

Weird Fiction for Weird People

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Editorial

A friend of mine, who is in a band, and much cooler than I am, sometimes talks about something called 'tour fatigue'. Magazine editors get something a bit less glamorous, which I've dubbed 'screen fatigue'; it feels like carpal tunnel alongside caffeine withdrawal. As I write this, the text on my screen is beginning to blur. I may as well be watching traffic.

Unfortunately for me, though, Empty Oaks won't let me stop and go to bed. It has taken on a life of its own recently, and it's much more wilful than I am. Ideas seem to pop up in my head like molehills; inexplicable, but impossible to ignore.

We always knew that a niche publication like this one would be a shy beast, slow to make friends. The friends we have made, though, seem to be friends for life, and the number of returning contributors we've had, as well as the enthusiasm of our new contributors, readers and staff, can testify to this. Empty Oaks is going cult. We're like that beardy band that no-one else has heard of, that when you meet another fan you find yourself wanting to move in with them.

But secretly, we're ambitious. The last few months have seen Empty Oaks take on a new staff member, myself interviewed on the Six Questions For blog, and Layla enter us into the Pushcart Prize indie fiction awards. New molehills, new ideas, appear every morning. An Empty Oaks eBook, an Empty Oaks publishing a collective, a series of themed issues...

Excuse me. I have to get back to work.

-Ro

Moment by Moment

by Walter Balerno

I grew up in Scotland where I rode my bike a lot, waited in the underpass for rain showers to end, wrote stories in school jotters, and painted pictures of my cat and other things. After deciding I had too little talent to attend art school I studied philosophy at Edinburgh University because I felt it was both interesting and unlikely to lead to a traditional job. I've always read science fiction and written my own stories, but until the last couple of months I've never bothered to submit them anywhere so unfortunately I don't have an impressive list of previous publications to woo you with. Yet.

Here I stand, Solace Bathgate, tall and gentle on the ice. In this bleak and suggestive space, thousands of the dead hover beneath us in a crystalline pattern. The clarity of the ice and the winter sun combine to afford us this vertiginous view of the deep. A noise shoots through the ice. I turn to find Dan trembling at the sound.

“Dan. It’s frozen solid all the way to the bottom. You can’t fall in.” He’s an idiot. The others look on, unsurprised.

More than thirty years ago I would desperately try to avoid sharing the exact moment I woke up with millions of others by setting my alarm for odd times. One day it might be 6.34, the next 7.09. I didn’t want to be the same as everybody else. Now, here are thousands who chose to die together at the same time, sharing their grief in what I assume was an effort to transform it into something noble.

Yost, whose nose I admire for its mountainous profile, wonders out loud. “How did they distribute themselves at different depths? Did this entire body of water freeze at the same time?”

“Perhaps they had different degrees of buoyancy. Maybe they all floated but tied themselves at different depths with thin wires or strings we can’t see. Whatever it was, they made quite an effort to create this scene.”

A thin mist circulates a few centimetres above the ice, snaking around our ankles in the thankfully light wind. No doubt it accumulated due to the steep hills on each side of this frozen

lake. The hills are covered with short dark green trees all the way to the top, the white sky flat behind. I am disturbed by the landscape although I see the beauty in it.

It is almost completely silent now. Even careful footsteps across the ice have ceased, all eyes searching below. People just like them forever suffering a fate they themselves fear.

“Let’s get moving again before our feet freeze.” I’m an unlikely leader but right now I know the mood has deteriorated and we need to change the scenery.

* * *

Thirty years ago my narcissistic clients talked incessantly about themselves and called it ‘information’. No. Information is when you see a small story on the internet about some weird microbe causing havoc with the ecosystem in Indonesia. Information is important.

Before long we learned that the microbe was just one in a chain of different microbes working like a production line. It was odd to discover these biological factories out of the blue, astonishing to find their DNA was different to anything else ever seen on our planet. The world was rocked not by the question of whether they were of alien origin or home grown artificial life forms, but by the realisation that these voracious microbes might change our world before we could do anything about it. Soon other miniature invaders were discovered smuggling their exobiology into our ecosystem.

It was all explained to us in serious tones by men in suits: “These hyper efficient organisms evolve faster than us and spread like wildfire so we have to adapt to the new environment rather than try to eliminate the invaders.” They planned to engineer the next humans but nothing could be done to ensure the rest of us remained viable in the new world.

It was with horror that I and billions of others realised our golden years were already behind us. We faced extinction. Life, viewed in its entirety, had become worthless. Now I see it like mathematical integration; if I stack every insignificant slice of time on top of the next I will make them amount to something.

Millions of others chose to make their own exit from this life. It started with bleak private moments but became infectious as stories spread. It was a movement, a comfort, and later a cult. Some made it an art form. Their last act a creative destruction like our brothers and sisters in the ice.

The new humans were issued and although initially small in number, these children represented our future. But they were clever, strong and agile beyond their years and people who had just spawned normal children feared their progeny would become second class citizens. We remembered the fate of the poor Neanderthals.

But we are worse off, our genes incompatible with the new humans.

We're heading south to warmer climes and from the top of the hill I can see the valley where we'll pitch our tents tonight. The short trees with their bulbous little waxy leaves, their purple undersides like heather from a distance, carpet the land in all directions, broken only by the occasional yellow patch of the peppery and mildly psychedelic flowers we use as a garnish on our food. These are the moments of beauty I live for now.

* * *

The sincerity of their goodwill towards us was absolutely unquestioned. It came as such a shock to find they didn't give a fuck. They lived amongst us, the poor, with no remorse. We couldn't compete with them and we knew our fate already. Many of us chose to leave the cities and wander the land until our last days.

The new flora and fauna are amazingly nutritious so gathering food takes very little time. We occasionally cook meat on the fire but most of our diet is raw. All we need is shelter, warmth and company. We tell stories and look at the stars.

* * *

"I don't usually know what a story is going to be about until I'm in the middle of it or maybe even the end. The inspiration is often just a random thought that I hope will transform into something along the way. This one started out as a science fiction story but it became a story about a group of outcasts wandering the world. A big story that turned into a small personal one.

The ugliest part of this story has already happened; the life the protagonist used to lead before the near extinction event. In other words, our world. The event itself is a forced transformation, or more accurately an exaggeration of the same world, and what remains is not drama but a glimpse of a possible future. It's important that the outcasts don't give in to the old system or the new but instead find their own way of living."

Extracts from a Lifetime

by Freya Jackson

Freya Jackson is a young writer who has previously been published in Writing Maps, and the Warwick University publications Ink and Dodo. She was the English winner of Heriott-Watt's 'Turing's World' short story competition.

What do you mean you have heard this one before? In many families there are mothers. In many families there are fathers. There are sons, and brothers. There is love. There is resentment and anger and pain. There is temptation. Why should it surprise us when these stories repeat themselves; after all is humanity not still as cruel as it always was? That these things may have happened before is almost a certainty - there are certain stories, archetypes if you will, that repeat in every generation, every civilisation. And still, we do not learn.

A story so familiar needs no stream of narrative, no neat ending only this - a collection of moments, of feeling. And even if we were so inclined we could not find an ending here. After all, this is someone's life, someone's death - if there were such things as endings they would not be so obliging as to be written down. Afterwards this is all that's left - a collection of noise: of memories, of meetings, of moments. Perhaps you may read them and find something like a whole.

Perhaps not.

i

[CAIN]

He is told that his mother is dead.

He never forgives her but much later when he visits her gravestone he tells himself it is the same thing.

ii

[ADAM]

He has found that the boiler does not work right; he does not have the right knack, the right -
he means that he misses her. He wants her back.

This is also a simplification. He means he wants to go back.

iii

[EVA]

That's not my name, you know; it's Eve, not Eva.

The boy was exasperating. He was all brutish charm and assessing smiles.

She had only been working here for a week and already, he was driving her mad.

No I heard you, Eve. Eve not Eva - Eve.

*Haven't you ever had a nickname, before, Eve. Hasn't anyone ever called you Eva
before,*

Eve?

Eve. Eve, Eve, Eve.

He said it again and again and again and again, until the word Eve lost all its meaning,
until it became a symptom of the way her life repeated, of all the cycles
she couldn't escape.

She met the assessing lilt of his lips, with the diamond of her eyes.

Eva sounded like a future. Like a straight, unbroken line.

iv

Waiting at the traffic lights, he tipped his wide thumb
under the place the soft yield of voice becomes bone
and kissed her,

right thumb under chin, elbow around left shoulder,

surprised she spun towards him like a ballerina, and kissed him back.

And each time he kissed her he planted the promise of another date.

She never intended to fall for him,
but he tricked her with his Scheherazade mouth
until one day she realised she married him
and the softness in his eyes.

v

When she enters, he does not even take in the babble of,

I'm sorry, my neighbour-

he drinks her in, the cloud of fizzy curls the dangerously skinny sandals that made her
small feet slip near-naked across the linoleum.

There is a moment when they both buoy themselves up with the sudden pause that comes
from connection, and then

Eva.

She loved the way he carved her name into his throat, formed it like a garden
she stepped into with him,
cast off her other name like snake-skin. The first time he called her Eva it was
revelation
or something like that,
then one day she knew
that she would spend the rest of her life wrapping all the shards of her around
the warmth in his bones.

vi

[NEIGHBOUR

an interruption]

Her neighbour was the kind of man who
believed in the inequality of man and woman like a divine intervention,

He took all her levels of inequality as fact
And often told her so,

a slut like her wouldn't get better.

It was a kindness, you understand, he always considered himself a kind man.

When he walked her to her flat, she would make sure not to tremble.

After all he told her often that he was a kind man.

Once he offered her a roof, a home, a protection

But she demurred which is to say,

ran

although her feet were fastened to the ground.

Later when he caught her he would tell her she wasn't a woman for marrying anyway

Fucking? Sure.

Tell her she was a woman without worth,

A woman full of sin

Place a hand against her chest and tell her one of his little facts.

(He always had his little facts)

Women have one less rib than men, it's well known. Holy.

A religious and biological Fact.

He was not a man to be argued with on the basis of facts.

He knew them well.

[THE LOVERS

which is to say even here, there may be found EDEN]

She moved in with Adam before they were married, (which her neighbour took as all the proof he needed,

not that he was a man who needed proof)

In her new house she would tangle their fingers together

One across another, across another, across another

As if parts of a knot - would pretend that slipping a soul inside another

Were as easy as putting two fingers together.

Yet somehow it was, a home built from this like a cat's cradle

Each moment a cradle against each other.

And outside, there were still taxes and workmen and traffic jams

Still neighbours to be humoured attentively

After all, she had long known the best way to get a dog to chase you

Was to run from it.

Vii

She decided early, that the best thing to do is not to listen

It is difficult to do in the sea of hey, hey, heys, the hiss and click and whine

gnawed at her ears. If she had had a daughter, she would have taught her the trick of

Not Listening.

It was her best trick, breaking down the words into syllables butchering them until she told herself she did not understand what they were saying anymore.

It never quite worked.

But she never did have a daughter after all,

only sons.

Even out with him it did not work, often she would find herself Not Listening

to the pavement as it bubbled with what it would do

if it owned his girl.

viii

She could feel dick rubbing from the tightness of his trousers
against her just been shaved leg which she'd levered right up, could almost smell the moisture
against the fabric of his denim jeans
his tongue in her mouth became a snail, and he jiggled his foot so much she was seasick with
it.

Overcome with lust she wanted more, pressed against him so much that her left breast burst
half-out of her incorrectly-sized bra

like he was a child that needed feeding. The kissing stopped, somehow, and in a state of
confusion they both adjusted themselves

He did not walk her home, he read somewhere that that would make him look needy, which
was the last thing he wanted with such a pretty girl,

and she was still thinking of the kiss,

the snail now homeless turned slug in her mouth, the taste of it did not repulse her,

instead it remained like aftershock

that she swallowed down to the place near her ribs. She fucked herself, when she got home
and smiled herself wide

she didn't know how to explain it, sure she wouldn't spend forever with him

she was just feeling fizzy, she guessed

ix

His appendix burst in the middle of their anniversary

No warning, just the sudden rush of red, for years she said it was the most afraid she'd
ever been,

and then came the day her oldest son came up with a fever that didn't go down

and she lay her shaking fingers against blotchy skin, and

the way years later the phone-call burst the space in her own stomach,

part of her own body suddenly removed.

x

She wore white like she'd invented the tradition
And maybe she had, when he touched her she felt almost sure this was the first time
Man and woman had touched like this before.
She looked like Pandora wrapped within a covenant
Walked like temptation.
When saw her whole, he broke her up into all of her pretty parts,
Stacked them together like Jenga blocks, into legs. Breast. Face. Kind. Clever. Docile.
Joined the parts together with his own bone.
He'd been doing it for years by then, after all, and would do so for decades afterwards.
He married both of them, the girl and the shade
they didn't cohabit well, but they both loved him for all his foolish butchery
and soon enough one twin consumed the other, and they became Eva.
She did not falter when she walked towards him
it surprised her, she had planned for indecision but somehow he became the only man
in her world.
When he kissed her she tasted like oranges
and he thought for a second he had never tasted something so bitter, something so sweet.

xi

Pregnancy didn't suit her,
she glowered rather than glowed, didn't like the way
her sons rested upon her bladder, rocked themselves against her guts.
The way she walked with her hips wider,
the extra weight doing nothing but bearing down upon her bones.
The way she knew she would never go back to work again.

xii

She loved the way her sons brought with them
their own language, first the stream of gurgle-gargle-giggling,
liked the way it sounded like the two-skip beat
of her own heart.

Then up, became the only word in their vocabulary used for near enough everything
first with one son, and then the other.

Up, up, up.

And then mama.

It sounded like her own name

but better.

Every meal became dinner: Breakfast- dinner, Lunch-dinner,

Dinner- dinner.

It was like she herself was learning to speak again.

xiii

There were a lot of things she didn't like to say.

She didn't like to say that she never thought motherhood was a full time job, wanted a real one
but had let him lead her with the practicalities.

He was the one with the degree after all and she did love her sons,

didn't want to be one of those career women gave who her children away to nannies.

They didn't have the money anyway, and it was only practical she stayed home and not him.

She didn't like to say anything about the way that the playground mothers first drew away and
then towards her. She didn't like to say when she didn't understand something – always thought
the best remedy for condensation was obscenity. She didn't like to say when her mouth bled
and her heart grimaced (or was that the other way around) from all the things she didn't like to
say.

She didn't like to say she was a bad mother, although she knew she was
the secret of it weighing down her eyes.

xiv

It was not the slap so much
but what came afterwards:

Long after his skin had returned to its usual jewel-black,
long after he had forgotten,
which did not take long, it was nothing more than a moment
after all.

She remembered, carried it with her like a curse.

She didn't mention it, of course.

It was the itch beneath her capillaries, flowed like septic blood especially

After

She can't confess it

but runs it across her throat, her very worst sin.

And it was this, the half-smile way she recoiled from him
that he never forgave her for.

She never visits her son in jail. She cannot.

xv

He tasted the tap of her fingers,

a measuring wheel across the fractured but not broken collar-bone.

The murmur of his voicebox,

let her thumbs' pulse x-ray his missing rib,

the slight podge of his tummy.

She'd feel the place where his appendix was before he decided it was just one of evolutions
leftovers.

The muscle of his leg which held somewhere within
everywhere he'd ever walked, all those miles he'd spent going
nowhere in particular.

She reached up to the tiller of his shoulders, which held first one son
and then another
to let her shaking hands rest.

xvi

It happened when she was watching University Challenge

I, IS THIS EVA?

On the screen it was the music round. She never went in for classical music much because

I AM VERY SORRY, I'M SO, SO, SORRY. IT'S ABEL. HE

the legato notes shattered against the speaker's staccato regret. It was giving her a migraine
which meant she of course couldn't hear right.

HOSPITAL. BUT THEY COULDN'T

For fifty-odd years she had never been silent, even when her mouth wasn't moving
there was always the echo of fidgeting toes, the flicker of nail against skin,

now not even her lungs move.

xvii

She had been turned into a statue.

He leant over to kiss her and she transformed

as if she were not some enchanted woman, but a dead animal. Its voice keening, moaning,
transforming. All her inaction became shattering

movement, the phone was still off the hook with no one's voice

left calling for her. And she began

to speak

as a tsunami speaks. He was not quite sure

what to do with all of the damage, after. Some things had been swept away and others became waterlogged.

It was the kind of city centre hospital where the visitor car-park was across the road and, waiting at the traffic lights, he kissed her

Placed his thumb under her chin, his elbow around her left shoulder, and she turned towards him

Surprised

It was almost exactly the same as their first kiss

except for all the ways it wasn't.

This was the last time he kissed her.

Afterwards, once they had left that place, he found himself somehow naked

and could not take the shameful touch of skin against skin but instead hid himself from the embarrassing intimacy

of all that loss

xviii

Something is not there anymore.

Her insides fall very slowly, the sluice from throat to womb again and again and again.

Somehow she learnt how to talk

again afterwards and not keep screaming.

Screaming

I have fallen apart I have broken apart I have. I am the fracture of unset wound. I need a doctor I-

she no longer lives there. That place. That set of ideas and cohabitations.

He remembers the place also but it may not be the same place. He is not sure.

He does not have time for her loss.

He has lost a son this is important.

A son is more important than a lover than a wife.

Than a son.

Somehow he has been cut out of the world and

they keep

falling

ixx

loss is

accident

casualty

catastrophe

cost

damage

debt

defeat

destruction

disaster

failure

fall

injury

trouble

is

bereavement

calamity

cataclysm

death

debit

deficiency

destitution

deprivation

detriment

disadvantage

disappearance

dispossession

fatality

forfeiture

harm

hurt

impairment

misadventure

mishap

need

perdition

privation

retardation

ruin

sacrifice

shrinkage

squandering

trial

undoing

want

waste

wreckage

xx

Her mouth

A jagged line, her skin rattles like a cigarette packet, her eyes ever spreading bruises.

Unhappiness has made her ugly. Purposeless.

xxi

She knew the way a mother always knows, it was murder although the charge they said was manslaughter.

To put the record straight, perhaps, she stood,

the spectacle of it drew the magistrates dribbling mouth towards her own.

Her lips parted

and...

She had fed him before he even had a mouth, this child, who had gorged on his own bitterness.

Her husband wondered, afterwards, how God could make two brothers as different as his own two sons.

She knew they were alike as her own two hands.

Her throat shook with what she couldn't make herself say.

Eva sat down.

She was sick, after, with her own mouthlessness

xxii

He visits his son in jail, but she will not.

The sudden sting of pain was like a sea-wind against her face, and it got stuck like that in a sudden downturn of sourness,

she could not turn her cheek and forgive him even if she tried.

He is well used to the solidity of her vengeance by now.

They have different faces:

Her face is wider and rounder, his is smaller, stouter.

Her skin is bistre, his is the colour of Cassiterite.

Her mouth upturns at the corners, his is a straight unbroken line.

Tiredness sinks their eyes into their skulls in exactly the same way.

He visits his son but she will not.

(he weeps afterwards, for the both of them)

xxiii

Soon tragedy became something of a game to her

As if it were only the background noise on a radio *that was the Beatles 'Here Comes the Sun' and your son is dead. And your son is a murderer.*

And your son is dead. The news today your son is dead, a murderer dead that she could practice not listening to.

(She was good at this game)

Sometimes she remembered when trying to name the last item on a shopping list,

Say my son was murdered; my son was a murderer when she meant we need to get bay leaves, because I want to make Shepherd's Pie

Maybe that's not true. Maybe she only thought this and although her pain was like a missing limb

She learnt to walk again without it. The horror of getting better.

It snuck up on her gradually; the soul is the slowest part of the body to heal

And yet, sometimes it does.

Even so she died of a heart attack, her arteries clogged
With 80 odd years of fatty foods and wine
The neighbours said *she died of a broken heart*
She would have liked that, the idea of her grief solidified into something so deadly
As to stop her own heart beating
Would have stopped: tragic figure, venerable figure – yes
But still would have given a little smile of vindication
If she weren't already dead.

xxiv

[ADAM]

He was not with her when she died.
After all they had long been in the habit
of not letting their paths cross accidentally
although in bed they still wrapped themselves together like a whole.
It is not that they did not love each other it is only that they had long been in the habit
of avoiding surprises, those sudden reminders of what they had lost.

She kisses him while they are watching TV: a re-run of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. This is not an unusual occurrence, they have been married for four months now, and each day they kiss. Today, she feels as if they are the only two people in the world; she kisses him as if the world is perfect and bursting and bright.

Perhaps it is.

* * *

“This piece was built out of an assignment in a creative writing seminar (Warwick University, Reeling and Writhing with Michael Hulse) of a poem that responds to the Genesis myth of Adam and Eve. Originally my piece was a ‘hyperlink-poem’ (kind of retro I know), with each of the individual parts of the piece a part of the poem which spreads out kind of like a tree. The piece as it appears now is simply

this poem heavily edited and then reordered in an approximately chronological time structure making it into a more traditional piece of writing.

By sticking to broadly traditional forms of writing (the piece carries elements of prose, poem, play and screenplay) this allows the piece to work as a direct feminist response to the Adam and Eve myth and instead of being a story about sin and disobedience it is instead a story about identity, power and the nature of familial bonds. Although the piece moves forward in time, each of the individual bits of poetry or prose are directly contemporary, and that everything happens in this precise moment is the one thing I kept of the original structure (or to be truly fair the precise moment of the precise time I wrote the piece which over time will become the past) as a sort of nod to the idea of Adam and Eve as a creation myth - beginnings and endings. So yeah, Genesis from a modern Eve's point of view, a poem-sort-of-thing that started as something and finished as something else. Thanks for reading it, I hope you liked it."

The Wayback Machine

by Phoebe Reeves-Murray

A writer, teacher and mother, Phoebe Reeves-Murray has worked with children and teens for the last 30 years. She loves writing about the mysteries of the parent child bond, fairy tales, Jungian archetypes, and strange events that take place in the space right next to our own lives. Her fiction has appeared in Pantheon Magazine, Devilfish Review, Dali's Lovechild, Quailbell, and will be appearing in Rivet, and Chrome Baby.

Everyone dies in the end. I know that. I just want to see clearly between now and then. I already knew what infinitive I wanted under my yearbook picture: 'To See Clearly'.

'To Rule the World' KayLa, Editor-in-Chief of the yearbook, never even looked up from her smartphone. She grimaced and rolled her eyes. "I know it's an infinity question, but 'To See Clearly'—really? Is that supposed to be, like, deep?"

Infinity question? Didn't she mean infinitive? I shook my head. "No. It's just what it looks like." For once, I was looking away too. I was looking at a purple, mimeographed health quiz I found in a storage box in our garage this morning. The quiz was one of Mom's from when she was in high school. One of the questions asked *when is it ok to have sex and how often?* Her answer, in flowery purple ink complete with balloons over each 'i' read, *when it feels right and enough to know I've had enough.* That last phrase was crossed out and she wrote instead *enough to know what love is.*

But the sentence that really puzzled me was at the bottom of the page. It read *how do I hold it?* I've never held one myself, but how hard can it be? Guys are always saying *just touch it.* I couldn't believe she would write *how do I hold it?* on the quiz and turn it in. I folded the paper and slid it into my pocket. It was hard to think of my mom as ever being interested in sex, but there was me and my baby brother are living proof. I mean we were. My brother is dead.

I'm in the disadvantaged student's program Trio, but all the norms call it Triage. Whatever. "SSI," KayLa hissed and rolled her eyes again. I watched her run her tongue over her fancy purple braces and text *tipikal treeaje* to her BFF. I shrugged. I wondered if KayLa and her group just stupidly misspelled "typical" and "triage" or if they had a purpose for going phonetic.

Her text looked like graffiti to me. But maybe that was that the real way the words appeared to them. Who was I to criticise? I literally can't even see things clearly. I've got this effed up psychedelic vision where sometimes, instead of normal time, space, and reality, I see squares within squares, each playing and replaying different vines from my life. My right now life appears in the central square while different things that happened to me at different times in the past appear in each of the other squares—and everything plays at the same time, like having too many screens open and each one is playing a different YouTube video at top volume. Other times, whatever I see appears through a white mist or veil. Or there's a kaleidoscope of pieces breaking up my sight, and I spend all my time trying to move the pieces into something I recognize, something that makes sense.

People think I'm stupid. I probably am, but no one would believe me if I told them how I see things. The way I see things looks like those YouTube videos that people edit and distort so they can upload them under the copyright violation radar. When I found these videos, it was a relief to have something I could show people, 'cuz no doctor ever would have believed what I see. Nor would my mom and my stepdad.

My vision's been low-res since the night my baby brother was killed by his father. Murdered, not killed. I keep getting that wrong. Something happened to my eyes the same night. The hallucinations came later. I've tried to remember how it happened, but I can't. Since then, everything appears strange.

My phone buzzed a text from Mom. **HAVE YOU COMMENTED ON MY BLOG?**

As I walked to Health class, I wondered what people would think of my yearbook photo. It was a picture of me holding a crushed Kleenex box in my arms. Would they just see another effed up jpeg on a list of creepy yearbook photos? Maybe once we got the robotic babies...

My phone buzzed with another text. **UVE GOT 2 MINUTES B4 CLASS! POST SOMETHING!** I had to put something on. Mom started this blog in the olden days of the Interwebs. My new stepdad (he came after my baby brother's father) established his authority by having a chat with me about how this blog was essential to Mom's getting over my brother's death (murder). He finished by saying I was to treat it as sacred if I really loved my mother. She wrote all about how he died on this site called True Story. She'd gotten a bunch of followers. But she only ever focused on the trolls.

Mom also has this corkboard chart she works on every single day. Toby, who was murdered just before he turned four months old, is at the top and everything else, including me, angles down and out like the pyramid letter and number charts at the eye doctor's. Only Mom's chart forms a pyramid made of cut out jpegs, printed emails, tweets, vines and other website artefacts

I tapped my bookmark for truestory.com, but class had already started. I had to hold my phone under my desk, even though everyone else was scrolling through their Instagrams and Tinders right out there in the open while the teacher was talking. I knew the keys by heart so, without looking, I backed out of truestory.com and texted her **JUST HOLD IT**.

"You have a guidance appointment," Ms. Green said, motioning to me without looking up from her MacBook.

I turned around to see if she was in fact talking to me since she hadn't said my name. But she never does and no one else looked up at her. They all glanced sideways at me instead.

I didn't want to go to Guidance because today was when we were getting our babies, and I wanted to be sure I chose the right one. Mom says to have perfect vision 20/2 is essential – not to be fooled by 20/20 which isn't perfect.

Mom started her trip about perfect vision in therapy and never stopped. She said her therapist told her she was really smart to call it her "I" chart. Mom made me look at the chart all the time in the beginning when she was first putting it together. That was right after Toby's death. I'd look at the picture of his mangled head, and this white fog would drift into my sight, and the chart would get all flickering 3-D. I'd cover one eye or the other to try and see 20/2—*you have to see like a hawk!* Mom would say—but all the blood tests, hospital and autopsy photos, pieces of police report kept shifting and falling into squares inside of squares like a tweaking kaleidoscope.

I shouldn't have thought about the chart just then, 'cuz my sight got all bleached out YouTube videos on me. I stumbled getting out of my chair and a classmate sucked his teeth in distain. "Hey Triage—see much?"

I made it out to the hall, feeling in my pocket for Mom's quiz. I knew she wouldn't like me having it. Dragging my feet to the Guidance office, I pulled out my phone and looked at my yearbook photo again. I thought for a minute that it was weird to have a yearbook photo when I'm not even a senior, but they lower the bar every year because more and more of us don't

make it to senior graduation. *Hey Tobes—look, it's you and me.* I'd taken it with a selfie stick—I couldn't exactly have gotten Mom to take it. Not with that crumpled Kleenex box. Not when she'd know that I'd gotten it out of her Toby artefacts chest.

Mom really feels strongly about seeing clearly, which is why she blogs the story of Toby's murder. I mean we all know the Interwebs is where you can get all kinds of other people who can see clearly—if you don't mind that it's almost always seeing in black and white, of course. No Crayolas allowed online. As I sat down in front of Ms. Brown the counsellor, Mom texted me a colour photo of our family after Toby was born, followed by one of her, my stepdad, and me after I started high school. A line from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* streamed across my sight and formed a shimmering square around the photos. *My purpose is, indeed, a horse of that colour.*

“So, your giveback is going to be early childcare?”

I looked up from the photos, trying to blink away the square containing the Shakespeare quote. Instead, still more squares formed around Ms. Brown's face: in one, the image of the crushed Kleenex box, in the next, the photo of Toby, me, Mom, and Toby's dad, and in the third, the photo of Mom, my stepdad, and me. I couldn't see Ms. Brown's face at all. I rubbed my eyes hard and realised from the sounds that Ms. Brown was tapping into her iPad, so she probably wasn't looking at me.

“Yes, Ms. Brown.” I took a deep breath and thought about the “giving back” scheme, which cleared my sight almost immediately. It was part of the requirements of the Trio program, but there were also extras not available to the normie student. We Trios had to earn those. “In fact, I was in class, about to choose my baby when you called me down here.”

Now she looked at me, probably thinking I was being fresh. I was just trying to get back in time to get the right baby.

She stared at her iPad, no doubt at my DHS records, the articles about the murder, and my “mysterious” eye problem. If she knew all this, then so did every teacher in the school. When you're my age, you don't have privacy.

I made myself sit quietly. I wanted the Trio's reward. They offered special services/products and you got to choose one. In my case, I wanted these new bionic eyes that I'd read about online, that would instantly correct sight no matter how crummy your eyes are. I'd read that the

lenses folded like a taco and came out of a saline filled syringe, and in eight seconds would unfold over your eyes. Of course, there was a cost for seeing clearly.

“Did you decide on your career pathway?”

I nodded, my eyes sliding out of focus as I looked at her, wondering about Mom asking how to hold it.

“Hello!” Ms. Brown snapped her fingers in front of my face.

“Sorry, Ms. Brown.” I swallowed.

She set down her iPad and folded her hands. “Do you have your career pathway choice permission slip from your parents?”

I took a long silent breath. I had to be something useful. ROI—return on investment, so I could pay back society. I loved art and science, and I thought art therapy would allow me to help others. I had this vision that art therapy would be like a big, beautiful, always changing Rorschach test that would allow me to look at each patient and see what was actually in front of me, and at the same time, what was really inside me.

However, Mom had crossed out art therapy on the permission slip and told me I had to choose something else, so I wrote childcare. Ms. Brown said childcare is a big need now with all the refugees from Syria, so that the parents can get jobs at McDonalds.

Ms. Brown grimaced, one eye on my DHS notes on her iPad, the other on my permission slip with *childcare* written in my handwriting above Mom’s signature. I looked back at her. Her face disappeared into a blurry central square; around the edges I could see a dark cramped room lit by a nightlight in the shape of a hot air balloon, the slats of a crib. I heard Toby crying, Mom screaming, and my stepdad leaving the room. “I have to get to class, please—we’re choosing our babies today.” My vision cleared. The yelling and dizziness stopped. I stood up.

“Why would you choose a baby, after...after...your brother’s...?”

Should I make it easy for her? I decided silence was the best answer. Play the teenager’s card. I added a shrug to complete the picture and she waved me off, tossing the permission slip behind her. I wondered if she knew about Mom’s blog. She probably had it bookmarked.

I went back to class. Ms. Green was just starting the tour of our school's state-of-the-art robotic baby lab. "We've come a long way from eggs with magic marker faces and little pink and blue blankets."

Nobody looked up from their devices. Silently they sneered at her for trying to sound up on technology.

I sat down, looking at the mute babies. How was a chicken egg with a magic marker face like Toby? I bet he would have looked at me when I came into class. He wouldn't have grown up staring into a screen. He would never know a screen. He wouldn't even know the quintessential old school kid toy: a cardboard box. Like the one the cops used to crush his head all over again. My vision broke.

Ms. Green had each of us walk up and look closely at the robotic babies. Everyone else took their phones and kept texting and scrolling. In each plastic car seat lay a baby. I was impressed that the skin tones and other characteristics accounted for the racial makeup of our diverse class. Right on cue, the mixes of dark brown, blue-black, pinky-white, pinky-mustard skin tones, eye colours and shapes, hair colours and textures, burst across my sight, this time like the toy kaleidoscope I used to show Toby when we shared a room.

The babies started talking and crying and burbling. I laughed, surprised at how beautiful they were. That was when the phones appeared in front of everyone's faces, filming me, and I realised the babies weren't switched on. It was just my effed up video vision seeing things all wrong again.

I sat down, my face burning. Since we were having a test today, I made myself think about what might be on it. We'd looked at how sex works, through the science lessons on pheromones, fashion lessons on making yourself sexy, the different drugs you could get slipped at a party, things that made people desirable, old school social events like dances (where nobody danced anymore because they were all looking at their phones) or sleepovers (where no one even gamed together or did wayback stuff like Dance Dance Dance because they were Vining, or Snapchatting, or Instagramming), places where you had to be on guard against getting pregnant, how to not get pregnant, and how to protect yourself against diseases (which was weird 'cuz the school had made us all get vaccines against every possible kind of sexually transmittable disease anyway).

Ms. Green was droning on about how everyone had to get pregnant or get someone pregnant. We'd had some crossover the previous week with the AP students, mostly boys. The boys felt it was unfair to have to spend time in what they called "dumb girl daycare," so Ms. Green thought she'd appeal to our base natures and added more sex to the curriculum, including a review on how to say no, how people got manipulated into sex, sexting, and a series of other topics in about 15 minutes. No one paid any attention.

I really wanted to show all the videos I'd found on babies needing to be held next to their moms so they could learn how to breathe, how to regulate their own heartbeat from her heartbeat, and pictures of how we shared cells with our moms that scientists found still in us after 40 years. But Ms. Green ignored my raised hand and informed us that we were going to be recorded by the baby for our grade. Next she motioned impatiently for us to sign fair warning and expectations of privacy forms.

"Now these babies have 20/400 vision, their eyes follow lines where light and dark meet, they can only see eight to twelve inches away so much of what they see is blurry. They have a camera that will record their interactions with you. The interactions, and you, will appear as the babies see you—so we will see what the baby sees." Ms. Green was activating the robotic baby report upload bracelets and scrolling on her iPad.

As she did, I watched a girl text a boy. I'd heard the girl tell another kid earlier that she and the boy were dating even though pretty much all their exchanges were on Instagram. Last night I laid in bed and told myself a story about being surrounded by people on their tablets and how I met this one boy who cared more about me than his device and what was on it, and how we ran away together, but somehow got trapped in this smartphone lab. I might have fallen asleep at that point, and maybe it became a dream because when I woke up, I could write the first part down, but I couldn't remember what happened after.

Someone asked if having something recording us was an infringement of our rights. Ms. Green sighed sharply and said that it was a choice, and we could either take care of a baby for the weekend or write a fifteen page paper on childcare. When a bunch of kids rushed for the paper, she added that the paper had to be written in drafts to prove that it wasn't copied from the Interwebs, and that it counted for 98% of their grade. I guess she didn't know about monkeyandatypewriter.com.

I approached the giant plastic bassinet of babies. Immediately, Toby's face, eyes squeezed shut, superimposed itself rocking back and forth over each of the robo faces of the multi-coloured babies. What I saw of the actual robo babies now looked like a bad videogame animation of old school Sim babies. My brother's face sped up from rocking to shaking to vibrating. Around his face, in a square frame, my teacher stared into her mobile device. Around her in a second frame, my classmates stared into their mobile devices, their thumbs tapping the glass keyboards nonstop. I refocused my gaze on the central square, but a gauzy white mist had settled over Toby's face. His face was identical to the photo on my mom's chart, the one of his head abnormally elongated, his eyes shut, his lips smacking together trying to breathe, his hands flailing, clenching into fists.

I tried to stop the images. Now Ms. Green was talking about how there were high needs babies mixed in with the "normal" babies, and no one would know what kind of baby they would get.

Now my little brother's face slowed all the way down to a slight shift, an off kilter superimposition over each of the robotic baby's faces, distorting each one into a blur; a two-faced monster. *Please be alive, Toby.* His face finally disappeared into one of the robotic baby's faces. I picked up that baby and hugged it. Someone laughed and I heard camera clicks.

"No pawning your baby off on your mom!" Ms. Green warned, locking on my bracelet. "The baby only responds to this bracelet. You'll need to swipe it on the baby's bottom to see if your baby is tired, hungry, needs a diaper change, or is sick."

The other kids were already pulling off their babies' diapers. One of the boys threw his baby into the air and caught it like a football.

"Hey, hey! We'll be reviewing how you handle your baby, and I think it will be an eye opening experience, especially when you see how easy it is to hurt them." Ms. Green glared at us.

I raised my hand again. This time Ms. Green nodded in my direction. "Can't we see how the baby gets hurt first—"

"You people only want to see violence—no, in fact, you can't see that first! This class is about learning something important and positive through living and doing. That is how you learn, through experience." Ms. Green held up a baby with a clear head and the cerebrum,

cerebellum, and medulla, coloured in dayglo yellow, orange, and green. “It’s not a video game!”

I had been going to say *so we know how not to kill it*, but I stopped and traced one of the little blue monkeys on my baby’s blanket. “This is the weekend—if the baby gets sick, do we take it to the doctor’s? Will it die if the doctor’s isn’t open?”

Ms. Green was on her iPad, probably doing what all the kids were doing: texting, vining, wishing she was somewhere else doing something meaningful, something beautiful, and something that was the answer to the universe. She frowned. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, what if something bad happens to it?” Some of the other kids glanced up from their chat forums, their hands poised to film any ensuing confrontation, their thumbs already creating captions.

“It’s a doll.”

I knew that the clear skull meant lights flashed if the baby’s head got shaken a certain way, and I played a quick YouTube on it. But why couldn’t we see it live here in class now? “Will our babies’ heads light up?”

Ms. Green sighed and stared at the clock. “No! Because that’s not what would happen in reality!”

I looked at my bracelet, wondering what it knew. It looked just like the rubber bracelets that say **BFFS 4EVA** or **LIFE IS BETTER ONLINE** but it was grey and marked with a string of 1s and 0s. Ms. Green told us it couldn’t be removed until Monday during class. She also said that for the rest of the weekend, our babies were our lives.

I took my baby home in its car seat. It hadn’t made any sounds yet. I had a vague sense, in my panic, of Ms. Green saying she would turn them on remotely through some app. I wondered if singing to it would be good, getting it making noise and being alive, being my baby. “Ok, your name is Be.” I didn’t want Mom to know I’d named it after my brother. I started with Rock-a-bye Baby.

He cooed.

“Hey, you like that!” I sang Home on the Range, not very well, after that. I remembered singing that to Toby. He cried a lot, and we lived in the same room so I’d try to soothe him with a song I’d learned in Pre-K.

The recorded noises were from real babies—no faking those sounds. They smashed into my brain and freaked me out. I tried to come up with some other songs, but couldn’t. The baby stayed quiet on the bus home.

When I got there, Mom put down her chart and scooped the baby up, changed him, and put on an outfit. I tried to tell her he’d only respond to me, but my stepdad gave me an ugly look behind Mom’s back.

Mom asked if it recorded video.

“No, but he sees like a real baby—his vision is 20/400, like light and dark, and shapes and sounds and feelings.”

“Did they give you a normal baby or is this one that screams, like, 24/7?” She hugged Be and gurgled to him. “What’s his name?”

I spun the bracelet around, wanting to talk about seeing me and Toby’s old room, and the crib, and the screaming, wondering if I should tell her his name, but not wanting to lie to her. “It’s Be,” I said softly.

“BE?!”

Be began to cry. Mom changed him again and fed him. He kept crying. “Gimme that bracelet!” she demanded.

“I can’t, Mom, it’s coded to me.”

She thrust him back at me and said, “Fine, then the two of you need to go out ‘cuz I’ve been working on my chart, and I’m exhausted.”

I took Be to the mall. He cried most of the way. I touched the bottle to his lips, but his mechanical arms pushed it away. I thought Ms. Green had said they just made sounds. Apparently not. “I wish the inside of your head could light up and show me what’s going on,” I muttered.

Some girls from my class sat in pay per massage chairs near us and decided which papers each of them was going to download from nothingnewafter2.com. As they did, they videoed me trying to comfort Be. “Lookit triage—turn the fuckin’ bracelet around—butt face!” the leader of the girls jeered.

I did as she said and Be stopped crying. I thanked her. Her lip curled. She scrolled her iPhone, stopped, and frowned. I remembered again about Ms. Green saying that we could end up with a special needs baby, and I was scared I’d picked the wrong one. But Toby had helped me choose and he wasn’t special needs, he’d just cried a lot.

“Sick!” The girl punched her friend and showed her the phone screen. “Look it’s triage here—her little brother got tortured and killed by her father—get the hell away from her!” They got up and walk-ran away.

I thought about how much I hated the Internet. It was like a junk drawer of rusty razor blades you couldn’t throw away safely so you had to keep them while they just got rustier and rustier, a place where anything you said or did haunted you.

I stayed at the mall ‘til it closed. Me and Be were finally shooed out by the cleaners. I called Mom, but my stepdad said she was working on her chart, so I needed to find my own ride home.

“But I have the baby,” I said, looking around in the dark at the empty parking lot, at the shadows beyond the stark streetlights. Be burred and leaned his head against my chest.

“It’s not a real baby.” He hung up.

I walked back, carrying Be inside my fleece shirt, his car seat banging against my legs. It was getting really cold, and I remembered weather.com saying it would get in the single digits and we’d see snow.

When I got home, I went in my room, and made a little bed for Be in Toby’s old crib, which was still in my room. I wanted him to sleep with me, but I was worried about what my stepdad or Mom would say if he started crying again and they came in. After I laid him in the crib, I sang Home on the Range again. I wished I could give him a bath. That would soothe him. A single square of Toby murmuring in a bath, his sobs quieting, grew in my vision. I watched it for a while and smiled. It was late. I remember Be leaning his head back against my chest. He must have heard my heart.

I listened for a heartbeat in his little chest, but only heard a light hum, like the one in my laptop. Be started to cry and thrash around in the crib. I picked him up. He stopped. I laid him down again. He screamed, sobbed. Maybe it wasn't a heartbeat with him, maybe it was electrical pulses—those were part of people—in fact, electrical pulses are what make a heartbeat. Maybe he could connect with mine.

I decided to have him sleep with me. I put Toby's crushed Kleenex box on the other side of Be so it would protect him from falling off the bed. I fell asleep, seeing lights begin to flash between his chest and mine, electrical pulses that became like tiny Christmas lights, then like tiny falling stars, then slower and slower, like fireflies.

Sometime later I bolted up and found myself falling forward into Toby's crib. Be lay there, half under me, screaming.

It was darker than I ever remembered it being, and all these colours were exploding out of the crib. Be's screams were awful, and I was freaking and seeing squares inside of squares inside of squares and all these bursting blues and reds. I tried to get up. Mom stood over me, and suddenly I wasn't in the crib but in bed, and the Kleenex box had fallen on the floor. She stepped on it and I grabbed it from under her foot. She went for it too and we tore it apart. She shrieked and threw me into the car with Be.

It was freezing out there. We huddled up. I went back to the house to get blankets. I tried to fall asleep, but Be's screams continued. Then I was wayback again—seeing through the veil of an old blanket that I was crawling into Toby's crib to stop him from screaming because I heard his dad yelling and I knew he was going to grab Toby's head and yell "Shut your face before I shut it for you!" I wanted to hold Toby close so I could protect him, but his dad hit me and I fell into the crib. He flung me against the bars and picked Toby up by his head, squeezing his face. I watched Toby's face turn dark red, then purple, his eyes bug out under his father's white knuckled grip. I heard a grinding, crunching crack and my baby brother's head crushed out flatter and longer as his dad dangled him by his head before he dropped Toby onto me, slamming us into the bars of the crib.

I came back to now. Be was gone, but I could hear him screaming. The blue and red lights were spinning and flashing, but this time they were police sirens. An officer pulled me out of the car and I watched as the neighbours gathered around, eyes wide. The policemen opened the trunk of the car and I realised the screams were real, the way Toby would have screamed if

he'd been able. When the police took Be out, his head was all elongated and busted open, not like the torn tissue box that the police had used to show Mom how Toby's dad had crushed in his head, but just as awful. Dark purple and black light flowed out of Be's head like blood. I grabbed him out of the officer's hands and tried to reshape it, to put the colours back inside his head where they belonged so the noise would quiet; so Mom could rest; so Toby's dad could make her happy; so Toby could live, and I could see clearly.

My mom and stepdad were in front of me, yelling. I realised they had put Be in the trunk because his screams made everyone think he was real. And there was Mom. I remembered how she had only cared about how to hold a guy's penis. I grabbed her face and screamed through the angry, burning red and blue and purple and black light rushing through my body, filling my head. *Just touch it. Isn't that the answer you were looking for, Mom? How could you only have cared about that—how could you close your eyes so you wouldn't see clearly and let him crush Toby?* I clutched her face, wanting to shake her.

That was when the violent lights flowing out of me changed, and became the same beautiful lights I had seen between me and Be. They sparkled onto my mom's face, and ran down her cheeks over her chest, and glowed into her stomach. I saw clearly that she was pregnant and terrified. I stopped gripping her face and held it gently now. *Toby is dead. I'm alive.* "You don't have to keep having this baby, Mom," I whispered in her ear.

She hugged me, sobbing. "He wouldn't stop screaming—his father said he could get him to stop crying—I didn't know how to hold it!"

I picked up Be's broken body. The jagged halves of his face stared at my mother.

"This is how you hold a human being."

* * *

"There is nothing as awe-full and awful as family. Except, perhaps, technology.

The Wayback Machine happened to me like this: 1) I read a lot of online parenting blogs, many of which are confessionals. One in particular was written by a woman whose baby daddy killed their infant son by crushing the baby's head while she slept, a baby she said cried or screamed 18-22 hours a day. 2) My daughter took a high school tour where in the Health class she visited, the teacher told the students they could either take a robotic baby home for the weekend and parent it (and maybe it would be a normal baby or maybe it would be a high needs baby), OR write a five page paper on parenting. Everyone chose the paper.

Many of us prefer to treat soul and body as though they are separate, and as though one is more important than the other—as if our bodies are little more than meat and bone containers for a pure, already existing soul. Technology, like family, is a stark reminder that there never was a separation.”

Man Flesh

by Sierra Donahue

Sierra's previous work has been accepted for publication in Flash Fiction Magazine, Beyond Imagination, Existere, The Corner Club Press, Burnside Writers Collective, All of 100, Christian Feminism Today, and multiple newspapers. When not writing, Sierra can be found conducting cooking experiments in her home in the Pacific Northwest.

The following is an excerpt from "Early Alien Interactions: A Review" (Anderson, 3001), copied and translated from the second Intergalactic Court transcript, Earth date: 8-4-2893

I couldn't ignore the smell.

To the two hundred and twenty-eighth footnote, I had memorized the Intergalactic code and its thirty seven amendments by the age of three Hevlen years. Two and three quarter Earth years. Hevlenian honour ran deeper than blood -- but there I go again with those sick Earthling metaphors. What do the two-leggers know? What with their simplified, hurrying circulatory systems, always pumping. Always beating.

Always smelling.

It was . . . intoxicating? No. The ethanol substances consumed for sport and momentary mental relief on the lower planets harbour nothing of the need I feel and breathe constantly. Clouding every sense and mental capacity until my judgmental processes are overrun by the Clicnatum, and my body feasts.

It is not our appearance that scares the Earthlings. Fanged carnivores have cohabited their world for millennia. It is our altered mental state, the Clicnatum that they fear. The possibility that the most reasonable of diplomats, ambassadors even, clothed in adjusted Earthling garb, could spring into sudden assault of limbs and fangs and utter, desperate hunger.

We do not leave Hevlen unprepared. Travelers endure hundreds upon hundreds of tests to evaluate our self-control with increasing exposure to Earthling flesh.

If the Earthling beside me knew how close I had come to failing my final test I doubt he would have stood so close.

It was a man. I prided myself on my ability to distinguish between the Earthling genders -- no easy feat when they speak and smell and walk so alike one another.

He stood close to me and kept looking at his companion -- a female keeping a more respectable distance -- as we spoke. Male Earthlings were known to commit perilous acts in the proximity of the opposite gender; I wondered if his confidence was such a ploy. If so, he was stupider than I had previously assumed. If the Clicnatum took me, both he and his mate would die.

He had introduced himself as something with two syllables -- at the time I hadn't bothered to remember the name, and could think of no polite way to halt his chattering.

Two-syllables leaned in for the punchline of whatever he was selling, and his soft breath hit my frontal nasal sensors like a brick wall -- not that such an unsuitable structure was ever constructed on Hevlen. Curse these Earthling metaphors. The sweet carbon dioxide he exhaled felt like tiny tickles crawling out my cranium.

When I leaned away, Two-syllables made to touch my forearm. His mate noticed, paled.

I remember she said, "Nathan."

I don't know if he heard her. Looking back, I always wondered if he hadn't noticed or had merely chosen to ignore her fear.

Fear is a good thing. Earthlings must learn this if their species is to continue evolving. Every world is a race between predator and prey, strong and weak. There is no exam, no practice that can prepare any being for such life-threatening confrontation. The prey can only rely on his natural instinct -- fear -- to save him.

Likewise, no preparation is truly capable of ridding the predator of his most foundational instincts. You spit primal like some dirty, lesser word to describe that which you cannot comprehend. The evolutionary advantage that is primal, foundational to all Hevlenians cannot, and should not be, stamped out. Call it what you will, the Clicnatum is an instinctual advantage as defining of Hevlenians as a beating heart is defining of Earthlings. Asking a Hevlenian to suppress the need to feed is equivalent to asking an Earthling to stop breathing.

Therefore I claim not guilty for the murder of Nathan and Ariana McNay . . .

* * *

“Man Flesh started as a misunderstanding. Bored one day in his office cubicle, my brother overheard what he initially thought was a conversation about 'man flesh.' Upon closer listening, he realized the conversation was actually concerning a 'MEM-flash' card, but the perception had already stuck, enough for him to tell me the story later that day. As we laughed and bemoaned the tedium of his summer employment, I started thinking: what if someone actually had been talking about man flesh? Who - or, better yet, what - would be talking about man flesh?”

My favourite sort of stories are the ones which force the reader to think in a different perspective - preferably in an entirely opposite perspective. What could be more opposite than a being which actually thinks of our own species as food, despite its best intentions? Let's hope future humans never meet such a sentient, carnivorous race. I fear best intentions will only go so far.”

Four A.M.

by *Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois*

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over eight hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for work published in 2012, 2013, and 2014. His novel, Two-Headed Dog, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. He lives in Denver.

It was four in the morning. I was walking to the subway station to look for my cousin, Monica. Monica may have killed herself a couple of years back. I'd seen the coroner's report, but it was a NYC report, and everyone knows how often they get things wrong. I hadn't seen the body so, as far as I was concerned, her death was only a rumour.

I didn't find Monica, but ran into her brother, Hubert, looking in the window of a jewellery shop at expensive watches encrusted with gold and diamonds and other precious stones, timepieces that a Tsar would have worn. I looked down at Hubert's wrist. He was wearing a plastic Timex with blue trim. It looked like something a child might wear, or a man used to being unemployed. I'd shopped for watches recently and I knew you could get one of those for thirty-seven dollars. As a matter of fact, I'd bought one. It was a remarkable coincidence.

I asked Hubert, "Is it true that Monica committed suicide?"

He didn't answer. He held his watch to his ear and shook it. Monica and Hubert's father was my mother's brother. He killed himself after his second career as a banjo player failed to achieve traction.

Hubert's current occupation was caring for his demented mother.

His lifetime profession had been catalogue photography. He specialized in taking photos of chairs and couches and home appliances. I had spent some time admiring his work. Then the bottom of market for that sort of thing fell out.

"Answer my question. It's a simple yes or no," I said.

Hubert refused to speak. For him, there were no simple questions.

It was now five in the morning. Hubert suggested that we adjourn to the donut bar.

He ordered a cruller, then went to the john. I figured that, with all his digestive problems, he might take a long time. I pulled a Henry Miller book from the pocket of my corduroy jacket and read a passage.

“Hail to you, sweet lice,” I thought and passed on. A mist was rising over toward Gowanus Canal. Probably a glacier melting.

Even in 1960, Henry Miller was hip to global warming. He walked a lot, from one end of the city to the other and back, like my Uncle Eddie, who acquired the habit in the Rumanian Army, where they marched to one border and back again because, while he was a soldier, they had no one to fight.

Eddie had flaming red hair and later opened a clothing store in Manhattan, and either did or did not cheat the Negroes who bought their work clothes there.

Henry Miller walked so much, he was able to observe things that others did not, like the beginnings of climate change. He also tutored the Beats in the ways that the Benighted States of Amerika screwed us every day, robbing us of our creativity and inner freedom.

Hubert came back twenty minutes later. He'd forgotten that he'd already ordered. He aimed stink-eye at the cruller that was sitting at his place, as if it were there to insult him.

Mist was rising over the Gowanus Canal. The next ice age was coming. The continents were preparing to move back together into one huge land mass.

Bedsread

by *Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois*

I threw myself on the dusty bedspread fully clothed. I drew my knees up and laboriously unfastened my stilts. Without my stilts I was a below average midget. With my stilts on, I could intimidate anyone, a Chicago gangster, a member of the Medellin drug cartel, even my ex-wife. My wife was an average-sized woman, actually above average.

Height makes all the difference in the world.

I could walk through fire unharmed if my stilts weren't made of a dry, brittle wood. They would burst into flames in mere moments, and I would fall from my great height and be revealed as just another fraud.

With my stilts on, I can get close to the large bats that fly by day and hang from Eucalyptus trees. They swoop close enough around me that I inhale their stench, of shit, blood and cough lozenges without the honey.

Then I wade into the pond with the crocodile traps on its banks and the waterfall that attracts the betrothed to immerse themselves in catastrophe and vulnerability, precursor to their nuptial ceremonies.

None of them have pre-nups. They've never heard of that. They've never heard of Seasonal Affective Disorder or read the book, *Against Depression*, as if there's an argument. But there is—people argue about everything. People have all kinds of daffy ideas. People eat increasingly wacky gourmet dishes, to demonstrate that they are wealthy and atrociously special, even above the masses of the special.

I reclined on the bedspread, feeling truncated. I pressed a button, and "Iz" came on. Israel Kamakawiwo'ole was eight hundred pounds when he died. He was a mass of blubber floating in a pool. He had the sweetest voice. He played a tiny ukulele like Tiny Tim, who sang, *Tiptoe Through the Tulips*. About eight of me would fit in Iz's skin.

I worship pluralism. I worship people who have sex with those who share the same sex organs and people who change gender, like chameleons or seahorses. It is the male seahorse that bears the young. Their sex display is to blow up their bellies, to demonstrate that they can

hold a lot of offspring. After the babies are born, the mother eats most of them. In the Ajax Seahorse Factory, they remove the young from the tank as soon as they are born. Midgets appreciate this kind of data more than “normals”, people of normal height. There is research that demonstrates midgets are smarter than “normals” proportionate to their lack of height.

I wonder if I could climb onto the back of one of the bigger bats and take off on a blood-drenched adventure. I wonder why zombie shows are so popular these days. Is it that we all feel like walking dead? Americans, I mean. And vampires, the feeling that we’re having the life drained out of us by huge corporations. That’s why I’m voting for Bernie Sanders. And I’m doing a psycho-political study. I’m guessing that if Bernie Sanders is elected, interest in vampire and zombie TV shows and movies will decline.

I’m lying on the bed now, watching a zombie show on my little black and white TV. It is a midget-sized TV. I have midget-sized eyes. I don’t want to strain them with some goliath of a set.

* * *

“Much of my work is autobiographical, with some distortion or elaboration. Most of the subject matter in these two pieces is “real.” The elaboration comes from my subconscious mind, and emerges without my conscious volition

*The direct trigger for this story was reading a passage by Henry Miller in which he was going to the subway station to look for someone. My cousin who committed suicide lived in Manhattan. She was a lifelong resident. One of my associations with her is subways. Some of the material in *Bedspread* comes from experiences in Australia and Hawaii. I find that travel provides me with a lot of ideas and details for writing.”*

“Because You Fear Them”: On Citadel and ‘hoodie’ horror

by Ro McNulty

Ro McNulty lives in Bristol, UK. He writes literary and genre fiction, and his work can be found in markets as diverse as Onyx Neon Press and The Incubator journal.

In 2008’s *Eden Lake*, a nice, friendly couple go on a camping trip and end up being tortured by the local teenagers after Michael Fassbender accidentally calls one of them a dick. And so, a subgenre was born. ‘Hoodie’ horror – which includes *Cherry Tree Lane* (2010), *Heartless* (2009) and *Citadel* (2012), among others – was part of a wider fixation with the inner city in British cinema, typified by *Kidulthood* (2006), *Harry Brown* (2009) and their ilk. Hoodie horror established its own identity within the movement – it is a niche genre, in which the villains are violent ‘hoodies’ or ‘chavs’- delinquent teenagers from deprived backgrounds who prey on the innocent protagonists, seemingly just for fun. Films like *Heartless* and *Harry Brown* used urban landscapes, inner city estates and high-rise social housing as their backdrops, scaring the shit out of suburban Middle England in the process.

Eventually, the fad fizzled out, and by the time *Attack the Block* and *Anuvahood* came out in 2011, hoodie movies were already fertile ground for parody. It seems unlikely now that the hoodie horror subgenre will ever become as much of an established trope as its American cousin the ‘redneck’ horror undeniably has. Flash back to the end of the ‘noughties however, when *Kidulthood* was still cool and Plan B and Professor Green were staking their claims as the mouthpiece of the generation, and it seemed a given that council flats rather than castles would become the real estate of choice for the new Gothic. Hoodie horror was very much a product of its time; an era when the Conservative press was using the stick of ‘broken Britain’ to flog the dead horse of the New Labour government. By the end of the decade, the word ‘chav’ had made it into the Oxford English Dictionary. Everyone in Britain was scared of teenagers.

Hoodie horrors, though, were politically dubious. Whilst *Kidulthood* had generally good intentions towards its disaffected youths, the horror genre’s take on the social issues it portrayed was intensely reactionary. *Eden Lake* and *Cherry Tree Lane* featured White, middle-class, supposedly relatable characters being terrorized by ethnically diverse young

people from the so-called 'underclass', complete with white cider, mopeds, camera phones, and just about every other stereotype of Chav Britannia the directors could dream up. The genre drew on the classist, anti-welfare discourse popular in the run-up to the London riots to manipulate the social phobias of Tory Britain. Hoodie horror was roundly dismissed by Liberal pundits; Guardian columnist Owen Jones described *Eden Lake* as a film in which "The middle classes could no longer live alongside the quasi-bestial lower orders." The genre was written off as horror for Daily Mail readers.

The films are noticeably preoccupied with rape and sexual violence. This demonizing of the sexuality of marginalized men is a nasty, classist and racist device, recalling the 'Buck' figure in American blackface minstrelsy, used to instill disgust in the man with protector complex at the top of the social heap. This is a skewed, Whites-only fairytale worldview in which White knights rescue White damsels-in-distress from Black and Minority monsters; a hackneyed old narrative which casually sidelines everyone but the White men who the films are aimed at. *Cherry Tree Lane* in particular echoes this sentiment; if the film's message is that Black, working class teenagers will rape your women, then the 'you', the target audience of the film, inevitably, is White, middle class men.

Whilst *Eden Lake* bore the brunt of the criticism, 2012 late-comer *Citadel* was not immune either. Like *Heartless*, *Citadel* takes place in the middle of a high-rise estate, and its chief antagonists are hooded teenagers who are rendered inhuman by some sort of supernatural augmentation. In a letter to Sight and Sound magazine, one viewer slated *Citadel* for its poor timing in relation to the 2011 London riots, arguing that the film's "[depiction of] 'Them' as flesh-eating zombies, to be dispatched second-amendment style" was indefensible. Critic Roger Ebert showed his true Blue colours in his praise for the film, arguing in his review that children in hooded sweatshirts are inherently scary and inevitably criminal. *Citadel* ends with the blowing up of the tower block in which the demon teens live; the moment is obviously supposed to be cathartic, but by seeming to advocate social cleansing, *Citadel* arguably leans even further to the reactionary Right than *Eden Lake* does.

It would be unfair, though, to write *Citadel* off as simple bourgeois fear-mongering. The film is a highly effective horror. Its atmosphere is undeniably tense, riddled with anxiety and desperation, and its honest and courageous depiction of its protagonist's mental illness lends the film a sensitivity that is hard to find amongst the grit and gratuity of the hoodie genre. Its

message is more ambiguous than it first appears, and deserves further examination. Despite the criticism it received, the film's (very literal) demonization of young people is too obvious to be taken at face value.

Whilst American hillbilly horror is the most obvious influence on the hoodie horror genre, *Citadel* itself arguably owes a debt to the 1992 slasher classic *Candyman*. Although *Citadel* takes place on an East Glasgow estate and *Candyman* on the Cabrini-Green neighbourhood in Chicago, the similarity between these two locations is striking. *Citadel's* derelict tower blocks are eerily reminiscent of the looming projects that form *Candyman's* backdrop. In both films, the seediness and deprivation are exaggerated almost cartoonishly, the imagined estates leaving realism behind and transforming into the 'ghettoes' of middle-class nightmares: lawless no-go areas in which the protagonists are victimized simply for not belonging.

Candyman has taken its fair share of criticism over the years, and at first glance the film is no less reactionary than *Eden Lake*, heaping scorn on Black America just as the UK hoodie films defame the British working class. However, whilst UK hoodie horrors tend to come down on the side of privilege, *Candyman* is a vocally anti-racist film that challenges and critiques the fear it seeks to instil in its predominantly White audience.

In the US in the 1980s and 1990s, Conservative news media often depicted the inhabitants of the Cabrini-Green estate in Chicago as senselessly violent, savage, almost inhuman. This narrative will be familiar to anyone who remembers the endemic 'Broken Britain' narrative and anti-welfare populism in the UK Tory press during the late 2000s. *Candyman* acknowledges this, and uses the audience's preconceptions of urban America against them. As we recoil from the deprivation of the estates, the spotlight is turned on us, and we are forced to realise some uncomfortable truths about ourselves in the process. The Candyman himself is the ghost of Daniel Robitaille- a freed slave killed in a brutal lynching to punish him for taking a White lover. The film's depiction of racist violence provides a powerful contrast to the latent racism of Helen Lyle, the White protagonist, and her fear of the Black community. We inevitably begin to identify with Helen, and the film reveals our own prejudices to us, whilst simultaneously giving us a stark reminder of the violence that these preconceptions can lead to if left unchecked. *Candyman* doesn't just make us afraid, it asks us why we are afraid, and cautions us against our fear.

Citadel takes a cue from *Candyman*, and the film attempts to challenge social phobias rather than simply antagonizing them. *Citadel*, though, takes its critique even further; a hard-line and eccentric Catholic priest reveals to protagonist Tommy late in the film that the monster teens can sense human fear. If Tommy is not afraid of them, then he can pass by them unnoticed and thus rescue his daughter. This assertion, that the fear of their would-be victims is the youth's greatest strength, is something worth thinking about.

To anyone familiar with a certain type of young, middle class men, this attitude may be hauntingly familiar. One result of the Dizzee Rascal and Dubstep era was that the inner city, although shunned by grown-ups, became the definition of cool among the younger generation. A trend emerged in which youngsters across the social spectrum would impersonate urban working class youth, and especially young Black men, in their language, dress and music. Hoodie comedy *Attack the Block* brilliantly satirized this with the character Brewis, a White, rap and reggae-loving university student who visits the Brixton block to buy cannabis and embarrasses himself trying to make friends with the local teenagers. Whilst the valorisation of working class youth initially seemed progressive, for the privileged, social class became purely a matter of performance; a sort of fancy dress that could be taken on and off again like a flat-peaked cap.

In this context, 'working class' almost always meant working class and male. The same boy's club tropes that underlie the rape fantasies in hoodie horror run deep into the so-called 'gritty realism' of the wider pop culture of the time. The aping of working class culture all too often involved a performance of hyper-masculinity, and inevitably class and gender became confused as young, middle class men mixing in a working class world came to understand class as a matter of machismo. Author Tom Wolfe echoes a similar sentiment in his novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*; in which a wealthy New York bond trader refers to getting lost in the Bronx at night as going "into the jungle". To the bond trader, the working class are animals. They, too, can smell fear, and interacting with them becomes an exercise in chest-beating.

The better hoodie movies acknowledged this; Brewis's problem in *Attack the Block* (and Tommy's problem in *Citadel*, too) isn't so much that he is posh, but that he is foppish, shy, and ultimately effeminate. It is because of this, not the brashness of their class privilege but rather the modesty of their gender privilege, that neither character can pass in the working class milieu.

This is where *Citadel* distances itself from the more sensationalist hoodie movies. Understanding fear is central to the film; indeed, the narrative is underpinned by Tommy's battle with anxiety and agoraphobia. It is not the working class characters themselves, but rather the protagonist's attitude towards them, that propels the film. In siding with the doom-mongering priest against the advice of Marie, the more liberally-minded nurse, the main character succumbs to his personal fears rather than overcoming them.

The millennial generation has always had a bipolar attitude towards the inner city. It is a generation that lapped up urban youth culture while simultaneously voting for village green Conservatism, dub-stepping through the slashing of social housing and unprecedented rises in child poverty. In light of this, it is ironic that victory for *Citadel's* protagonist is seemingly to regress rather than progress. His prejudices and fears are vindicated, not resolved, and he ultimately triumphs by faking a sense of belonging, rather than by discovering one. In this way, *Citadel* makes a keen observation about the hoodie culture, its expropriation of the inner city and its reductive, depoliticized attitude towards the working class.

At one point in the film, Tommy and Marie find a pack of the hoodie monsters loitering in an underpass. Marie turns to Tommy, and says "They can't hurt you if you're not scared of them". This is the cornerstone of *Citadel's* social commentary, and it serves as a message for the hoodie horror movement and British culture more generally: The hoodies are not out to get you, they are not interested in you, and if you're scared of them, it's your problem, not theirs.

On the Letters to Margaret

by Fred Nolan

Fred Nolan works in risk management for a commercial construction firm. "On the Letters to Margaret" represents his short fiction debut. Fred lives near Dallas, Texas with his wife and two children, and is currently working on a novel set in the Middle East.

When Dušan is born the authorities take him into custody. Prompt, uncaring. Barely a word. One of the marshals – it is the skinny one, with a pressed uniform and the eyes like riot shields – says, “Are you the mother of Dušan Janusz?”

Her surgeon only delivered the boy a few hours before and Margaret is not used to the question. She can only say, “Why?”

“Dušan is a person of interest, the killing of Prime Minister Dunham.” The statement is prima facie absurd but she does not answer in those terms, nor has the man offered it with any hint of theatre. Perhaps his curtain of a face is the only hint she needs. Her son has to fight to breast feed, fight to cry. And more, is Prime Minister Dunham not still alive? He is set to return to the country today, after a week of discussing tariffs and trade quotas overseas. She says as much and the marshal replies, “I suggest you watch the news.”

Her husband Vukal stands and crosses the room, close enough to smell. He is not the same man as before, but his hair adds two inches of height and the winds have done something to his face. It helps that he is still wearing a coat, despite sweating through it during her labour. Vukal says, “What is this all about?”

The other marshal steps forward, nearly a metre. This one fits the shirt well and seems quick to anger. “Have you been paying attention?” The steady voice alarms Margaret more than anything.

Vukal says, “You tell me that my son killed the prime minister. My son is a baby, a new baby. My only son. We love the country and the prime minister and both elected him twice.”

Two voters, two votes, but with such alarm Margaret has to struggle with the arithmetic. Vukal says, “I paid attention, but are you paying attention? I said, what is this all about?” Margaret can only think in stage terms now and wants to ask him, when did you learn to speak in meter?

The second marshal leans out of the room and gestures. There are more in the hall. Margaret took the noise to be ambient hospital sounds, but sees now that there are twelve men

in all, more than twelve. Back home her husband would already have glanced down at his fists, but Vukal will get nowhere by fighting them off.

She says, "Please, honey."

"They are not taking our son."

"No need to stand up. They will be reasonable." When Vukal and Margaret emigrated they left a region full of military uniforms behind. Men with banners who claimed theirs was an uprising of reason.

She has picked the wrong word.

After a brief skirmish the marshals subdue Vukal. A single blow to the head, no arrest. They seize Dušan as a third officer aims a rifle slug at Margaret's temple. Her stomach fills with mercury. If it inches from her oesophagus to her throat she will be sure to vomit. The baby squeals hoarsely – a pig's first answer to a cage – but his mother is too acidic to cry.

* * *

A social worker visits in the first hour. Her uniform only reads Kernick and she is frail with outrageous white hair. She has been crying and looks as if she spends her off-hours in a garden. Some time ago a nurse switched the television on without Margaret asking and Kernick keeps stealing glances at the screen. But this way the newsfeed confirms it: a young anarchist with a beard across his scalp and a loose, torn shirt has murdered Prime Minister Dunham. A hotel kitchen execution: slaughter among butchery. Compared to most men the assassin is bedlam, a cloak with a face. But alongside other killers he is common. Tall, lean, handcuffed; a biography that did not piece together until now. Eyes framed within a disorderly tangle of wires.

Margaret does her best not to feel relieved, but at least the authorities did not simply invent the murder for the purposes of detaining a newborn child.

"No one mentioned it to me before. No one." Kernick has made the point several different ways already. Every time she does Margaret is tempted to say, *if the marshals had only followed procedure would the rest have been acceptable to you? That they arrested a baby for treason and put my husband out with a shotgun handle?* Vukal is still nauseous and has thrown up once, although that might also be the hospital food and other developments.

What Margaret says is, "No blame. We just want to have our son back, let him grow up here." That she has spoken, and the way she has misspoken, makes both women cry again.

Kernick says, "I can't even say who to call about who to call. Have you considered a defence lawyer? Criminal defence?"

“Whatever you recommend.”

“Of course my services are yours, that is part of the budget. But the services of a third party...”

What Kernick is trying to say is that criminal defence is expensive, a cost the hospital will not absorb. That or they can wait for the court to appoint an attorney for the child’s arraignment. In normal cases, twenty-four or forty-eight hours. Margaret crosses herself with two fingers, now thinks of her manicure. Is it the wrong colour for reverence? Red for blood, sure, although these days red normally means body.

Vukal says, “A skyrise attorney will do it for free. It will be easy for him, one or two hours of work. And *zhahlem!*, he is a star, defending a baby against murder charge, for the prime minister.” His local grammar is still bad and the term *skyrise attorney* makes Margaret think of their faith again. But her husband was referring to the penthouse law firms, near-silent nightclubs of typewriter music and prepaid security. And in their mother tongue *zhahlem* is a wizard’s command: shazam, presto. Every culture swears to magic in a different way and therefore produces different demons. Vukal’s demon, it appears, is that troublemaking spirit who makes folk heroes out of defence counsel.

At home Margaret carries her purse from the curb to the step. Indeed she carries it like a child, although the zipper troubles her, and the straps make her think of birth defects. Her mother has been looking after Mira and knows better than to speak. But Mira, who will turn four, says, “Where is Dušan?” Margaret has used her stomach to make promises to her daughter for six months now. For a moment, but only that, she entertains a horrible idea about her breasts.

Three generations of Pozderac women come together while Margaret cries and cries. Vukal, who was made to endure, brews a sort of coffee he will have to chew instead of drink.

* * *

It takes little time to find pro bono defence. But Vukal and Margaret see no other progress until the arraignment. They may not bring their child home in the meantime, and may not visit. Margaret wishes to speak to the boy via telephone but the attorney will not hear of it. In their one office visit leading up to the hearing, the lawyer, named Giske, says, “The agency understands the way they handled the arrest is a problem. If you do not charge the marshals with excessive force, they will drop the charge of witchcraft against Margaret.”

“Witchcraft!”

“It’s a fair exchange. And I recommend it.”

“Witchcraft is a charge?”

Dušan’s arraignment is the opposite from what Margaret expected. She looked forward to a long, dramatic thing with chanting crowds, placards, banging gavels, humourless security points. But this one is a wholly empty room, with festive dance music brought in by public address cable. Giske looks for someone to ask and puts his weight on two locked doors before a bailiff returns them to the first chamber. Two agency officials are inside now, as are two staff members from the District Attorney’s office. The agency is mostly acting as its own security and the bizarre music has been cut.

If she is not mistaken, Margaret recognizes the unkempt assassin just to her right, handcuffed and lost in a huge orange uniform, a prison officer on each arm. She knows she will dream about him always, in every nightmare that needs an antagonist. The men call him Bolin, a deceitful surname. Perfect for a traitor and so ugly a man. The throat of a choking animal, with a neck that looks to have taken one guillotine strike already.

The agency has not brought baby Dušan to the proceedings.

The judge comes and sits, unannounced. Both lead attorneys request a quiet approach, speaking at length to their own cuffs and wristwatches. Margaret can barely stand to look on; the hush of the proceedings both outrages and frightens her. Only the judge’s voice is clear, and only in glimpses: conspiracy, assassination, high treason, passport. They continue this way for only a few minutes, adjourning with a shared, respectful laugh.

Not until the lead prosecutor closes his portfolio does Margaret understand the hearing is finished. Time for sandwiches and early wine; a conviction before midday.

“Where is Dušan?”

“We have to be careful, you don’t understand.”

“And my son?”

“This is a bit of a unique case. Of course you know that.”

“Unique? That he’s a baby?” She looks to her husband, who she expected to have a throat in each hand already. When he is angry his mouth turns deep and terrible and he should be swallowing men whole by now, devouring the courtroom, turning law herself to bile. Instead Vukal grabs his legs through pants pockets, makes failed circles with his shoulders and struggles to open his eyes.

Margaret realises that she must look like this all the time, that Vukal rehearsed it only by looking to his wife.

Giske says, “Full testimony would be very damaging to the state, and to your family. The prosecutor hopes you will think of them less as an adversary and more as an ally.”

Margaret’s speech is flushed through. She looks to Vukal again; the mother of the accused has no argument left. Giske is no stranger to outraged muteness and says, “That was their offer. Thirty-five years in exchange for a short mention of the facts to a grand jury. No dates, no details.”

“Of course, I already know the date.”

“Yes. And our silence is as crucial as theirs. If at any time during his sentence we break it, they will move for an immediate jury trial, and for the death penalty.”

In a week Margaret receives the first of the letters. It is postmarked from Arlington and the calligraphy makes her check her own handwriting. It has been years since Margaret has put ink to stationery.

There is no address or signature, but there is little doubt that Margaret was the intended reader. The letter says, “Your son is in our care. We will never leave his side. He is as important to this country as anyone.” Margaret puts her hands to her face and walks every room in the house, trying not to slow down.

* * *

Margaret, Vukal and Mira celebrate Dušan’s first birthday with bolognese and cake. Mira’s favourite dinner is bolognese and she does not want her brother to settle for less. Vukal has built wall space enough for thirty-five years’ worth of gifts. They will buy him presents one year at a time and the boy can open them all at once when he returns, even if he is approaching middle age. Dušan will unwrap the plush toys and children’s books first; next, the soccer balls and skateboards. Beyond that, gramophone records, acoustic guitars, keys to the car. The fiction makes Margaret sob but she presses on anyway. Cutting one scene, adding more surprises to the shelves, tightening the dialogue. When Dušan is nineteen months old she throws up from trout almondine. She already suspected. Indeed, the nausea is two weeks late.

Margaret’s breasts and belly are full again when Petra Alcista comes for a first introduction. Activists have approached Margaret before, in the hopes of adding her name to one political cause or another: a national income guarantee, social reforms, an end to war.

Alcista’s approach – whether she means it to be or not – is different. She smiles warmly at the sight of Margaret’s stomach, reaches for it with both palms and breathes in noisily. “A little brother for Dušan!”

“This is Dušan’s sister, Ciella.”

Alcista says, “Ciella? Your mama is going to help me keep your big brother safe.”

* * *

Margaret’s political views are unsophisticated, and as a first-generation immigrant she believed the country to stand behind Prime Minister Dunham as a whole. Alcista shares a bottle of Irsai Olivér and describes a different man, one who was hostile to the poor, minority and immigrant. An otherwise incompetent executive who was skilled at war alliances and personal conquests. A man who deserved a crueller fate than two quick bullets to the forehead, not so much a death as a darkening orchard of sound.

Alcista says, “So many dead and out of work, there is nothing we can do to reverse that. All of the cities he unbuilt, it will take years to put back. But the men on death row, we can appeal every one, and in our lifetimes. You and I alone, with little outside expertise or money.”

She grins at Margaret’s stomach again: “No use leaving all of the work for our children to do. Come and meet one with me. His name is Michael Samara and he is ready to visit.”

“I’ve only ever thought about one death row case. Not that I am opposed to hearing about the others. You know Dušan has not had a trial by jury yet? The D.A. is only holding execution over our heads like a stick.”

She meant to say sword, but Alcista does not correct her. “I don’t need you to agree with me on capital punishment. I only need you to know that Dunham staffed the Ministry with judges who taste blood. If your first thought is to execute you will be blind to the process. It should be the opposite. Your first thought should be the process, with a blind eye to execution.”

Margaret does not like the word process, which recalls soft, unsalted meat or slices of bread that too easily become wet. She says, “As I meant, only one case has my attention. I know him to be innocent of his crime and of any crime. I watched over him every second of his life until he was arrested. Every last second.”

Alcista says, “It is not always a matter of innocence or guilt, but of the fitness to stand trial. If you are not fit to care for yourself day-to-day why should you be fit to answer for yourself in court, which sets the course for the rest of your life, or for your life itself?”

Margaret neither agrees nor disagrees. She has said it twice and will not repeat it again. She does not bother herself with the general issues of death row reform, judicial process or fitness for trial. Perhaps one day she will better describe her views but today she only means to snatch

one errant piece from the machine. Yes, that is a better analogy: “You’re talking about a ship that is off-course, yes?”

“I am! Exactly.” Alcista grins around a sip of wine, her teeth biting into the drink as if it were solid fruit waiting to ferment.

Margaret says, “But I’m saying I have left something precious on that ship, say, a wedding ring. I plan on having my ring back long before the ship arrives.”

“But if the ship arrives, everything is lost, including your ring. Help me stop the ship in its place, take your ring and let me figure out what to do with the rest.”

Margaret is silent. This is why she does not debate politics; not with Vukal, her father, any stranger. She is not good at it and cannot, in the heat of it, separate logic from rhetoric. That Alcista has unravelled her analogy seems like full argumentative defeat. English needs an expression about those whose victories come in generalities. Margaret could use such an idiom now and there was no need for one back home, where the rifles seldom loiter around, waiting for discourse.

The woman repeats: “Come and meet Michael Samara with me. We will let him make his case and, if you agree, we will tell it to others.”

“Is he at Dale Kester?” She means the Dale M. Kessler Correctional Facility, two hundred miles south. Baby Dušan is an inmate at Dale Kessler.

* * *

Margaret would never tell anyone but Michael Samara reminds her of Vukal. Not the one she married, but rather the Vukal she has come to know after Dušan’s botched arraignment, when Giske entered the guilty plea. Both men were born kind but prone to terrible things, and now have only resigned to ache. In their every word is a cold and constant pain, all over. Their sentences are different only in terms.

Samara is slow to consider, slow to answer, with an open, uninterested mouth and an animal’s sense of alarm. Margaret takes to him the way she would a dog with its head low, its tail pointed straight down, like piss. Alcista organizes a small awareness rally for six weeks out, creating pamphlets with phone numbers, mailing addresses, a fact sheet and photograph of Samara when he was young. Margaret is dressed for warm weather and plenty of walking, for handing leaflets to passersby. But she reconsiders her dress soon enough; Alcista says, into a quiet microphone, “We have a special guest here today.” Margaret becomes disconnected and feels her palms go all over, as if she had to rule out defects in the stitch one handprint at a time.

Alcista says, “You all know the case of Dušan Janusz, who was born on the day of the prime minister’s execution. Authorities took him into custody and threatened to charge his parents with witchcraft.”

The audience has started murmuring, each man looking to his wife as if they had brought a celebrity dowry along without meaning to. Alcista nods at the collective sound, says, “You heard me, a newborn baby. Prosecutors threatened to seek out the death penalty if his parents did not go away quietly or if they pressed for a jury trial. They haven’t seen their child since. That was a year and a half ago.”

Those passing through have stopped, which doubles the size, trebles the sound. Odd, though, that the register of true anger is so low and unshrill, prone to quiet. Alcista says, “Dušan’s mother, Margaret Janusz, has come to say a few words about Michael. We met with him a few weeks ago and that is the reason we’re here.”

There are between four and six dozen people watching; more than twice as many listening. Margaret thinks of a private glare for the speaker; they will have to exchange the microphone right away, and that will be her ideal chance. But she only smiles, puts arms around her friend and begins. She has been waiting for months to tell her story.

Margaret is not sure how closely to talk but the loudspeakers only squeal once, too briefly to notice. She introduces herself shyly, feels heat at the top of each cheek, now says, “Petra Alcista came to me because she knew about our son’s case. In an atheist democracy, federal policemen came to our hospital room and beat my husband, accused my child and I of witchcraft.” Margaret tries not to worry about grammar; the audience will assume by her name and accent that she is foreign, and will forgive her for a few lost pronouns. But at once she regrets the use of *atheist* when she meant to say *secular*. She has wrestled with the distinction before and already believed it to be unfair. Secular: the disregard of any belief in God; atheist: the belief that there is no God. Only English would demand two, un-rhyming words apply to only slightly reassembled definitions.

She says, “Petra asked me to pity Michael Samara, and Felipe Garza, and John-Paul Williams. And I told her I did not have room in my pity, I only had room for Dušan. She wanted to talk about the government’s treatment of convicts and the poor and those with no voice and I said no, no, no. For me there is only Dušan.”

Unexpectedly, the crowd applauds. Anticipating, perhaps, what she is preparing to say. The supposition is unwise; Margaret barely knows herself. Or is this why the expression discourse is rooted in course? Because the track, regardless of the competitors, is always the same?

She says, “I still had not let her in my front door and she told me, do not think of Samara, Garza, Williams and Dušan as four different inmates. Their pasts are different but their futures are the same. If it is easier for you, think of Dušan as all of them. I offer you what she offered me. If it is easier for you to think of Michael Samara as all death row inmates, or Felipe Garza as all death row inmates, so be it. Because if one court will listen, every court will listen.”

Those who were sitting are on their feet. All here are applauding, even Alcista, and those passing through. Margaret meets their applause with her own applause and does not care if it looks indiscriminate. She says, “I want to thank you. I hear your talk of diversity and I appreciate it. My people would never have come to a new home if your people did not want diversity. But in the eyes of a prison machine all men and children are without face, their diversity is lost. Their humanity is lost. So all I ask is for you to fall in love with one inmate, whether it is my son or yours, or Michael or John-Paul Williams. Because to love one is to love them all. To free one is to begin to free them all.”

The audience is cheering, whistling. Indeed, Margaret has never spoken so well, in English or in the language of her birth. Is this a factor in every rally? That speaker is made whole with her speaking material by the energy of a crowd, hands held in place for the sole purpose of clapping? Or instead has Margaret found, at last, her medium?

As she hands the cable back to Alcista, her partner wraps a small hand around the mouthpiece and whispers: “Perfect.”

Margaret, who knows now why she has come, says: “Next time give me a few days to prepare.”

“Never. Especially not now.”

After two more rallies – the third of which is the most raucous of them all – Margaret receives another letter. Like the first, it is postmarked from Arlington and written in a vague female script. It says, “You are doing wonderful work. You are an inspiration to us all.” She minds her posture but tries not to pose.

* * *

After Dušan’s third birthday Margaret and Alcista travel to York. There is an inmate in the maximum-security penitentiary there who claims an appellate judge quashed testimony that would have released him, freed him from death row. (On the former term, inmate, Margaret has started to carve into words more than she ever did in her mother tongue. The prefix in-, short for inn, paired with mate, meaning companion, is, to her, a disgusting mince. A hotel

fellow, a travel buddy. More, in poetic terms it refutes her own, now common refrain, that there are no individuals in prison. Only men duplicated over and over until the facilities are spilling over with one man. She tries never to say inmate, only prisoner.)

Alcista is not feeling well and goes to bed early each of the three nights; Margaret is restless and spends the second and third evening at the hotel bar. On the last night she meets Keith, who has come to York on financial consulting business. Keith claims to be an accountant but does not talk like one. His suit is too large and makes him take small steps. He has short red hair and facial hair, and his skin is rather the same in colour. He raises one hand to smile and both hands to laugh, although he does not once cover his mouth when he speaks. Keith describes his practice as an objective realm, where all is dualism and balance, and the other inevitabilities of commerce are tucked away in line items: price discounts, human error, horse trading, even graft and payoffs.

Arithmetic, he is trying to say, is refuge.

He concludes, "I hate business otherwise. I spend my time bewildered by human motives. But the general ledger and the balance sheets are a sort of method-world." She makes him repeat the last term twice, explain it, and at last she grasps what Alcista has been saying all along about process. Take, say, the time four months ago when she made another attempt to see her son at Dale Kessler. The administration turned her away yet again, and for the same reason as always: she cannot visit Dušan until he is old enough to give his consent. Dušan is not refusing her, he is simply too young, procedurally, to say yes.

The word *procedure* exists in her language, too, but it does not carry nearly the weight. Rather like how telling a child to fuck off or to bugger off is blunt, but not as detestable as it is in English. A correctional facility may be another one of Keith's method-worlds, but prison sentencing is wholly unmethodical. Margaret will change that.

She organizes a demonstration at Dale Kessler. Her sign reads Due Process for Dušan although that does not chant well. The crowd opts instead for *due process, overdue*, over and again. Margaret's words have turned to sound and filled the street and she tries not to let this gratify her. Volume does not mean momentum, nor does momentum, consequence.

Local police – enough to fill a van – arrest them, or perhaps only detain, but Margaret finds it telling that the men do not simply show them inside Kessler. Instead they drive to another jail, miles off; it is inefficient, an unnecessary use of time and treasure. While in lockup she drinks skinny coffee, served lukewarm, cool enough to stir with a finger. Soon Giske is here. He is quick to chide her: "Are you sure this is what you want? Full legal procedures?"

The sight of him alone has outraged her: “Why not? You hold me to procedure. It is only fair.”

“Don’t include me when you say you. I have always fought for you and your family.”

“We have not seen it, not even once.” Has she just said it, or him? She slipped the other day, when a handsome clerk at the deli counter asked if she had children. Margaret replied that she had two daughters, Mira and Ciella. After they spoke for a while she felt obliged to mention Dušan, although he was difficult to fit back into conversation without making it seem that she only forgot.

Giske says, “So you want a trial? For you and Dušan?”

“Yes. Today, even.”

“You are upset and I will forget all about this. But if you bring it up again I will do it. We will force the state to move forward with a trial. We will file charges of excessive force and illegal detention. They will charge you with witchcraft and Dušan with high treason. The jury will be intimidated by the D.A. and the sentence will be capital punishment for at least one of you if not both. I promise it.”

He says, “So I suggest you never mention it again.” But it is all she ever says, whether she is dissolving the sentiment into a cocktail or baking it into sourdough. *Due process for Dušan, a trial for my son.*

* * *

Within the year Michael Samara’s midnight appeals are spent. By law he is entitled to dinner with seven visitors, although he has no surviving parents, no children. When she and Petra Alcista receive an invitation, Margaret tries not to think of the convict’s wife.

Registering with prison security feels like being booked and Margaret begins to regret all manner of things. Not just the rallies and marches but the unpaid parking citations, an amateur cigarette she tried when she was varsity-aged. Two other guests are here: a man and a woman, both with expensive clothes and names Margaret will forget at once. The woman’s face is charred red and she cannot take her eyes from the floor. Moreover she has a thick, distracting hairstyle that must feel incarcerating to wear. In her world, a sexy makeover would be more like freedom.

There are five in all, but the second man looks weary, difficult to pin down. Alcista and Samara talk throughout the whole meal and within twenty-four hours he is dead. A third letter

is waiting: “If it is any consolation Mr. Samara was not who you believed he was. Your work should go on. You cannot lose momentum because of one setback.”

The prankster has given herself up: the letter is postmarked before the execution. This is the first time, ought to be the only time that Margaret responds: “Normally I might ask what you know of me or my work. But without a signature I do not even know if I know you.” By way of reply the anonymous woman sends a list of soccer scores, which Margaret tosses out with the chicken gristle.

* * *

Margaret knows she will not work with Alcista much longer. She has spent a precious amount of time with the activist and her rallies, petitions, interviews, but the women are making true progress, which neither could have done on their own. The group’s mailing list has nearly doubled in subscribers, while the York case is under review by special counsel and their catchphrase greets them almost everywhere: I Am All.

Oppositely, Ciella is no longer an infant, while Mira will soon be in elementary school. Her husband has never recovered from Dušan’s arrest and imprisonment. The family needs her again; Vukal more than the other two. He spends much of his time in the yard, along the development’s far edge which, for the sake of simplicity, Margaret has started to call the horizon.

Should they try to have one more child? She might bear a son.

Margaret offers dinner at Chez Artistes. It has her favourite drinks and an appetizer he always talks about. That she mentions it at all does something to his face and shoulders; he cannot fake it, he is happier already. As they park there is a great commotion in the pub across the street: men chanting, fists tied with banners. The proper word, although neither one knows it yet, is ominous.

Margaret asks the valet and he shrugs, says, “Maybe we scored against San Jose, but I doubt it.”

Margaret smiles into her cocktail and Vukal cannot put the menu down. But when the entrees come the earlier clamour tugs at her again. She is quiet for a time, now asks: “He said we were playing San Jose?”

“I believe so.”

She considers it at length, now says, “At soccer?”

“I believe.” She sees that Vukal’s answers are eroding, knows how much the silence weighs on him. He has started to curl inward at the edges again, a written recipe put in the oven on low heat. He rejects the waiter’s offers for dessert and port wine and is quick to pay the check. The game is finishing as he searches his pockets for the valet ticket. The pub, emptying out. Cars speed away, performing Doppler and dissonant brass. Men strip to the waist and run. Women squeal, laugh, turn their ankles while trying to keep up in high heels. Margaret is drunk and cannot distinguish the victorious taste of garlic from other victories.

The valet has not changed, nor does he seem to have moved. She says, “We won?”

“We did, three to one. Las Vegas is bankrupt tonight.” Vukal follows Margaret here and there and scorns her for it without speaking, enduring her lead from the curb to the car, now car to carport, through the house and into the back yard. Their renewal dinner turned heavily quiet, even unwieldy. (What was Alcista’s favourite phrase early on? Regressive?) It began with an elegant meal and ends here, at the trash bins, with Margaret fishing through garbage with her hands and Vukal still following. He says, “What are you doing?”

Margaret’s aunt had an expression for the casserole that forms when food scraps mix with garbage moisture to form a certain, edible musk. The term is *zyvach*, which seemed to take the old words for food leftovers and chess, suture them together. The expression matched the concoction well; another delicious gamble in which Eastern Europeans were dominant. More, the word seems to be a cognate of ceviche: raw fish prepared only with citrus, another gamble. Not garbage, mind you, but not as flavourful as *zyvach*, either.

And *zhahlem*, here it is, the letter from her unfaced riotess, with the soccer scores written down and which she threw away while cooking dinner earlier in the week. It is dated a week ago and postmarked from Arlington two days thereafter. She received the post three days ago. At last she answers him: “I’m checking for something.”

“In the trash?”

“Plenty of rewards in the trash.” Yes, Margaret is aware of what she has just said but only remotely, and hopes Vukal does not press her on it. She has lived most of her life as a foreigner now, with a fluent inner life, vibrant, but with outward illiteracy and stammer. There is no reason to exclude her husband from that. But he only says, “Not only in the trash, either.”

Here, at the bottom of the sheet, the anonymous woman has written “At San Jose, 3-1.”

She says, “We played San Jose tonight, am I right? We were visitors?”

“You tell me. Your sudden interest in soccer.”

“And we beat them three to one?”

“Yes, Margaret.” She passes the letter to him and he accepts, although the way he takes it the page droops heavily at the far edge. The effect is of a plant with one leaf. The leaf is dead and the hieroglyphics all over it mean blight.

It seems Vukal will refuse to read and she says, “The games before San Jose? Are they coming up, or are they done?”

Vukal glares and – without once moving his eyes – says, “They are coming up, in reverse order.” Only a spider can read like that and she thinks, *fitting, he is already looking at me like a spider does.*

The third game down is a home game, within miles of their neighbourhood, a week from now. She will learn from the hollering that the visiting team, Mehmed, has won, and will know the score by only reading from the page, which arrived in a sealed envelope ten days before the match. She places a meagre bet on the second game down: another home game, against Barbosa. She bets two hundred, no points in either direction. In the end the score is two to zero in favour of Barbosa, exactly as predicted.

A new industry is born. Sports wagers by post.

The first match on the list is a six-to-zero win against Kirkland, which Vukal assures her is wrong, if not wholly reversed. Kirkland was league champion three of the last five years and their home team, Douglas, will struggle to reach the semi-finals.

Margaret offers the casino Kirkland plus five and a half goals. The bookmaker insists she is giving money away but she repeats the bet and says, “What odds will you give me for that?” The clerk exhales in a way that sounds of gravel and petrochemical: you wonder if you are conversing with a man or with the back of a car that is pulling out of a lot.

Within three days of the match, Kirkland’s main striker is ill with the flu and the head coach has been arrested for disorderly conduct.

Margaret and Vukal watch the game in their living area. They invite guests and bring the set out from the master suite. (The choice is between moving the television and letting their friends gather on the bed. She fears her husband’s inevitable joke: that an orgy would remind them how to make love.)

The set, if not the game, cuts the room in half. The match seems more portentous this way, perched in mid-air like a broadcasting crow. Douglas scores early: a slow, deceptive shot from thirty meters. Margaret shrieks, claps, spills her husband’s beer. Say for now the predicted scores are doctrinal; it nevertheless took the human hand to write them out, and she has wondered for a fortnight if her letter writer reversed the team names. Even with a distracted head coach and replacement centre-forward, Kirkland arrived tonight as the statistical favourite.

But now, with Douglas's first score a six-to-zero loss is impossible. All Margaret needs now are five more goals.

Kirkland is sluggish from the beginning: the players overcommit, the coaches only respond with hoarse shouting. The refereeing is mostly competent, but all of the lapses are in Douglas's favour. There is a fistfight after the fourth goal, with only moments left in the first half. Margaret cannot tell if the huge streaks of red are blood or floodlighting and yes, it would make a difference.

She needs two more goals for the payoff but that does not seem impossible anymore. The game is an untidy blowout, and a boring one. Four of their guests leave during halftime and two more keep checking their watches during the second half.

Another goal, now another.

There are over thirty minutes left on the clock and Margaret feels her alliances switch all at once. A 7-0 victory would be cruelly vague, and 7-1 would be tectonic. She cares less for the financial gain now and more that the final score reads exactly as predicted. Vukal warned to her during the opening hour of the contest, watching her cheer for Douglas, truly engage with the sport. But now she is alarmed again, adding the distance back between herself and her husband. Less anxious about family or guests, and more, god forbid, about one more goal, for or against.

Thankfully Douglas is slowing, having exhausted their starting line-up with so much early force. But with five minutes left they score again. Margaret gasps, stares wide, now moves her hand to one knee and pulses it wildly. A referee calls the play back: one of the shooter's feet was out of bounds at the moment of the kick. Margaret sags into the couch like wet clothes: the game will end six to zero. She can only think of one thing more frightening than magic, and it is errant magic.

The casino cashier nods when Margaret presents the betting receipt. The woman stands and seems to crack her knee on a leg of the desk. Margaret says, "Goodness, love," but the cashier is mute, passing between two gaudy columns. It takes a while for her to return and so many blinking lights, cartoonish noises let Margaret invent all kinds of explanations. Most of all that the woman has truly hurt her knee, and sits bleeding in a back office somewhere, the receipt forgotten.

But no, the cashier reappears with a casino executive and a security guard. Neither casts a smaller shadow than the other, although Margaret hopes the guard is the one to show her out if need be. The other is older, seems angrier, and has lake water instead of a face. As if a child

had dropped a pebble into his mouth and the concentric wrinkles spread out like ripples in the surface.

Then again, when he speaks, the words come from drought: “Margaret Janusz?”

“Yes.”

He holds the receipt up, dwarfing it with fingerprints. “Kirkland plus five and a half? Exactly six goals?”

“Yes?”

“A striker with the flu, a coach with a bogus arrest, and the number seven goal which the referee calls back? Six goals exactly?”

“Sorry, I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

The man makes a scene of wadding the coupon into a knot of paper fibres, now dropping it into an unseen bin. Margaret looks at the cashier and says, “You’re not paying me my winnings?”

“Excuse me - winnings?”

“My deposit then?”

The man turns as he says, “Deposit?” Margaret thinks of calling the authorities but in the end there is no need. The authorities have come to her. Perhaps they should charge her with sorcery after all; she thinks of filing a complaint and all at once the law appears at her door, without one word from the complainant.

Bureau agents all but let themselves in, photograph her rooms from every angle, put gloves to the flat surfaces. One of the agents finds the soccer scores and shows it to the lead investigator. She tries to comfort herself this way: *They do not have a case, Margaret. For all they know I am tracking Douglas’s season.* Today, those four games are historical, not speculative.

But the chief turns to Margaret and says, “What did I tell you about witchcraft?” Did they meet once already? She has only one possible answer and makes it as small as she can: “And what did I tell you about excessive force?”

Vukal – who, she sees now, can forgive anything – suggests they bring in Giske for the defence. But if they are looking for another pro bono arrangement they can rely on the court appointment.

No, she would rather pay this time. She writes to the anonymous address again: “Legal problems. More soccer scores?” The response comes within two weeks, “We know all about the trials, and they have changed the world for good.” There are dozens of sporting results written in close: soccer, prizefighting, horses, dogs. While she awaits the grand jury Margaret

may neither leave the country nor wire funds abroad, and there is not a casino within newsprint distance that will let her in the door. Margaret will have to sell the results to others instead, asking for only portions of the winnings.

She begins with neighbours, with friends and parents of Mira's classmates. Keith from the hotel at York refers her to a real estate developer named Anthony Gallo, who jokes about moving dirt around for a living. She does not understand and he is too polite to repeat or clarify, but when Vukal explains it later, Margaret nearly shudders. She cannot look at their development the same way again, despite that the one hundred acres of earth has been at rest for ten years.

She offers Gallo the results of a lightweight bout free of charge (Powell over Sanchez by TKO, in the tenth), and now sells him the scores to three soccer matches. She would benefit from Vukal telling her which upcoming defeats will be upsets and which will be commonplace, because that would affect her pricing. But Vukal refuses to speak a word about it.

Even so, after the third soccer match Gallo calls her, an unsolicited move: "You're making me rich, sweetheart. I could put my grandkids in college like this."

Lately she is mostly silent and he says, "You're not charging me nearly enough."

Margaret says, "Good to hear, because you're not paying me nearly enough."

* * *

The trial is in late summer, after a gruelling seven weeks with no rain and little wind. There has been plenty of hell and purgatory humour to begin with, but those jokes turn to Margaret now that the hag will come forward and answer for her spells.

She comforts herself by enduring the heat along with everyone else.

Around midday the August sun jabs at the skin as if with needles, but it is worse in late afternoons, when it has been collecting on the pavement as if in a cloud.

She, Vukal and Dušan will face the grand jury together. Gallo has agreed to cover their legal expenses provided that Margaret still comes forward with sporting results, at least ten per month. Today is the first day of the trial and she is nervous about meeting Dušan again. The boy is almost five: old enough to notice her dress, choice of shoes. Whether or not she is skinny.

They recognize each other at once, mother and son.

Dušan is not as handsome as she expected but she cries all the same. He is lean from the prison diet yet his face is broad, somehow thick at the cheeks. He wears the bruised eyes of the

truly exhausted: spread thin by events, yes, but just as well spread thin by years with no events at all. Years after years. It causes Margaret to reconsider his age but no, he is only four.

She steals a moment with her son, putting two blunt hands around his shirt and burying him with her hair. He reaches, too, with weary hands.

“I’m so sorry, baby. You’ll be home soon.”

“Not so soon. I’ve been at this a long time, mama.”

“Don’t say that.”

“But we’ve changed the world. It’s easy now that I know the plan has worked.” He speaks like an adult, with the vocal rhythms of a man who holds a cigarette at his teeth, chats while he looks around for a match.

He notes her expression and says, “I’m free when I’m twenty-four years old. We’re together then.”

At last he says, “And it’s been good to see papa.”

Something is happening to his face and Margaret says, “What is it, baby?”

“Nothing. This is the last—” but a bailiff has removed her to the opposite side of the courtroom, despite that she begs for another minute. One goddamn minute, a mere coin of time; you find coins simply laying in the street, unclaimed, mostly unseen.

She barely hears the specifics of the testimony: the date of the prime minister’s murder, the time of death, the address of the hotel in which Dunham was slain. The murder weapon, Bolin’s confession. But Dušan has brought himself together again and hears every word. Now and again he will look to Margaret and smile, or make the gesture with his eyebrows.

Here is the basis of the district attorney’s claim: despite that the prime minister’s daily agenda was unpublished and security was utmost, Bolin came upon the finest details of Dunham’s last day, and of his hotel’s floor plan. He knew about a thirty-minute tour of the premises during which the politician would meet and shake hands with staff, including restaurant staff. But the food servers knew nothing of the tour. Only security did, and Bolin.

All the killer needed to do was take a table in the restaurant, which was open to the public despite the intrusion of secret service. While ordering he claimed severe food allergies, and asked to inspect the kitchen. Bolin was dressed in a jacket and tie already and when the waiter saw the would-be assassin’s hair, he made sure to find a hair net. This way the restaurant hosted two kitchen tours at once: one for Dunham, another for Bolin, the latter of whom looked, at a glance, like another kitchen employee. Secret service agents momentarily disregarded him, and the killer came within two meters of the prime minister. Bolin shot twice at close range, killing the politician in mid-step.

It was impossible that the murderer acted alone: few knew that Dunham would stay in the hotel, tour the kitchen. Bureau agents asked him about a plot within secret service, or the hotel ownership. But Bolin insisted that he maintained an occult conduit with the inmates of Dale Kessler, specifically a would-be six-year-old named Dušan Janusz (the district attorney repeats the term over and over again: “occult conduit”). That the child was born at the moment of the execution lent an uneasy credence to the claim, and more, it turned the bureau’s attention to Margaret. But Bolin was clear on this point: Dušan was not presently to blame. The boy would conspire when he was older.

Margaret understands now that she has handled her end of the plot without fail, despite knowing nothing of it. She hired Giske as the family’s first attorney, and he proved to be a blundering lamb who would accept the incarceration of an infant provided the state put aside talk of capital punishment. She remained in the public eye with Alcista’s demonstration and the march on Dale Kessler, then – when Dušan was old enough to understand his role – she overbid on the Kirkland soccer match, which renewed suspicions of witchcraft, despite that she was innocent.

Has the district attorney’s office somehow checkmated itself? Dušan hears testimony of when and where the prime minister was slain, and the details of the killer’s exact methods. All he needs now is to get the information to Bolin, five years ago.

* * *

Another letter comes: “Our hearts break. We beg, if there is any way, always avoid Oak at Cedar.” Does the unnamed woman mean Oak and Cedar? Does Margaret have allergies she does not know about, perhaps enough to kill her?

Instead of the cryptic plea, Margaret mostly thinks of Eugène Lonseny, the Nigerian writer and radio celebrity. As a child he became renowned for his insight, making predictions with impossible accuracy, on matters pertaining to local politics, sporting contests and law. When those events would pass he often forgot them entirely, despite the precision with which he had forecasted. He began smoking and drinking very young; at age eleven, according to his biography, although there is a photograph of a much younger boy with a weary expression and a highball glass at one elbow. Dušan shares that expression with Lonseny and it is the name of the biography that concerns her: *The Child who Lived His Life in Reverse* (of the term child, Lonseny disappeared for good at age twenty-four).

She has heard dispatches from his radio show: Lonseny's voice barely rising over the volume and character of the weather. Margaret always assumed the title of the biography was figurative: a drunkard boy who remembered the future and could only speculate about the past. Today she poses terrible questions: What if it was literal? Did Eugène Lonseny somehow experience his days in reverse?

If there are others like him, Dušan may be one. She remembers the way her son greeted her: "I've been at this a long time. We've changed the world."

And she remembers: "It's been good to see papa."

Oak and Cedar, you see, is a traffic intersection. Margaret and her husband have become lost in the garden homes district, looking for a new house. Ciella and Mira have become cramped in the shared bedroom (Margaret refuses to paint the nursery walls purple and Vukal does not have the will to fight about it). Their back yard is too small and Mira wants a dog. They have left the girls with a friend and started driving other neighbourhoods, looking for signs. Not prophecies, mind, because those are all back in the mail pile.

If Dušan was born into the same condition as Eugène Lonseny, he has been in prison for nineteen years, not five. He has seen, she figures, the reformation of the country, his father's death, and -- not incidentally -- a lifetime's worth of sports matches. He has found others like him, both prison inmates and not, and enlisted their help in getting Dunham's itinerary to Bolin, in getting certain words of comfort to Margaret and Vukal. She thinks of the red-faced woman at Michael Samara's last meal, of the text of the first letter: "Your son is in our care."

Streets here run north to south, avenues run east to west. Ash, Elm, Maple, Oak Streets and Birch, Box, Cedar and Pine Avenues. She turns east into the neighbourhood: Box Avenue. She passes Ash Street, Elm Street, knows now that Oak will take her south along the back of the property.

So many questions, and she will find no answers without terrible loss. Margaret turns to her husband and says, "All the way to the back?"

"Yes," he says, perhaps not as fatigued as in recent years. "All the way."

* * *

"In a way, 'On the Letters to Margaret' is my oldest story. The inspiration came when I was a teenager, on a downhill skiing trip in Colorado. A friend, an immigrant from Yugoslavia, wanted to show his parents what a real jump looked like (all they knew of the sport was the crash during the title credits of Wide World of Sports, which their son would outdo). When he landed both skis disengaged, whipping around him like helicopter blades. I still remember the pock-mark in his face and the blood on the ice, unerringly red. His father—in fiction I call him Vukal—had to carry the boy to the car.

There was talk of my friend's hand requiring surgical removal. When his mother told us that, it felt like an accusation, and I likely did not speak much afterward. Hopefully I have not imagined the rest: security personnel came to the hospital room and threatened to tow their sedan, or perhaps the car was already impounded. It seemed inevitable that the dispute would end in a fistfight although the father remained calm; a powder keg that, the moment before detonation, opted for restraint."

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Cover photo from 'Forgotten' series ©**Kathleen Pendlington**

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