with makeup it backfires and the thing ends up looking like it has blinking red lights around it, and a sign that reads "Please stare at my facial blemish." While my husband claimed he didn't notice it when he looked at me, I was sure the rest of the world did.

Yet I continued play it cool, and I was very proud of myself for shirking my hypochondriac tendencies. Mind over odd bumps. Until I arrived at my parents' house for a visit and my doctor father said, "What's that thing on your chin?"

I said I didn't know, but it was white and looked like it was covered with dead skin and it wasn't getting any bigger.

After a kitchen examination my father said, "You should get it off, it could be squamous cell carcinoma." A form of skin cancer. This statement was followed by, "Why do you always worry about things that turn out to be nothing, and you weren't worried about this?"

"I don't know," I wailed, "I was trying to play it cool." So much for that bright idea. My hypochondriac side was righteously indignant for having been correct after all, and scared out of its mind. But the white bump continued not to look as bad as squamous cell carcinoma or a cutaneous horn or keratosis or a wart. It didn't look like much of anything. All the pictures my father and ever-vigilant husband found online appeared much worse than what I had affectionately termed my little white zit from hell. My husband said that should be reassuring, but in my hypochondriac brain the only thing I could process was, "What is it, and when is it going to kill me?"

When you think you might be sick or when I think I might be sick--it's like there's a black cloud hanging in the back of my mind all the time, even if I try to forget it. The cloud is looming over my shoulder whenever I turn around. That was what happened with the little white zit from hell. I figured it might be similar to how women feel when their mammograms come back inconclusive. You try to pretend you're living in the real world, but really you're in an alternate pseudo-reality where there's an elephant in the room but only you can see it, and you don't want to mention the elephant to anyone else because they'll think you're crazy. This is because you are crazy and you probably realize that, but just because you know you're crazy doesn't mean that you can get rid of the craziness. It's kind of like a bad case of acne. You do what you can to relieve it, but really you just have to tough it out.

"Well, it's probably benign like a wart," said the surgeon when I was sitting in his office, "but it could be

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squamous cell carcinoma. I've seen a few of them start out as little horny things.Ö

Forget it, I thought to myself. You're here and I'm here and you have sharp things. Just get the damn zit off and send it to the pathology lab so you can tell me what it is.

While she prepared the aforementioned sharp things and sterile surfaces for surgery, the nurse and I chatted about how I was living in Colorado and her daughter lived in Arizona and how it was very dry so you needed to drink a whole lot of water or risk dehydration. When you're really nervous it's amazing how easy it is to find a connection with someone, anyone, so you can make futile conversation and try to get your mind off impending doom. Or a shot of anesthetics.

The good thing about doing a lot of hand sewing\and I may be one of the few people who does anymore--is that most shots don't feel too bad. While getting the shot I can ponder all the needle sticks I've had in the past that felt much worse because they were unplanned. After that I had to think of something while lying on the table with a blue sheet over my face and a little bit of chin exposed.

There was an old lady who swallowed a fly, I don't know why she swallowed that fly, I guess she'll die.
There was an old lady who swallowed a spider that wriggled and jiggled and tickled inside her. She swallowed the spider to catch the fly... I worked my way through the bird and cat verses and then didn't remember what came after, so I was alert to the tug of the needle when I was getting stitches.

Someone is sewing my skin together. How about that. I don't feel a damn thing. They used to get people drunk before they did things like this, and then sterilize the wound with more booze. Too bad I don't drink. At least this isn't as bad as dental surgery, but I don't get nitrous. That's a shame. Why don't all doctors' offices have nitrous? Dentists shouldn't have all the fun. Nitrous would make medical procedures so much easier...

Then it was all done and I had a band-aid on my chin and an order not to take off the band-aid or get the wound wet for twenty-four hours. That was fine with me, since I didn't want to see the stitches or the little vial that now held my zit from hell. Now all I had to do was wait for the test results. The problem was that this was a Thursday, and my dad explained the slides took a day to be prepared, so they probably wouldn't be read until after the weekend. The good and bad thing about having a doctor as a father is that I get all the inside information, including the history of research on squamous cell carcinoma while standing in the kitchen making dinner. According to my father, the National Cancer Institute was considering re-naming some kinds of squamous cell carcinoma that occurred in breasts, because some of the cells looked like cancer cells but didn't behave like them or spread beyond a certain point. Except for a few kinds of squamous cell carcinomas that did behave like cancer cells.

Since I grew up with a family member in the medical profession, part of me wants to shrug at any ailment, take some Tylenol or apply antibiotic ointment and tell myself I'll be fine. The other part remembers all the dinner table stories about people who died suddenly for odd reasons and that taking too much Tylenol could kill my liver, but IÖd have to do it all at once.

My adopted grandma has told me that we spend seventy to eighty percent of our lives waiting. I don't know where she got this statistic, but it sounds true. We pass a lot of time searching for distractions to stop us from thinking about other things. Sometimes I knit. Sometimes I cook. Sometime I watch funny cat videos online. Are funny cat videos proof that humans have superior intelligence, or have they made us take an evolutionary step back closer to low\and gorillas? At any rate they're something to do, since all of us are waiting for something. That would make a good question for a poll. What are you waiting for?

When I was in high school I really wanted a boyfriend. High school of course is its own country with its own social mores and caste system and currency and a range of other customs that shift from year to year when the seniors graduate and a new crew of freshmen move in to be ritually demeaned. But high school relationships and PDAs (public displays of affection) seem to be universal, as does the existence of the much larger and lonelier population of discontented teens who get to watch those PDAs with equal parts ridicule and envy.

My mother stood by the standard mothering script\ needed to wait until I graduated and entered the larger world, then IÖd find a guy who was right for me. While my mother turned out to be right, I didn't relish swaying alone to slow songs at high school dances. I did what I could--got together with a gaggle of girls and tried to have fun, but felt insanely jealous anyway. If someone would have told my seventeen-year-old self that I'd meet

my husband at twenty-seven I probably would have shot them. This is why it's good that we don't have crystal balls, though I really wanted crystal ball during the days when I was waiting for the report on my zit from hell.

When I was job-hunting last spring, I heard way too many people my parents' age say, "Wow, I'm glad I'm not young anymore, the market is really awful for people your age." I'm not exactly sure why they said this, since everyone in my generation is fully cognizant of the fact that we and our friends and significant others are lost in application hell. My husband has been there for some time. He has two hard-won part time jobs totaling twenty hours a week, but still needs more work.

Dearest baby boomers, we know things suck. Is it supposed to make us feel better that you're acknowledging the fact? Job searches are another kind of hell, another kind of waiting, especially since prospective employers don't feel obliged to tell you when someone else has been hired for the position. Ultimately we end up shooting cover letters and resumes into the application black hole, which I imagine to be a deep dark virtual crevasse sucking in white paper moths.

Or maybe the job market is more like a carnival game where you throw darts to pop a balloon or throw a ball and knock over milk bottles. You have to know the tricks to win a huge stuffed rhinoceros, and even then it doesn't always work. In the meantime all we can do is knit and watch funny cat videos while old people remark on how they're really glad they're not us. How comforting.

My grandma was put into Hospice in early September, when her coughing was getting worse. It was one of those times when everyone in the family knew we were settling in to wait, one of those times when the treatment options would have killed her before the cancer. At least I could Skype my grandma in Hospice since she didn't have Internet in her condo, and I could see what she looked like. Once or twice a week I watched Grandma TV for the latest status report, and we chatted. In the end she wanted to be around for as long as she could. We had to honor that, even if the waiting was uncomfortable, even if it made us wonder if medicine had gotten too good.

Those kinds of experiences make you lie in bed thinking morbid thoughts. If my brain could survive in a jar, would that be okay with me? What would a brain think when it was isolated from everything else? Wouldn't it get really pissed and miss pizza and chocolate, only it couldn't tell anyone because it was alone in a jar? What happens when you're lost in that space, floating in a mason jar in some lab? Could it be fun, like when you realize you're dreaming and suddenly you're God and control everything, or would you just end up waiting forever for...something?

The Lakota people believe that when you die, a relative comes to greet you and take you over to the next side. One of my Lakota friends told a story about her terminally ill uncle who was in the hospital and near death. One afternoon he sat up and started reaching out his arms and pulling them back to his chest, like he was hugging people no one else could see. My friend said it must have been family members who'd come to walk him to the other side. He passed away not soon after that. He was done waiting. Of all the stories I've heard about the afterlife, that's the one I like best. Everyone wants a hand to hold when they go to a new place, and like anything else you must be a tourist at first and need someone to explain things to you. I wonder what it would have been like to sit in that hospital room while he was hugging people. I probably would have shivered in my chair and made myself small so there'd be more room for whoever else had decided to show up and wait.

Actually, I picture it less like an elephant in the corner of the room, and more like a one-eyed one-horned flying purple-people-eater.

Everyone knows waiting is the worst part of any problem, question, or dilemma, because you have time to dream up all the things that might or might not happen. There's no course of action, just the space of waiting. It's one of the most helpless places in the world. I don't think we're getting better at waiting, just at being distracted with the Internet and cell phones and other electronic temptations of a life increasingly lived online. I don't like it. Nobody seems to be able to have a conversation that lasts for more than a couple of minutes without being interrupted by a text or ringtone. At least most people remember to apologize when they answer.

But there are other side effects, like the way I have an ability to focus on something for a long period of time, a talent that seems lost on many twenty-somethings. It's a trait that I never thought would mark me as a product of my generation, but some of us can still concentrate. That also means I could focus on my zit from hell for long periods of time, which wasn't productive. Then I really needed a good funny cat video.

My father is a talking medical encyclopedia. He wants to give you all the footnotes, which is great if you have the time and desire for knowledge. He has all sorts of knowledge, and one of his greatest joys in life is dispensing it. His lectures float from topic to related topic, and I know I do the same thing sometimes, but not about medicine. Kids don't become their parents, but we have a tendency to rhyme. I have my father's temper and inclination to lecture. I have my mother's need to make lists, and her love of asking questions. Both of them are worriers, but my mother will admit to it faster than my dad. Neither of them like to write, so in that I'm an anomaly, but sometimes things can't be explained.

A guy drove into a crowd of people in California the other day. Venice Beach. He killed one person and injured eleven, at least that's what I heard on the radio while I was taking a walk and waiting to hear back on whether my zit from hell would kill me. We get up every day and expect to get back into bed that evening. You don't think something weird will happen in between those times. Sometimes there's no waiting, there's just surprise, which has its own kind of awfulness. The lady who was killed was a newlywed. She was just walking along with her husband and then...

Well-meaning and curious people keep asking if my husband has found a full-time job. They keep asking if my parents have found their cat. The cat bolted in May after getting dental surgery. May was also when the zit from hell first appeared. The zit is gone. The cat is still gone. My husband is waiting for better job prospects, so for now we just have a string of people my parents' age telling us that they feel bad for our generation. I have also been told not to listen to anyone in my parents' generation, so I can maintain my fragile optimism. Even if the old codgers are right, it's better to be cheerfully young and chasing dreams. I can wait to grow old and jaded, but sometimes I feel five, sometimes I feel thirty-five, and sometimes I feel sixty-five. I don't have to wait for any of this; it happens on its own.

I wish I could explain things better to my parents' lost cat, why he needed the tooth cleaning and dental surgery, why people who loved him put him through pain. I want to tell him it was in his own best interest because his teeth were turning brown and needed to come out. That's just the way it is. It makes me wonder if there's some greater being trying to tell us the same thing--*This sucks now, but you'll be happier for it. Just wait.*

For four days which felt just short of an eternity I walked around with a band-aid on my chin waiting for someone to make a fistfight joke so I could say, *Yeah, but you should have seen the other guy.* My sweet husband told me not to worry too much about the zit from hell because it didn't make sense to fret. Of course that made sense to me, but of course I was always fretting when my mind couldn't think of anything better to do. This happened too often. I was walking down the sidewalk not long after I heard the report about Venice Beach, when I realized *Maybe we'll all be waiting for death all the time, only we don't realize it.* God, that's a cheery thought...

When you have a father who's a doctor you get certain perks, like the ability to look at hospital records and peer into pathology reports that confirm the zit from hell was not squamous cell carcinoma but a wart, a very funky-looking wart, but a wart just the same. I was happy. I was surprised. I called everyone who I'd told about the biopsy to let them know. It was a time for rejoicing. I'd never been so happy to have a wart, or have so many other people be happy I had a wart.

Quietly my brain had been preparing for the worst--cancer that had spread, news I'd need to have chemo or radiation or further tests. Now the slate had been wiped clean. I had a new future, a brighter future, impossibly wonderful and free of burdens, even though they never existed in the first place. It was so elating and completely illogical. I also felt like a total wuss, since I had just escaped a fake brush with death. I'd never been in danger, but the purple-people-eater had left the corner of the room and gone to haunt someone else until he came back to my corner, which I knew he inevitably would.



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Genevieve DeGuzman

Genevieve DeGuzman was born in the Philippines, raised in Southern California, and graduated from Columbia University. Her fiction and poetry appear or are forthcoming in *Alluvian*, *Liminality*, *LONTAR*, and *Rising Phoenix Review*, among other journals. She is a winner of the Oregon Poetry Association New Poets Contest and has been awarded a residency at Can Serrat. She currently lives in Portland, Oregon. about.me/genevievedeguzman

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To The One Who Left

[Genevieve DeGuzman](#)

On the bed you planted a note
 in the folds of our shared life
 rooted in the crumpled twisted sheets
 smells of rusty ice cream spoons
 in the loam wrestling of our bodies
 the night before. The dresser holds
 an explosion of flowers in the act of molding
 extravagant tears down my cheek.
 Petals overcome with getting on
 fall to the wood floors
 no bounce, gleaming one by one
 until there is only the pollen nucleus
 left lidless eyes torn from my hands
 rubbed to steady. When enough time has passed
 I will put the dog in her pen, my locked up bitch
 Laika in her space travels burning
 up in the descent. The dog and I will know
 the roughness of dried flowers
 that deity propped up in a vase
 more scarecrow to the ghost of you
 gone.



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William Cullen Jr.

William Cullen Jr. is a veteran and was born in Petersburg, Virginia. He lived in Alabama, Georgia and Germany before settling down in Brooklyn, New York, where he works at a social services non-profit. His work has appeared in Canary, Concis, Farming Magazine, Gravel, Gulf Stream, Heartwood, Pouch, Spillway and Written River: A Journal of Eco-Poetics.

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Therapy Blues

[William Cullen Jr.](#)

(after B. Dylan)

I kind of mind
that I can't find
those deep down things
I need to lose.



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Nina Bennett

Delaware native Nina Bennett is the author of *Sound Effects* (2013, Broadkill Press Key Poetry Series). Her poetry has been nominated for the Best of the Net, and has appeared or is forthcoming in publications that include *Gargoyle*, *I-70 Review*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *The Broadkill Review*. Awards include 2014 Northern Liberties Review Poetry Prize, and second-place in poetry book category from the Delaware Press Association (2014). Nina is a founding member of the TransCanal Writers (*Five Bridges, A Literary Anthology*).

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Bourbon Street, 9:30 a.m.

[Nina Bennett](#)

No southern belle waltzed
here last night. A young man,
dreads pulled into a ponytail,
plays a hose over the sidewalk
where zydeco and blues spewed.
Early morning breeze thick
with chicory and remorse.



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Gate 58, Orlando International Airport

[Nina Bennett](#)

Cinderella and Snow White race through Terminal C,
stumble over carry-on bags. Mickey Mouse ears
dance above seats as toddlers fidget and squirm.
Harry Potter points his wand, flings Cheerios
at his sister. Her sobs erupt like a fastball,
thirty minutes of toddler screams hurled
at their parents. A pre-school
Captain America covers his ears and drops
the f-bomb. Chatter halts as his father's slap
reverberates through the gate area.



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Lisa Favicchia

Lisa Favicchia is a recent graduate of the MFA program at Bowling Green State University and the former Managing Editor of Mid-American Review. Her work has appeared in Smeuse Poetry, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, and Wordpool Press, and is forthcoming in Rubbertop Review, The Airgonaut, and Adelaide Literary Magazine.

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Apparitions of High Tide

[Lisa Favicchia](#)

Watch for the holes. Children often bury
 dead jellyfish and sea nettles, empty hotel
 bottles of Fireball. Clear waves will stir
 shadows that might look familiar, but do not
 reach for them when the never-landing petrels
 come to shore scratching mollusks out of their shells
 and forcing their wings inside to hide in the funneling spirals.
 Don't come to small fishing towns and expect to find
 what you expect to find. Chances are it will be there,
 in tangles of seaweed that seem to wrap
 around your legs just a little too purposefully,
 or beneath sand that won't settle, asking you warmly
 to allow yourself to keep on sinking, to just stop
 pedaling your feet. If you can't say you won't listen,
 this is danger. Do not rush, though, to your longboat
 where the sea waits fleshy and open-mouthed. Remain
 on land until the petrels, now swirl-tailed, leave
 their warbling shells beside the shriveled-naked,
 and the red tide shrinks back, when you're certain
 the gulls have only buried their heads in their necks.



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Devil's Hole

[Lisa Favichia](#)

I don't know why I didn't turn off
the garbage disposal, why I watched
Grandma's rogue spoon sputter around,
its rose-petal handle fallen prey
to metal teeth, why my fingers teetered
on the edge, inched closer. I also don't know why
I've never been to Devil's Hole,
a place I only dare imagine.

Some days I picture a long, deep tunnel
dug into the earth in the middle
of a field, only 4 or so centimeters
wide and rimmed with grass, just big enough
for a toe to slip into unaware then fall
no further. Other days it's a swamp
no one in town can remember
except that once a group of surveyors
and the rescue team sent out after
them were pulled through the bottomless
earth by their feet. It could be
a black drainage pipe, one that thrums
with the wings of hornets as the queen builds
their nest from her own saliva
But without a doubt it is a place
you wish you didn't want to sink into
all the way up to your teeth.



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Jason Gordon

Jason Gordon earned an MFA from the University of Maryland, as well as a scholarship from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He has authored two chapbooks, *I Stole a Briefcase* (Pudding House Press) and *Attack of the Nihilist* (forthcoming from Ravenna Press). He lives in Catonsville, Maryland, teaching English and creative writing at a middle school for children with dyslexia.

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Cheat Codes

[Jason Gordon](#)

the pillow swallows the head

but the mind with its tentacles
of blue light rests on a nest
of crumpling un-crumpling poems

or it sits on the TV and stares at
the tree growing out of the sofa

it doesn't wear pants it can't
think or hum songs from the 80s

too much not enough
synthesized drums

too asleep too awake

it can't decide

*

I won't look in the mirror my reflection
is a vampire with acne and prescription sunglasses
he stays up all day writing poems about nothing he's not
my mirror image he will never taste lobster
dipped in blood or bend his fork into a bracelet
for you to re-gift like his heart covered in flies

*

can you turn off your breasts they're cold
they burn my tongue I can't talk on the phone
or leave silent messages like empty
bottles in the sea like love or hate poems
in my heart your nipples on fire red sky
at night blue moon at noon

*

the sky is dead

no seeds in the glass
cubes of its teeth

an endless landscape of hiccups
the occasional iceberg
of sunlight taps on the window

oh blank dance of clouds
the porch is on fire
the milk strings of your guitar

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shatter on the roof



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Lost in St. Texas

[Jason Gordon](#)

my sponge is a brain
to squeeze and/or throw

at the cat
making sounds

like a cloud
giving birth
to a phonebook of rain

on the streets of st. texas

where cops huff paint
in the trees
made of steam

that rise from the manholes

that bloom
in the dark

where I live in a van
or a van lives in me

...

I build a napkin
out of swans
but can't make it swim

or fall up like a fridge
full of ghosts
through the weather

blue eggs in the brain
high on stones
not for breakfast
the moon
the brain orbits
so quietly
explodes

I hate yellow ketchup

I want to believe
that life isn't boring
the dust off the furniture

the windows
in their frames
expand and
contract

every breath
so important
to calm down the flies

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...

oh pearl ear of necklaces

listen to my brain

I will not put my phone
in a beard of fake birds

so why will I push
this snowflake
upstairs
while not wearing feet
like a digital human
like pac-man
drunk
on poodles of rain
in this unplugged machine
I call home
in the dark

know I don't know

I must first be a sperm

underground tornados
playing hockey
with the mind

I must first be an egg

the tv is off

the tv is watching me
sleep on the couch

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Chanel Brenner

Chanel Brenner is the author of *Vanilla Milk: a memoir told in poems*, (Silver Birch Press, 2014), a finalist for the 2016 Independent Book Awards and honorable mention in the 2014 Eric Hoffer awards. Her poems have appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Rattle*, *Cultural Weekly*, *Muzzle Magazine*, and others. Her poem, "July 28th, 2012" won first prize in *The Write Place At the Write Time's* contest, judged by Ellen Bass

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Welcome to Dead Child World

[Chanel Brenner](#)

Please try to make yourself comfortable. If it feels like you are outside your body, it's because you are. Don't worry, this is normal. It helps to think of yourself as a cocoon. Part of you crossed over with your child, and what remains is a shell. We recommend you refrain from catching your fleeting reflection in mirrors or windows. A new you will emerge, but not today. We apologize in advance for the woman who will knock on your door with ashes in a plastic box, tucked inside a baby blue gift bag. We're sorry it will remind you of a shower gift. If your dead child had a brother or sister younger than three, you will need to tell them repeatedly their sibling has died. We recommend you say, *No, he's not in the hospital. No, he's not coming home. No, he's not going to be born again.* Say the words firmly, in the same tone every time, without tears. We are sorry for the additional pain this will cause. Good news: you can't OD on grief! If you chose to donate your child's organs, remember that his heart, liver, and kidneys will eventually die. If you are wondering whether the label, *Parent of a Dead Child*, is necessary, it is. Wear it conspicuously, so other parents will know to avoid your sorrow's contagion, so they won't think about their own children dying. We don't want a situation on our hands.

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[Chanel Brenner](#)

Look at our wide smiles, muscular legs, blond hair blowing in wind,

not my clenched jaw, tight neck muscles.

See grassy hills, yellow wildflowers, shades of blue,

not me dragging him away from the X-box.

Admire the ocean merging with sky,

not the fight in the car,

the sun-kissed earth,

not his complaints of being cold when he wouldn't wear a jacket,

our faces, radiant with dew,

not his car sickness.

See the trail's summit

not my fear of him falling off the cliff.

Like our heads tilted toward each other,

not someone shouting, "Smile, or else!"



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Thinnest Day of the Year

[Chanel Brenner](#)

When our older son died,
 I touched a tree to see if it was real.
 Six years later, on Halloween, my younger son turns
 the yard surreal, with Halloween zombie
 heads, severed feet, and tomb stones.
 The leaves on the neighbor's ficus blacken.
 Mold grows on our shower tile's grout.
 Canker sores fester in my mouth.
 When I drive my son to school, the parking lot
 is empty. *Where is everybody?*, he asks.
 A stranger's voice answers my husband's phone
 when I call him at the gym,
He wants me to tell you he's okay,
but there's been an accident.
 Home from the hospital, my husband
 limps up the steps to our house.
 I bring ice packs and pain killers
 to his resting place on our living room floor.
 Decapitated heads and bloodied necks
 glisten in the daylight, severed hands reach
 from earth, trying to pull themselves out.
 I catch my reflection in a store window.
 When did my skin become like ash?

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America

[Genevieve DeGuzman](#)

is on a mission to run me down.
 Behind the wheel it drives, speed
 demon tailgater tearing up
 asphalt, leaving curled ribbons
 of Vulcan on the road. We drift
 together, matching gaits, tread to
 tread. Headlights drilling the back
 of my head, tethering us like twin
 buoys, womb-tight. Overhead,
 Fanta orange horizons
 drip, and the Santa Anas boil
 down hillsides, those makers
 of meek wives stroking knives
 and ruffling my hair. The dangers here
 are hard to resist. Every hitchhiker's a cat
 purring its way onto your lap
 to strum picks into bare thighs.
 Yet it knows me, knows what's
 aerodynamic, what dives under my skin
 without a splash, withstands
 the gales and battering and drills
 extra holes in my belt, what
 lights up the dash and disturbs me
 into motes to salt mountain passes.
 Mile after mile the yellow lines
 pulse. I count them off in the dark
 peeling off of the yucca clerestory
 and dirt domes. Everything reveals
 its true state at ten and two o'clock,
 and I realize what I'd be without
 the chase and the devil
 winds, without the high beams
 in the mirror, herding me
 along this desert cosmic axis.
 What I'd be when America's mask
 unmask America.



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Larry Narron

Larry Narron's poems have appeared previously in *Switchback*, *Phoebe*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *Permafrost*, *Whiskey Island*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *The Boiler*, and other journals. They've been nominated for *Best of the Net* and *Best New Poets*. Originally from San Diego County, Larry currently lives in northern Michigan, where he serves as a literacy coach for elementary school students via AmeriCorps. He is the nonfiction editor of *Dunes Review*.

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Winter Formal

[Larry Narron](#)

under the blue
spell of the strobe-lit gym,
the basketball
court turned sweaty

palace. paper
snow dangles
just over the free
throw line, where

a dancer scans the grapes
of wrath on her phone.
purple rain bounces
to a forgotten

song from sophomore
year. the chorus in
the boys' bathroom: a blue
corsage in a urinal.



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Taylor Napolsky

Taylor Napolsky's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Deluge*, *Verdad*, *Small Po[r]tions*, *decomp*, and others. He lives in Seattle. Visit him on Twitter [@taylornapolsky](#).

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Most Part

[Taylor Napolsky](#)

My shift goes 10 to 5:30 working but \$12 an hour isn't cutting it. Ha ha nobody gives a fuck about that, I'm not the only one who earns \$12 an hour you know, do you realize what \$8 is worth to me shit that's almost an hour's worth of my time, my God, no wonder I don't eat out. Wouldn't it make a huge, huge difference if I got to ply myself in intellectual and creative practices rather than spend hours every week on banal frippery labor, but tell me what you think's best for me. Whatever you're the economics person and it's best just to have a free market and I'm not getting older every week. Who cares how other people get to spend their time. I know what I'm worth, which is about \$12. It's not such a big deal if my opinion's worthless because of my social status, or if that determines how I'm perceived like, get it, a lot of us been saying what a more esteemed person says and they get noticed more 'cause they're the one who said it which it isn't complicated I think we all recognize this for the most part, which it's weird to talk about. I get it!



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Vestige

[Taylor Napolsky](#)

My dad had just discovered Bukowski, and asked me if I'd heard of him. *Yes, sure, he's famous, but I haven't read him.* Then he wanted to bring me the book, bestow it on me, convinced that I'd like it. And you know what, he was probably right. *It's pretty cynical stuff,* he summed up. Okay but do I want this copy? Am I going to read it, and anyway I have a shortage of storage space. Plastic drawers. Shelving. Going through his bag, about twenty cases of earplugs were found, along with the one set he repeatedly used, revoltingly stained, should've been long-since tossed out. You may as well then, add the book to his luggage to bring home, but, thing is, I learned some of the pages are a sickly green with fungus. If Dad were here to gift it to me, I wouldn't accept. I've heard about the hell that is mold. I know how my room would nurture it.



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Be the Voyeur

[Taylor Napolsky](#)

There is a copy
of *Richard III*
to read, both for leisure
and because I'm using
it for a project.

At first, I
thought I could
finish it off in
a little over four hours.
This turned out to be wrong.

What I'm looking for
has no specificity.
Trails of particulates
littered within this ancient
perverse story.

Alternating between
tearing through it, and watching
a version on YouTube, with the
spatial noise between lines,
at speeches' peripheries.

Remember, there
are three
characters each with
the same
teasing name.



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Matty Layne Glasgow

Matty Layne Glasgow is a poet and MFA Candidate in Creative Writing & Environment at Iowa State University where he served as the Poetry Editor for Flyway. Matty's work has appeared or is forthcoming from journals here and there, including Muzzle Magazine, The Collagist, Rattle, Cosmonauts Avenue, and elsewhere. He is a Poetry Reader for The Adroit Journal who loves beautiful words and the people who write them.

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The Long Take: after Atonement

[Matty Layne Glasgow](#)

INT. BEDROOM N DAY

MOTHER, you lie on the hospital bed the nurse brought into our home when you could no longer rise. The midmorning sun veils your bedroom with a jaundiced filter. Yellow, pale, & ever-fading the last color you will know. I watch the rise & fall of your chest, listen to you exhale: the harsh fragility, the rattle of breath from your lungs, its slow release through your throat. My eyes are the camera, unblinking as they pan over your body, now eroded like the beaches of Dunkirk the evacuation of what life remains as we sit in the theater, our eyes fixed on the screen as Robbie makes his final march past slaughtered stallions, ash & smoke whispering around the distant ferris wheel. What remains of that beach knows only death, & it fills the screen before us. The camera cannot cut away. It follows the devastation: the men who cry like boys, the boys who die like men. I see your crusted mouth twitch. You must hear those brave boys singing on the shore: *Take from our souls the strain and stress*. Mother, listen, go toward their voices. *And let our ordered lives confess*. My eyes do not look away; I do not cut to the flowers littering your bedroom with sympathy. *The beauty of thy peace*. I do not cut to the pictures on your nightstand: you with FATHER, you with your two BOYS. *The beauty of thy peace*. Because that woman is a stranger to me now. Your body is the beach, but you are the song rattling within me. My eyes on your yellow-fleshed limbs, on your parched, open lips, on the sunken stillness of your emerald eyes, on your chest that does not rise.

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I Need to Tell You a Secret

[Matty Layne Glasgow](#)

I didn't read those sad stories when I was younger,
but I never left a line of poetry unsung on the page.

Poets know how to turn a phrase. They're efficient
lovers, know you've got to get to where you're going

& it's gonna be deep, & it's gonna be raw, & it's not
gonna take two weeks to finish because who has time

for that shit? Poems let the world turn on the page,
give me line breaks like revolutions that spin into

what I need. To tell you a secret might be just enough
to keep you here, so let me tell you about those dark

places we go to touch one another. How I hold him
in my hand, & on my tongue. How we do it because

it feels damn good, & we don't care who listens or
watches or reads between our broken lines. Let me

tell you another little secret: some stories don't end
how you want them to. Some stories are about the son

who watches his mama turn to ash before he's ready,
the son who tries to check out early, the son who takes

too many pills, about all the scars on his arms, & how
the nurse tells him they'll let him outta there soon, but

what's he gonna tell his kids about those scars someday?
Some stories don't even *start* the way you want them to,

so the son doesn't finish those stories. & here's a secret
about the son: he doesn't read the stories, but he sings

you every broken line because he knows time's not on
his side, & he wants to bring you with him in every lyric

because someday soon this world ain't gonna turn no
more. So there's your secret, how you gonna keep it?



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Lana Bella

Lana Bella is a three-time Pushcart Prize, five-time Best of the Net, & Bettering American Poetry nominee, *Lana Bella* is an author of three chapbooks, *Under My Dark* (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2016), *Adagio* (Finishing Line Press, 2016), and *Dear Suki: Letters* (Platypus 2412 Mini Chapbook Series, 2016), has had poetry and fiction featured with over 400 journals, *Acentos Review*, *Comstock Review*, *EVENT*, *Ilanot Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Rock and Sling*, & *The Lampeter Review*, among others, and work to appear in *Aeolian Harp Anthology, Volume 3*. Lana resides in the US and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam, where she is a mom of two far-too-clever-frolicsome imps.

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A Lingerin Wreckage

[Lana Bella](#)

Pale eyes settled into the roar
of gust across the wasteland;
fingers dragged up vertigo of
winter air like red calligraphy.
Your voice, a matte haunting,
took its time to throb slow and
sped black in the footlights, clefs
piled as sigils on mass graves.
A merest falling felled, you felt
too wrecked with the whistlings
of dark wood and beared music,
where only the exact sequence
of split breaths feathered long
the glacial eaves. Synaptic atoms
of broken bodies, you calloused
flow the liquid dawn, stiffened in
the flutes of knife-teeth silver mere.

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Amanda Gomez

Amanda Gomez is an MFA candidate in poetry and the Writers in Community (WinC) Coordinator at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. She has taught creative writing in Norfolk city public and private schools, and currently, she teaches creative writing at the Norfolk City Jail through the program, Humanities Behind Bars. Some of her works have been featured in Ekphrastic Review, Manchester Review, San Pedro River Review, Avalon Literary Review, Barely South Review, Writers Resist, and other journals.

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Second Opinion

[Amanda Gomez](#)

You tilt your head towards me asking: *What becomes of our bodies?*

With pleading enticement, I offer a Snickers in my hands.

You want a bite? I ask, evading the question. And your voice, more understanding than I expected, embraces a sadness

I don't understand. *No thanks*, you say and we continue our exchange: you layering your sweaters in your suitcase,

me softening my tongue against my palate, searching for words other than *terrified* and *afraid*. Instead, I say, *Absolutely* nothing

fucking happens. You're just going in for a second opinion. Quit talking about dying. How do you think I feel? Maybe get me some marijuana.



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Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega

Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega teaches contemporary poetry studies and American literature at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs. She lives in Colorado with her family.

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Without Ceremony or Ritual of My Own

[Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega](#)

I have been weaving together these maile leaves
without tools of ceremony or ritual of my own

at Hymn Sing, we sat back-to-back, our knees pulled up
and sang mostly Negro Spirituals without needing the hymnal

at L.Ös family Seder, bites in taupe mounds on the plate:
matzoh, horseradish, gefilte fish, my mouth in shock around these symbols

at sixteen, reaching for K. who had pulled me up
to communion during a wedding, I stood with no words before a priest

on his eighteenth birthday, your brother received the thin, brown-paper package
across the picnic table from your father and even your step-mother laughed

on the Vermont road at midnight, there were no cars when I snapped
a picture of you laying spread-eagle on the white lines

the women in your family grew their hair to their waists,
coiled it up at their necks for your wedding

on your shoulder, a pixie winks as you pull your hair aside, begin
to dance in the pulsing lights and you are not drunk, you are never drunk

what should have been bitter and sweet, savory and salt
I arrange on a plate: in small mounds sugar and flour, butter and chocolate.



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The Maile Leaf

[Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega](#)

At a Starbucks in San Diego, I
 overheard a woman witnessing
 to another and she said, "The Bible
 interprets itself," definitively, and the ocean
 was not in sight on this crowded corner but I
 would walk up the hill guided by palms
 later and there it would spread out
 a vision beyond and below the green
 quads and stoic campus so I remembered
 what came from the unseen
 across this ocean: the maile leaf
 dipped in gold and strung
 on a long chain, received
 twenty-five years ago with a card defining
 its significance, the fragrance
 repressed by solid sheen, suppleness
 encased in brittle curves.

Your parents

transported fresh maile lei
 for your crowning
 moments, always regal never
 "Smiley Miley" cute. Your gift
 to me, preserved across oceans and
 cultures by a Midas touch a reminder
 of your name as aura and bond: Maile
 as bridge and celebration.

I'm pounding these

metallic words with fingertips as mallets
 and worry the leaf
 within will be lost to you, invisible or
 replaced because remember that time I
 let J. read my journal and he
 returned it with analysis, graphs
 even charting my mood swings over
 months and drawing correlations and
 you called him an android?

What if

translation makes words more
 authentic the way I once heard
 that "Virgin" may have been more
 like "Maiden" and maybe or maybe not
 an actual virgin because slippery
 language is rolling out
 of our mouths over saliva and taste
 buds onto impermanent
 pages and what we hold on to
 might actually be arbitrary but we think
 it is the only defining thing
 like the maile leaf made
 souvenir and friendship pact.

I knew

I had to tell you because you
 are the expert on innuendo and double
 entendre when words lure while
 all mine do is blaspheme and I see
 the book between people on a metal table
 the lookout at the top of the hill

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the ocean beyond the street corners
the mallet in my hand
the solitary leaf around my neck
meaning so many things to so many people.



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Dreaming of Warienna Wright

[Amanda Gomez](#)

Growing up, my best friend's mom told us stories about wife-beating husbands, strangled corpses, and child abductions. It didn't help much either her husband was a cop. He kept her up to date with the latest crime patterns in the area: *Always have your keys in hand when walking to the car she'd say. Or if you're in a bad part of town stopped at a red light, don't wait for it to turn green. Just drive through. You're a sitting duck if not.* But the craziest advice was when she told us that if a man ever wrangled us into his car, to rip off a button, assuming we had one, and put in the ignition that way the key wouldn't fit, assuming we wouldn't be tied up or locked in the trunk, assuming the button fit the slot. So naturally, when I left home I binge-watched shows like *Law and Order:SVU* and *Shipped*. One night, lying on the couch at home, I caught a *60 minutes* episode about a Tinder date gone wrong. Warienna Wright, a girl my age, was trapped on the 14th floor balcony. Trying to escape her date, she attempted to climb over the rail. Reach the neighbor below. But drunk, she slipped and fell. Technically, yes, he didn't kill her, but if that's the last resort to safety, it might as well be murder. The best part: he recorded the entire night: his phone tucked in his chest pocket. When asked by the reporter why he would do such a thing, he said: *I can't remember what happens when I drink. I was protecting myself in case she made a false claim of rape.* What he doesn't say: he gave her a red necklace with his hands. When her body reached the morgue, they found a snip of her jeans lodged in her skull: evidence her body bent in half, as if she hugged herself mid-air to reach the safest place she could before death.



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Dun Flank Narrows

[Lana Bella](#)

Reduced to a plodding
crawl that went,
and went, nowhere,
he feasted on too many
skies and bled vellum
of ruddy dye. Ghost-light
combed the cast-back
rain where fear clothed
in panic carapace,
foul drinks coaxed out
from pelican throat.
A hundred in the shade
and he thought of swamp
water, mud in hands,
mouth of sand, sweat rust
over dun-flank narrows.
Instead, he filled the abyss
to get closer to home,
gauzy abdomen clung to
wasps' bites, gaze flattened
out to cleft, pale woods,
blinded by ceremonies of
stars drummed well
into dusk's latticework,
until stillness gave shape
to what felt through
moss, and tucked him
in like every hand cradled
that dish of ravine earth.

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Eleanor Levine

Eleanor Levine's writing has appeared in more than 50 publications, including *Fiction*, *Evergreen Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Dos Passos Review*, *Hobart*, *Juked*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *Pank*, *The Toronto Quarterly*, *SRPR (Spoon River Poetry Review)*, *Wigleaf*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *The Breakwater Review*, *Artemis*, *The Forward*, *(b)OINK*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Gertrude*, and *Bull (Men's Fiction)*; forthcoming work in *Willard & Maple* and *YES Poetry*. Levine's poetry collection, *Waitress at the Red Moon Pizzeria*, was published by Unsolicited Press.

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Mamie Gold was menacing.

She chased me all over the beach when we were three.

At five she called me *ÒSalami* in Hebrew school, though my name was *ÒShulamit*.

At 10 she was reading Simone de Beauvoir and tried to explain what a feminist was in European style.

By 16 she had crushes on boys and chased my friend Max with her bicycle in the Foodtown parking lot. We were more frightened of her on the bike than other car drivers or pedestrians because she traipsed over suburbia as if she were in a rocket.

*

Before she went off to study math in college, Mamie and I did not talk senior year in high school.

Indeed, I had more feelings for her when I wasn't talking with her than when I was.

Mamie delivered, rather than participated, in extensive conversations that included a voracious laugh loud enough to swallow you alive.

ÒSalami, she'd whisper in the girls' bathroom during Hebrew school, *Òyou pee in a very existential manner.*

ÒWhat?

ÒAs you urinate, you experience it.

She made me squirm and I left the bathroom quickly, sometimes not washing my hands.

*

When I went to summer camp, she wrote me biblical texts, much like her exponential monologues about feminists or boys she liked.

She was particularly fixated on a kid called *ÒIt*, whom she accused of stalking her. They were neighbors, and before everyone on their street became Hasidic, which is the present tense situation, Mamie and *ÒIt* lived across from one another in a perfect state of irreligiosity.

ÒIt was also my buddy and whenever we got together he laughed heartily about Mamie and other kids who comprised the *I want to get into Harvard cult*.

*

ÒDear Salami, Mamie began letters she sent to my Zionist socialist camp, which she called *ÒConcentration Camp*.

ÒHope you are having a good time at Concentration Camp. It was out this morning waiting for me. I think he might ask me to his Junior Prom.

Then she'd give an expansive thesis on how *ÒIt's* persistence would eventually get him in trouble after her father in whom she never spoke with filed a complaint.

ÒIt, who was my friend, was a genius at math and never mentioned Mamie on an erotic level, so I was confused

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by her pronouncements. In fact, the only time ÔtÔ reacted to sexual matters was when we walked along the boardwalk with Max, and I announced to much of Seaside, New Jersey, at the custard stand, ÔMax! I want to have your baby!Ô ÔtÔ was in tears, giggling by the time MaxÔs face turned a radish color.

*

I saw Mamie in a dream last night, and she was quite furious with me.

It was reminiscent of the time I called her after our tenth high school reunion, which she did not attend, though she sent her biography for the class reunion publication: ÔAm a statistician for an obscure Chicago magazine where I turn derivatives into variables.Ô This was too complex for me, so I moved onto the football player, who, after being kicked off the Penn State team, was now a woman making hosiery in Brussels.

Most people in our high school would not have remembered Mamie except as a spidery creature whose webs fell when she walked. Others, like my friend Beth, who was in MamieÔs honors classes, feared that ÔMÔ was mildly radioactive.

I dialed her number.

ÔHi, is this Mamie?Ô

ÔWhoÔs this?Ô

ÔSusan Ryman. Remember?Ô

ÔWhy are you calling me?Ô

ÔWhy wouldnÔt I be calling you?Ô

ÔYou said terribly mean things to Max about me and your libeling has precluded him from sleeping with me.Ô

ÔSo, you donÔt want me to call you anymore?Ô

She hung up. It was worse than the time John F. Kennedy, Jr., hung up on me at Brown University.

Getting hung up on is never a good experience, so I phoned again.

ÔtÔs all your fault!Ô Mamie screamed as I listened from the rotary phone, which would eventually be pulled out of the wall by a neighboring Hasidic Jew weÔd sell the house to in 2011, which infuriated my brother K, who thought the Hasidic Jew had no respect for us or our phone.

ÔMy fault?Ô

ÔThat Max got married to someone else. You said horrible things about me.Ô

ÔWhatÉ?Ô

ÔListen,Ô she continued, ÔI donÔt know how you got my numberÉ. *clickÉ*Ô

*

I do remember the first time they met.

MaxÔs house was next to the golf course. Mamie, not knowing who we were going to visit, excitedly rang the doorbell.

Max soon thereafter delivered a sanctimonious lecture on Tom Waits and Elvis Costello. Mamie was enthralled.

Max too (though he didnÔt want us to know) relished the curves of MamieÔs diminutive body. There were many

lads, some burnouts, who fantasized about Mamie when she visited their sistersÑtheyÔd stare at her in the

kitchen.

*

MamieÔs bicycle escapades began in the summer. She knew the approximate times that Max did shopping for his mom, and because her house was only two blocks from the store, sheÔd rush over and hide behind Dairy Queen or Foodtown.

Mamie was not the kind of girl you wanted to cross whether she was an adult or prepubescent. She could make tiger lilies shriek or thermometers reach new and insurmountable levels.

You could feel Mamie's threadbare gazes during French class, when she snarled at the nasalization of consonants by our teacher Mr. Flame. His mispronunciations caused turmoil in Mamie's soul as she believed him to be butchering an ancient language.

Mamie was most mortified when Mr. Flame introduced the past tense because it reminded her of how I had fucked up her relationship with Max.

To be honest, I had merely introduced them on his front porch near the golf course. Okay, maybe I had said, "Max, she's on LSD without taking it," or "Max, when Mom and I take her to the mall, she bumps against me."

There was veracity in evil and it was Mamie fuming when I passed in the hall.

Mamie still fumes, but this time in the imagination, when she tries to hang out with me, because she's home during college, in the summer.

*

In college, her life would become immensely better. But here, in Lakewood, across from it, she wrestled with French feminists, her father, and not leaving the house much, except when the school bus came.

Though my father was a teacher and her father owned a button store, the Mamies were wealthier than we, unlike the other residents, didn't travel much in the summer, except when I went to socialist Zionist camp in June.

In July, I'd hang with Mamie.

"Hi," I said to Mamie's mother at their door. We'd never met before. I didn't know she was bald. In synagogue Mrs. Mamie had hair.

Mamie's house smelled like a funeral home after a fire. Everything was old, including her family.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Susan. Here to see Mamie."

"Just a minute," she said, slamming the door.

Mamie came down a few minutes later.

"Back from Concentration Camp already?" she asked. No one laughed at Mamie's jokes except Mamie.

*

Mamie was the opposite of Hannah Q whom everyone had a crush on, even girls in suburbia who hadn't spoken with her in 40 years.

They all rushed to be friends with her on Facebook.

Last night, in a nightmare, Hannah Q moved a block away from me, where my old neighborhood became Princeton, NJ, with paved sidewalks, omnipresent coffee shops, and a few communist groups springing up.

Hannah Q was a poetry editor.

She accepted my poems for a literary journal at William and Mary, where she attended college.

Hannah Q was reluctant to make corrections, though I emailed that she needed to correct the spaces and remove typos, which she had introduced.

Hannah Q felt that making such corrections would cause problems for her journal deadline.

A young boy, who wore Ted Baker shirts he purchased on eBay and lived on her block, also had his work accepted.

He and I went to Hannah Q's dorm room, which she shared with other people who were far above my socioeconomic status, that is, the people who were not born in but now lived in my neighborhood.

Unlike Mamie's family, which was fallen aristocracy, that is, they lived in a burned-out house that was bound to self-immolate through fire or bed bugs, Hannah Q et al had shag rugs and Fresca in their fridge. Also, cold cans of sliced peaches. Whereas Mamie had bottles of expired gefilte fish that the homeless in Fincastle, Virginia, wouldn't eat.

Hannah Q had brothers who were delectable and judicious and only attended elite schools and once threw rocks

at me while I delivered newspapers. Marnie's brothers had jobs on Wall Street, before the market collapsed, and we suspected they might have engineered that.

Hannah Q was kinder, better looking, but more elusive than Marnie. Given the choice, one would prefer Hannah Q's breasts to Marnie's. For Hannah was sweeter, more scrumptious.

Hannah Q, who would have been great as a human milk manufacturer, didn't want to publish me in her journal though she liked my poetry. She concluded that I place my work in a blog.

"We'd like to use you," she said, "but we can't."

"But you sent me an acceptance letter!"

"Now it's the blog. Either that or not," she insisted.

I emailed her, informed her, that I would never put my poetry in a blog if she had originally promised William and Mary's literary journal.

Plus, she hadn't made the corrections.

This morning, after my Hannah Q bad dream ended, I looked at her Facebook profile: she is blank, and slightly less creative than Marnie, who had a photograph of a disheveled raccoon as her profile pic. Whereas I look like a dyke with my hat flipping back and forth like those "Neolution" creatures in *Orphan Black*.

*

The nightmare about Hannah Q kept flashing on my screen at work.

There was a pervasive darkness in the neighborhood where Hannah Q held an encampment of men who wanted to sleep with her.

One of the boys said she was as old as me and had no boyfriend. That is always a possibility for me—no boyfriend, no girlfriend, and likes to be alone.

Hannah Q looked the same: thin, ponytail, white, Ecuadorian, and a metaphysical countenance that even Stalin lacked.

Hannah would sit with Amy Z when we were in sixth grade.

Nobody but Felicia Diaz, a big Puerto Rican girl who smelled like bologna sat with me.

"Mrs. Goldstein told us to sit with you because you have no friends," Hannah and Amy, who were cheerleaders, told me.

"Will you be able to use this experience in an essay contest?" I asked them.

They ate tuna sandwiches.

Hannah was also a goody two shoes with PF Flyers made by smug human rights activists in Berkeley, California, where she had gone to graduate school to study pleurisy, before she accepted my poems.

*

None of my love interests, including Hannah Q, were like Anna R.

I knew her phone number.

I called her.

Anna R was more intriguing than lipids.

More lip-smacking than pot pie.

More compelling than a classics poet trying to decipher modernist poetry.

She was frequently in the elementary school parking lot, doing yoga, expecting me to transpose my mind into her book.

Sometimes she read good books. Other times she laughed like a daffodil too silly to fall in love.

After I graduated college I read that Anna R had gotten married and I was thrilled to speak with her, but quite remorseful after the conversation.

"Hi," I said.

ÒWho is this?Ó

Anna R recognized my voice.

ÒYouÕre still alive?Ó she giggled. She hadnÕt heard from me since the time I defended her honor against prickly big shots in fifth grade. IÕd still have defended Anna RÕs honor had she not been so asinine. ÒAsinineÓ transforms eclectic chicks who were once beauty queens in elementary school into inarticulate ladies who shop at Whole Foods and make snubbing/squeaking/grunting noises like primates if you veer too close to them in the strawberry section. In fact, some of these ladies have Òservice primatesÓ because they have neurological difficulties, which prevent them from loading items into carts. The monkeys are trained to help, though sometimes they eat the fruit before it gets into the basket.

Inarticulate ladies, however, give you more room to breathe than Marnies.

Marnies are insufferable, whereas Anna R and Hannah Q types dismiss trifles such as boredom and make you feel as if there is room, even a possibility, that sleeping with them wonÕt divest your soul of enzymes.

*

But my incubus revealed that I was more likely to sleep with Pee Wee Herman if he were Hitler than Nicole Kidman if she were Eva Braun. You may not know that Marnie is the future Hitler, but her accessibility makes it so.

People such as Marnie, who were likely Hitler in a previous existence, which makes them excellent candidates as Hitler in their next existence, are so available and easy to sleep with me because they are the only ones who will.

Others, who have green hair and soft dispositions, who laugh loudly at Zyklon B jokes and make reference to your inability to be paranoid, are likely to leave you despondent in a motel room.

Because those fleeting moments with Hannah Q and Anna R were transparently unreal, I shall return to the wonder zone of Marnie and recall how one day, while babysitting for a teacher who claimed to have been part of the French Revolution, we, that is, me and Marnie, were almost molested in his Chevrolet.

This was the same person who tried to have sex with his wifeÕs colleagues.

Females always know when a man is trying to rape them, whether these men do so in the ice cream parlor or the cannoli shop.

Eventually said females will discuss how said perv tried to ply their virginity in a phone booth, and how they screamed so loud, that instead of physically abusing them, he verbally fucked them over.

In this case, he was not a looker, nor was his wife, but he was the man who was supposed to transport me back and forth from my house, in his Chevrolet, to babysit his daughter, who would later become a drug addict and change her name to Cannabis.

*

We were in his car, Marnie and I, when he scrutinized us in the rearview mirror.

Neither of us wanted to sit in the front seat with him, least of all Marnie, who speculated that he should be on a Sex OffenderÕs List long before New Jersey passed MeganÕs Law.

ÒDracula is picking me up this evening,Ó I said to Marnie, Òbecause I have to babysit his daughter. I need you to come over.Ó

Dracula, the perv car driver, was not okeydokey when he saw *two of us* leave my purple-shingled house.

He was not expecting James Joyce or any of the characters from *Dubliners*. He was, however, envisioning just me, my knee, my ability to say nothing, his ability to extend his hand.

Dracula was a landed gentleman in our town.

His family owned a plumbing agency that specialized in draining unquenchable prunes from the drainer.

World over, and even in *RipleyÕs Believe it or Not*, his family was known for plumbing feats that surpassed the average plumber.

They didnÕt ÒplumbÓ themselves, though their father, Dracula Senior, was so proficient in plumbing he hired numerous liberal arts majors from the tristate area. The only requirement was that you have a slightly intimate

knowledge of the quirky and bitchy prose of Erasmus.

“What is she doing here, goddamnit?” he pointed to Mamie.

“She’s my friend.”

“You need a babysitter assistant?” he queried.

“No, Drac, er, Mr. Pluñheyñl forgot your name,” I said.

“You don’t know my goddamn name and you’re babysitting my daughter?”

I looked at Mamie, and Mamie looked at me, and Dracula made shrill noises. We stopped at the corner of my street.

“Excuse me,” Mamie said, slightly nervous, “would you please let us out?”

“Excuse me?” he countered.

“Please let us out at the corner.”
Before Dracula could turn on the children’s lock on the car door, we jumped out of the Chevrolet.

Mamie took my hand and we ran to my house.

It was like when Max and I, in his car, drove fearfully away from Mamie on the bike, but this time I didn’t look back.



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Scott Bakula

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Betty switched off the old RCA television during the CBS Tuesday night promo reel and then watched Clifford's reflection in the blank screen. Her husband glanced up from his seat in the dining room and then returned to his important business. These were their typical interactions after dinner. Betty would sit in her recliner with a show on in the background and fill out daily crossword puzzles while Clifford built models. He had spent the past ten years of their retirement together building models, sitting silently at the dining room table behind her, gluing together tiny boats and airplanes, their wet paint dripping onto her old newspapers.

He was painting a model of the *Scharnhorst*, a great big ship that sank during a great big battle a hundred years ago. At least that's what Betty remembered from Clifford's explanation. When he first brought the model home she had nicknamed it the USS *Charlie Horse*, which made her laugh, but Clifford grimaced and explained that the ship wasn't American, so the prefix "USS" made no sense. He told her the little battle ship was one-seventy-second scale, meaning the wreck lying upside down a thousand feet underwater was seventy-two times larger than the model in his hands. Betty imagined all the little sailors like mites marching around on the plastic deck, seventy-two times smaller than grown men.

She folded up the newspaper on her lap and waited for Clifford to say something, anything, but he let the awkward silence persist. She didn't know what to do with him. These Wednesday nights were especially boring and played-out. First the late service at church, then eating whatever she made for supper, then sitting with Clifford and ignoring whatever was on TV for a couple hours before turning in. Tomorrow would be about the same, but Betty felt like having a conversation with her husband, visiting at least, speaking. She pondered what they might talk about, and then what they would never talk about.

"If you could let anyone have their way with you, who would it be?" she asked. Clifford cleared his throat and asked what she had just said.

"I know you can hear me," said Betty. "The TV's off."

"And will you turn it back on, please?"

"How about you put your boat down for two minutes. Let's not be boring for once."

Clifford sighed at her. He was always sighing like characters in the mystery novels she used to take out of the library, before holding a book made her fingers sore, like opening a medicine bottle or folding laundry or doing ponyes in her granddaughter's hair.

"Please ask me something else," Clifford said, and then, "Can't you just turn the TV on?"

Why was this so hard for him? Men were always looking around, even men like Clifford. He had claimed to Betty that she was his first on their wedding night, but that didn't mean he no longer had eyes on the front of his head. After Betty waited a while, Clifford slouched in his chair and finally said Elizabeth Taylor, and after some hesitation Ann-Margret part of the time. Betty scoffed at him.

"Obviously," she said. "But I mean nowadays, not back when you were diddling yourself at thirteen."

"Good Lord," said Clifford, "Is this about something I said this week?" But Betty sat without turning to face him. For someone who spent his retirement building and painting things, Clifford sure wasn't very creative. Any man his age would have said Elizabeth Taylor and Ann-Margret part of the time. What was that supposed to mean?

"Just tell me," Betty said. She watched Clifford scrunch his face in the TV screen and set the

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Schamhorst down on the newspapers.

“What for?”

“At this point,” said Betty, “I just want to hear if you can answer a simple question.”

“Fine,” he said and thought about it. “How about the girl from that street racing picture you had on the other day?”

“That doesn’t help,” said Betty. She turned in her chair to look at Clifford directly, but he wouldn’t meet her eyes, looking down at the table instead. She knew he was worked up. His whole head had turned red.

“I don’t know,” Clifford said. “One of those newer ones, with that bald guy from *Saving Private Ryan*.”

“No, that doesn’t mean a thing to me,” said Betty.

“There’s more than one of them,” Clifford said. “It’s the sequel I’m talking about.” Betty considered the last time she’d seen a racing film since watching *Herbie Goes to Monte Carlo* with her grandchildren. She didn’t remember.

“Who’s the bald guy?” Betty asked.

“I don’t know exactly. He has a short name,” Clifford said. “Van.” He snapped his fingers. “Vin Diesel. That’s him.”

“I have no idea who that is,” said Betty.

“It’s that *Fast and Furious* deal,” Clifford said. “I remember. The second one. Part two.” Then she remembered something from TV with close-ups of women’s bottoms and quivering car-engines and quite a bit of money and guns and drugs. She’d forgotten the actors.

“But you don’t know this girl’s name.”

“You’re putting me on the spot,” Clifford said.

“Oh, please,” said Betty as she waved her hand at him. “How can I put you on the spot in your own house?” She faced the TV again, the family portraits and vacation landscapes in the lamplight framed on yellowish paisley wallpaper. “If you can’t remember her name you can at least tell me what you’d let her do to you.”

Clifford clasped both hands to his face. “What the hell has gotten into you?” he said.

“Come on. This would be easy for a lot of men,” said Betty. She wanted to remind Clifford of how often it had been easy for him to at least call her pretty when they started going steady, but then she realized these moments didn’t exist anywhere in her memory.

“I don’t see what’s so important about it,” he said.

“What’s the harm in telling me?” asked Betty. “I’m not looking for reasons to leave you.”

“Longer marriages have ended over less.”

“Oh really,” said Betty. “What marriages?”

“I give up,” Clifford said. “Eva Mendez. And Michelle Rodriguez in the same one. And Salma Hayek, alright? I’d let them tie me up and do anything. Whatever they wanted. Is that good enough?” Betty watched Clifford in the TV screen. Eva Mendez, Michelle Rodriguez, Salma Hayek. She knew them. There seemed to be a common denominator though, which she did not fit.

“There appears to be a common denominator here,” she said, but Clifford ignored her. He’d gone back to work on the USS *Charlie Horse*, poking at the model with his little paintbrush, painting patches of rust and oil streaks seventy-two times smaller than real grime to give the ship its dirty and used look.

Betty switched on CBS and sat through the promo for their Tuesday night lineup again. Clifford spoke up during the spot for *NCIS: New Orleans*.

“Hold on a second,” he said. “Now it’s your turn.” She picked an actor from one of the commercials and said his name in her head over and over again, ready to speak it aloud for Clifford, but the true answer sat at the tip of her tongue. That younger man from next door, jogging through the neighborhood, grilling in his backyard on Sundays. He wore pink polo shirts and took his kids to school in a Ford Windstar. Betty sat for a moment and then turned up the TV volume. She knew better than to tell one man what she would let another man do to her.

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Raised in the South, Christopher X. Shade now lives in New York City. Over twenty of his stories have appeared in publications; recently Gravel, Timber Journal, Quarterly West, Steel Toe Review, and Word Riot. He has a short story collection in circulation, as well as a novel set in Marseille, France.

His book reviews have appeared widely. He teaches fiction and poetry writing at The Writers Studio. Until recently he was an editor of Epiphany, a print literary journal. He is co-founder of Cagibi, a literary journal at cagibilit.com.

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Drive

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He looked everywhere for her. In his '73 Super Beetle, he drove to her parents' big yellow house on Humboldt Street, jogged up the porch steps, knocked on the door, panted, waited—no answer. At the side of the house around back where the gravel drive led to the garage, he knocked on the privacy fence gate. The pool's smell was in the air. It was a clean smell, a translucent smell, a clear sunlight smell on her wet skin and on her one-piece after swimming while she lay with her face to the sun in the tortoise shell sunglasses. Behind which he could not see, but he knew somehow that she pretended to have closed eyes when she was in fact regarding him through her lashes still moist, with tiny water beads. There was the sound of agitated bees in the air—it was the pool's dragging pump.

He drove to her favorite place with trees, not Cheesman Park as one might guess—Cheesman was nearby, but a neighborhood away—instead, just north of busy 1st Avenue, her favorite place with trees was a nameless strip of green where neighborhood residents might walk after a meal, or take their dog. Grass and dandelions and other weeds had been thinned by joggers cutting through, by the rare family picnic blanket, by raucous children, by dogs jumping for thrown tennis balls and by lovers like him and her, holding hands, leaning with her back against an old oak so that he might kiss her, and then together sliding to sit in the shade on the fat roots and dirt and weeds to plan great and impossible things: She wanted to be a dancer. She thought she might paint. She would be a Lee Krasner in a wintry countryside cottage. She wanted to cure cancer. She was certain it was possible, anything was possible; it wasn't at all like her father had told her, that she should finish at the university and probably meet someone there and, as a result, everything would get figured out—no, she would figure it out, she would not resign to the fate of a great passage of time. The time was now, more urgently than ever.

She would race cars. Those cars were cute, she was petite. She would easily fit inside.

Great people were waiting for her. When she arrived, they would know that she belonged, they would see at once that she'd always belonged.

He drove to her high school, Cherry Creek HS—he didn't know why. There was no reason he could think of why she'd evacuate to such a place, but he was looking everywhere. He slid the Beetle to a halt and rushed the front doors—closed, locked, secured with a chain and padlock. At the football field, he climbed over the fence. Sprinklers in the grass hissed and ticked. He dodged spray as he hastily searched the bleachers, everywhere, imagining her there, so clearly, imagining her everywhere there, a younger her in oranges and browns and corduroy, but in fact she was not there, it was barren land. He'd never been with her there. She probably had no fond memories of the place. He climbed back over the fence, hurting his ankle in the jump down on the other side, and sped away in the Beetle.

At her church where he went with her on Sunday mornings, sometimes with her mother, less often with her father in town—her church where he'd imagined one day they might be married, he got in front of two white-

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haired ladies kneeling in a pew. Neither of these were her and he lifted aside the curtain of the vacant confessional and he looked in at the sacristy, startled by a scarecrow of vestments. She had told him she would be adored. She would not be mean. She would be a church-going Christian. She would be familiar with the Bible and know more than the few verses she knew, like Isaiah 40:31, the one about flying eagles.

She would be someone who did not look back. She would be erudite. When she'd told him this, he had no idea what this word meant, and when he looked it up later he couldn't find it, he couldn't guess the spelling of the word, he had to give it up. She would learn languages. She would travel. She would see France, all the way to Cassis. Her grandmother had visited Cassis in 1978, and she had her grandmother's Cassis map that had become delicate over the years of folding and unfolding. She'd pointed to things on the map: She would sunbathe on the *Plage de la Grande Mer*. She would dine in the old port on the *Quai des Baux*. She would visit the old church *Saint Michel*.

She would work in the movie industry. Her grandfather had told her so. Her grandfather had said he could tell, he said, there was something about the way she stood at a window. Even as young as she was, there was something about the way her eyes did not quite look at the same point in space, though they in fact did, but he said it struck him that hers were movie star eyes. These many years later she insisted she *would* be in movies. She would work magic on and off screen.

She had said she would be with him. She would always be with him. They would marry even if someone said they shouldn't but who would say they shouldn't? Who might say she shouldn't marry him? Her father who had asked him, *Could he close a deal?* Her sensible aunt Colleen? Her uncle Mike who had worked in Dustoff's in Vietnam and who had asked him, *What were his plans, What did he want to do really, and Why not finish at the university? Why not finish something?*

She had told him they would make a future for themselves, a future brighter than anyone would expect, something to change the world. That's how important it was for her to be with him.

He went to the Park Hill café where they'd gone together in the early days, to their usual outside table, a memory so vivid it seemed like yesterday. He got in front of two women sitting there his heart pounding so hard he felt it in his head because he was startled by the image of her, but only an image, neither of these were her, she was not one of these. That first day here with her he'd been so flustered, so astonished to be in her presence, it seemed an undue privilege. He couldn't talk, he couldn't comprehend the menu. She had to order for him. She ordered him a sandwich and something else he discovered when it arrived to be an orange soda from overseas it was clear, and it was cold and clean in his mouth and throat. When they were leaving the table, he put so much money down that she widened her eyes at him and then picked it all up, counted it, shaking her head, and then she said it was very kind of him but was it really necessary? She slid some of the bills across to him. Take it, she said when he didn't move because, in the state he was in, he didn't have a grasp of what he'd done and she said, *You can't afford to be so kind.*

She'd said she spent most of her time listening to records and what she liked second-most was looking at album covers like Sonny & Cher's *Look At Us* with those two in the crook of a tree that looked like it could've been a tree in Colorado, maybe up past Boulder, before there was so much snow, on the way to Estes Park, a tree alone on a farm somewhere. She said, *That's just where it might've been.*

He went to the Sixth Avenue café where their usual table was inside at a window with a view of the changing leaves or the snow, and he walked, still limping, all through the place but she was not to be found there. He sat at their table where, one day in particular, they'd had hot tea and held hands across the table and then she'd asked him, *Why were his hands always so cold?* She withdrew her own hand. She told him to put his

hands around the teacup like she did: elbows on the table, the cup in both hands, her eyes watching him over the brim. And so he picked up his teacup in both hands and put his elbows up on the table and looked at her. He asked, Now what?

Now, she said, come closer in your chair, now we wrap our legs together under the table.

As they did this, he nearly spilled his tea.

Careful, she said, Now let's put our arms across. Put your tea on the other side of mine. Don't spill it on me.

I haven't yet.

There we are.

He asked, Now what?

She said, Now we sip the other person's tea.

This is elaborate. Are you comfortable?

She said, Yes, I really am. Are you?

We've tied ourselves in a knot.

But the knot loosened over time, over days and weeks, in the gradual way that these things do, in moments of odd words and misunderstandings, and, then, in his shocking, dreadful error of causing a tear in the fold of her grandmother's Cassis map. It was his pulling open the map the wrong way that had caused the tear. It made no sound when it tore, the only sound was her quiet moan, and then she grabbed the map from him. He was left with his hands in the air holding nothing. He said he was sorry, he didn't know how it had happened, it had come apart in his hands. But she was so upset, she would not respond.

He suffered days apart from her and spent countless hours in the car, both hands on the wheel, trying to drive through new and different streets.

He asked her out again, and set out to entertain her. He made her laugh. He'd known that this would bring her back, and it had, but it hadn't, not really.

At last, he turned the Beetle toward home. He returned it to the garage. He pulled the garage door up, drove in, and then pulled it down on his way back to the house. On the porch he knocked the dirt from his boots and went in the house. Just inside, he unlaced his boots, pulled them off and stood them on the mud rug as his wife Nora called it, or the ugly rug as she sometimes called it, or the washing machine rug because it could be found there when it was missing from the entryway. But it wasn't missing. Everything was, after all, where it should be.

Nora called from the front room, "Where have you been, Maurice?"

He said, "I went for a drive."