

SHIRLEY



ISSUE EIGHT

FEATURING STORIES BY:
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AUGUST 2017



THE 45TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES...

by Grant Gerald Miller

...LED ME OVER THE ST. JOHNS BRIDGE

The 45th President of the United States led me over the St. Johns Bridge and into Forest Park. The trees were creaking. The sun was a mess in the sky. We came to a clearing scattered with the bones of dead raccoons. The 45th President of the United States stopped and kneeled on the ground. Let's plant seeds for a brighter tomorrow, he said. We dug a hole large enough to fit the 45th President of the United States in. You'll have to make me lighter so you can pick me up and put me in the hole, he said. I wondered why I had to pick him up at all. Why I couldn't just help him into the hole. Or push him. Or roll him. Instead of asking questions I proceeded to make him lighter. I plucked out his eyes and tossed them into the hole. I reached my hand into his eye sockets and pulled out strips of baling wire and confetti and tossed these into the hole. When his head was empty, I reached into his torso. His lungs were made of cardboard. His heart was a fidgeting guinea pig in a bright cage. His liver was a clump of top soil. I pulled out his ribcage and set it on the wet grass. His entrails were shredded CVS bags and rotted Chinese take-out boxes. When I'd hollowed him out down to his feet, I lifted him over my shoulder and gently set him into the ground. He was an empty budding tree. Are you happy? I asked him. Shut up, he said. And watch me grow.

...AND I WENT TO A MOVIE

The 45th President of the United States and I went to a movie. It was a matinee on a Tuesday so we were the only ones in the theater. When the movie started, the 45th President reached over and grabbed my hand. He braided his fingers with mine and squeezed. I leaned over and put my head on his shoulder. After a while I wanted more popcorn. I tried to get up but the 45th President of the United States wouldn't let go of my hand. I tugged at him, but he wouldn't budge. I reached out to touch him and get his attention and I noticed that he was smooth and cold and hard as rock. I ran my free hand along his body, but the 45th President of the United States had turned to stone. I got comfortable in my seat and tried to pay attention to the movie. It was a movie about apes fighting with humans. When the movie was over and the credits started rolling a movie theater employee came into the theater with a broom and dustpan. I waved her over. I'm sorry, I said to her. But I seem to be trapped here with the 45th President of the United States of America and he has turned to stone. The movie theater employee rolled her eyes. Hang on, she said. Let me get a manager. I looked over at the 45th President of the United States. His stone eyes were fixed on the blank movie screen. I patted him on his smooth shoulder. They're coming for us, I reassured the 45th President. They'll be back soon to help us.

...AND I WENT DEER HUNTING

The 45th President of the United States and I went deer hunting. It was still dark as we crept through the woods with flashlights, our rifles slung over our shoulders, the leaves crunching under foot. We found our tree and climbed up to the stand and sat on five-gallon buckets and waited for dawn. Our breath shot out in clouds. Later, we heard a rustling in the distance. A couple dozen yards off a large buck stood between two trees. The 45th President stood up quietly and rested the butt of the gun on his shoulder and peered through the scope. I watched him hold his breath as he squeezed the trigger. The rifle cracked and the buck darted off through the woods. We shimmied down the tree and chased after him. We found a thin trail of blood and followed it over a small ridge where we saw the buck lying on its side, panting. The 45th President of the United States pulled his hunting knife from his belt and tiptoed toward the buck. The buck jumped up in a surge and lunged forward and speared the 45th President

with his antlers. The 45th President staggered backwards, clutching his stomach, and the deer pounced on top of him and began to box him with his hooves. I fumbled with my rifle and cocked it and aimed at the buck, but he ran into the woods before I could get off a shot. I rushed over to the 45th President where he lay bleeding from multiple punctures on his stomach and chest. I put my hands over his wounds and noticed his blood wasn't blood at all, but thousands of tiny 45th Presidents of the United States escaping from the 45th President of the United States' body and dashing into the woods. Thousands of them poured from the 45th President of the United States. His body began to contract and shrivel like a blow-up raft until he was nothing but a crumpled suit and clumps of hair. I staggered backwards and turned and ran through the woods. I didn't see any of the thousands of tiny 45th Presidents of the United States that must've been out there, shirking behind leaves, clinging to the tree bark, burrowing in the dirt. I couldn't see them but I could feel millions of tiny eyes watching me, as sure as the warmth of the morning sun rising, as I ran back to the truck.

JUST WAIT

by Lisa Gordon



It hurt a whole fucking hell of a fucking lot. She wanted to die. She must have muttered it or said it out loud, because the doctor said something about how she couldn't die, she was creating life, right there and now. She focused on branches outside the window, silhouettes of deep gray against a sky turning to dusk, so lit up through the slatted blinds that she swore she could see the day actually ending.

They treated her the way flight attendants treat a child traveling alone on an airplane. To be honest, she liked the attention. When she was open wide enough for the man to come out, she felt like she was the world. It only lasted a second, and then she felt her body in such a way that she marveled at her own existence—such a miracle, if she believed in miracles, which she did not, nor did she believe in God—and was so taken aback by her submission to the event that she clenched up and the doctor yelped.

“No,” he said, very sternly, in such a state of surprise. “Push,” he yelled. “Relax.”

Such strange words bumping up against each other. The direction was jarring and confusing. She cried, twisted her face into unrecognizable patterns. She wanted it out, her life was over, she wanted to know—would she love him? She was supposed to; she'd created him. Chosen carefully: hair, eyes, body type, 5 dominant personality

traits. (She did not pay extra for more, even though most of her friends did.) (They were happy now, it seemed.)

The branches outside swayed. It was a cold day for Northern California.

"Give me something," she gasped. She didn't care what it was. She'd seen it on TV. The doctor called a nurse and the whole thing was over in a few moments and then her body didn't feel like hers anymore, which was better, because she didn't like the sudden ownership she had felt before anyway. It was too much.

She stopped remembering after that until about when it seemed to really be happening. Her legs ached like a memory, the whole bottom half of her was elsewhere, just a vessel. She felt everything in a hollow way, thankful for the drug, yet furious with it. It didn't hurt exactly, but the absence of pain could have been worse. She'd never know. She knew she needed it to be over soon and suddenly an authority overcame her, a fiercely natural thing, and she reached between her own legs and pulled him out. She turned him around and held him apart from her face, resting her elbows on her bent knees, panting. He squirmed, covered in human-ness, ugly, slippery, bizarre. He'd need three weeks to come to full term and constant attention, they told her in the clinic. It was expensive. Marian's mother, a traditional southern lady who lived a life of unhappiness, had left her the money.

He did not make a sound. She searched for his eyes.

Quickly, he was taken away. The nurse came back and cleaned Marian off with a towel.

"Beautiful," she said. "What are you going to name him?"

Why were newpersons always called beautiful? Were any of them ever, actually?

"I don't know," Marian said.

"'I don't know' isn't a very good name," the nurse said, pleased with herself, swiping Marian's limbs. Marian half-smiled out of niceness.

A name—a name! Just task one of the to-do list of her life. What could she name the person she'd created to fulfill her every wish, desire, hope, dream, basic need? It felt

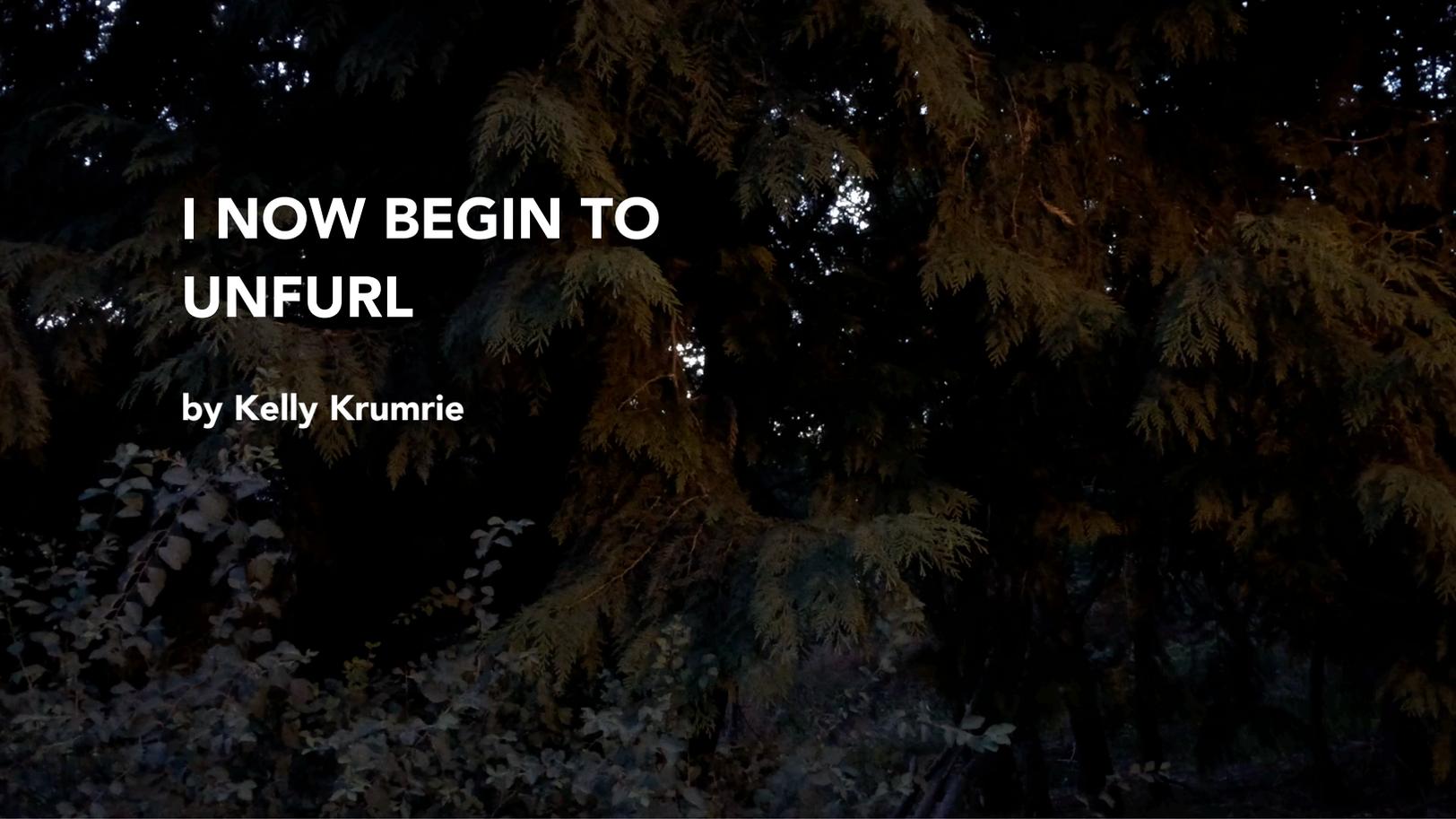
like such a task, like something you cross off a list. Names mean everything, and yet they mean nothing. Marian had heard of people whose namesakes had been random things: a word picked out of a dictionary, a name seen rolling on the credits of a television show.

“When do I have to decide?” Marian asked the nurse, who was nearly out the door. She turned back.

“Technically, about a year. You know—legal-wise. But not technically?” She pursed her lips together in one corner of her mouth, silently scolding Marian. Then she left, and Marian was alone.

She spent two days in the hospital, which consisted mostly of some classes: How to Love Your Newperson, How to Grow & Sustain Your Newperson, Stages of Life with Your Newperson. She was allowed to visit him twice a day for 5 minutes each. The tubes and tape and things coming out of his tiny body obstructed Marian’s view of him, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to see him, anyway. Mostly, Marian looked down at him, bewildered. She wasn’t allowed to touch him yet. All she could think about was how big his private parts would be, and how she’d ever be able to allow him inside of her for pleasure when he’d grown inside of her for life.

They discharged her with a pink balloon that said “Newperson, New Life”, which Marian thought was grotesque. They patted her on the shoulder and smiled. She went home and sat on her couch and at her kitchen table and ate cereal and watched TV and clipped her toenails. She waited, the minutes and hours passing by impossibly slowly, to feel it: Stage 1, Anticipation. Stage 2 was arrival; Stage 3 was Getting Acquainted; Stage 4 was Love. That was all: just Love. Just like that. She shook her head and felt ridiculous and hopeful, a strange combining of two disparate emotions that began to feel as pure as any single one. She was 41; a lot of life was behind her, and yet—they said when she paid the bill, handing her the information packet and sending her off with bright faces—there was so much still ahead: every happiness, every wish she’d ever made, was soon to be hers, just wait, you’ll see.



I NOW BEGIN TO UNFURL

by Kelly Krumrie

My cousin became a burst of pollen—in an instant she burst open; her breath fell upon us in yellow dust. I stood beside my aunt who began brushing the stuff off of me, fast and rough, as if it would pollinate me, my pores opening wide for her new yellow cells. I was, then, already fertilized. One moment does not lead to another. My cousin, she changed quickly, at once. A girl and then nothing. We had heard of this happening, but slowly.

The forest is dark and closed. The understory layers, does not yield for me. The ferns smell very strong, and there are red funguses growing beneath them.

What has formed in me I shall give him.

The ferns smell very strong, and there are red funguses growing beneath them outside my uncle's house. I've inspected their undersides and looked closely at the sori, wondering when they'll burst, let the spores blow away.

I've inspected my undersides and looked closely at the cavity with a small mirror, but it is dark and closed.

At school we talked about animals in spring time, buds opening with a gasp, and babies forming in women, in girls, and my husband sat across the room avoiding my gaze. My father had arranged everything over the phone.

From the growing bulb of my abdomen I imagine the sprouting, what will come out at the end of it. Tendrils, a tap root descending, pulled by gravity or open, warm soil.

I have a steady unquenchable thirst as if the child inside is a water lily, algae, a sea plant I can't imagine. If my body holds a blossom, I will bear it, and no one will show surprise. If, months from now, I change into a corn stalk, upright and heavenly, my husband will tend to my watering.

He blames my cousin when I go into the forest and inspect the undersides of ferns. The ferns smell very strong. I am also a girl. I am not looking for her.

If my baby is instead a sorus, when I bear her, she will burst into a thousand spores and litter the forest floor. She'll grow into a thousand girls who, when fiddleheads, will be harvested. There will be stories about girl fiddleheads bringing bad luck or good luck, to be eaten before tests because I always did well in school.

When I go into the forest he waits for me outside my uncle's, inspecting the cracks in the walls, looking for pollen. In spring, all the world is breeding. The flowers are thick with pollen. He'll find it everywhere.

When we're married, are we quieter? Are our mouths covered over with sepals to shield our lips and tongues from turning pink?

Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through. My body grows like a tree, invisibly, impossibly slow. My abdomen bulges like a bulb in the ground.

If I were as quiet as a plant, as invisible—

The ferns smell very strong, and there are red funguses growing beneath them. I can see myself in the understory: my hair, a grass; my leg, a stem; my fingers, green fronds waving. The ferns smell very strong, and there are red funguses growing beneath them. The fungus forms a pod of spores and from it will grow a thousand girls. Even my body now lets the light through.

What has formed in me I shall give him—

Month by month things are losing their hardness.

I go into the forest behind my uncle's house. The soil opens like a dark cavity. The ferns smell very strong.

I lie down among the plants, press my body into the dirt. The spores, they flicker over me. The flowers are thick with pollen.

I now begin to unfurl, in this scent, in this radiance, as a fern when its curled leaves unfurl. The ground and I open.

Whatever is in me is mine. I possess all I see. I have grown trees from the seed.

***A little over one third of the sentences are from *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf.**

Kelly Krumrie is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Denver. She seems to write only in series, and this story is from a series on girls and plants. Recent work has been published in *littletell*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Horse Less Review*, and *HOOT Review* under the name Kelly Werrell.



EXCAVATION

by Spencer Lucas Oakes

My mother lifted open a window from inside the house. Her head fell out as she wailed at the two of us.

Malcolm handed me a shovel. I stood beside him in the backyard. We looked over our dig site, the sun hanging amid blue sky like a spaghetti western. The dirt was practically sweating. I imagined tumbleweed.

The hole, if you could call it that, was not deep. I thrust my spade into some grass and slammed my foot down on its heel pushing it deeper. I did this over and over piling up the dirt and grass and rock. I felt as important as Apollo 11.

I saw Malcolm's face change, like he approved of my strength and my pile. When I took a moment to prevent the cool sweat from reaching my eyes – the sun dissolving into the curve – I glanced over at him between movements and saw only his blank stare.

Framed within her single-pane guillotine, mother weakly hollered between sobs for us to quit it. Something like Genesis, Genesis! Stop, Malcolm, please!

We didn't.

She reemerged with the sun the following day. Our excavation was quite far along at that point. Her tears fell down the lumpy walls of the cavern. Water, mucus and oil mixed with dead roots and stray pebbles. My numb hands were burning pink and swollen and the shovel's wood was a ghost. The hole was lit up and glowing in the sun's light. As the two of us dove deeper into the soil our bodies narrowed together. The shovels deteriorated. The earth exhibited increased resistance.

Days later, we ended up compacted together into a singular excavating machine, dripping and pumping. The further we went, the brighter it got. The earth's surface was dust to me now.

We were illuminated by a seething and the glow of whatever material dwelled below. Within the layers of shifting soil and clay and found rock, light shot up like an unrelenting gust. I heard radiation. I felt skin sear. I opened what I thought were my eyes to place Malcolm. He was gone. I tried to drop my shovel. I reached out and felt nothing.

Which Law of Nature was this?

My insides boiled like singing lobster and I could hear my mother in the distance. I heard her wailing and pictured her thankful embrace of Malcolm as he rested his shovel on the grass at her feet. You're soaked, she would have said, holding him in darkness.

I needed to go deeper. I recited Genesis 2:9 in my head as mother and Malcolm became dust above me. I would find the source of the light.

A photograph of a bridge with Gothic-style arches and a suspension tower, with a street lamp in the foreground. The bridge is made of concrete and has a green-painted steel truss structure. The suspension tower is also green and has a Gothic-style design. The street lamp is black and has a glass globe. The background shows a forested hillside under a clear sky.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The days have begun to shorten, the golden hour slips more quickly into darkness: proof that the world still spins. We've been thinking lately of stories as an escape from this spinning & the chaos it so often brings. The stories in this issue offer a way to dig into and through this world, a way to remember newness and ripeness; imaginings of possibilities. We're excited to share these works with all of you, each story like a moment stopped in amber and held to the light.

Thank you for reading, and thank you for writing,

CB & LP
editors