

SHIRLEY

ISSUE 13
APRIL 2019



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THE FUGUE OF LA VOISIN

by Sylvan Lebrun

[Catherine Monvoisin, known as “La Voisin,” lived from c.1640-1680. She was a fortune teller who ran a black magic ring during the reign of King Louis XIV, arrested and burned at the stake as part of the Affaire Des Poisons.]

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The Girdle of Venus: runs in an arc from the ring finger to the index finger. Located above the Heart Line. In the chiromancy of the Greeks it connotes emotions, beauty, and manipulation — if it is broken, the one whose body on which it lies will prove an unfaithful lover. If it intersects with the Heart Line one will become lost in an obsession with wealth and grandeur. This is a minor feature only present on about one in four, as I have come to find, but it is the first I was taught.

The Head Line: extends across the palm from below the index finger to the outside edge. Each cross that severs it represents a deeply painful decision.

The Apollo Line: crosses from the Mount of the Moon to the Mount of the Sun. When well-pronounced, it indicates a cultural refinement, and when branching downwards it hails a failure to fulfill what one craves to do.

When people arrive to get their fortunes told, they are looking to hear of a crisis, and they will believe nothing as fact but a premonition of despair.

Love lost. Enterprises failing. Early death. The success of enemies.

All they have, they will give, for a chiromancer who can reverse such cruel turns of fate.

First, I told my clients to pray. Then it was amulets sent from across the waters, it was crushed flowers, it was a chanted refrain in the darkness. Aphrodisiacs made of iron and Spanish fly, the teeth and bones of rats, diamonds and blood and ashes from the mortuary. I brought roomfuls of people into trances and I learned the ancient languages, forwards, backwards. Still they wanted more, so more I gave.

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The Marquess' daughter ran to my chambers late at night, shivering and small, like a cat left out in the rain. By candlelight I was passing over my list of appointments when she flung herself, tear-stained, onto the ground in front of me, this proper and dignified child adorned in light blue silk that had been chosen to match her eyes. Her lower lip shook as I moved to stand over her, and she extended a limp hand in some perversion of good manners. *Madame. I am sorry to bother you at this hour.*

Poor darling. I crouched down, folding my skirts underneath me, and nodded at this girl who was trying in vain to halt her weeping and slow her breaths. *Speak.*

My mother, she began, then her voice broke off. Clear mucus was collecting under her nostrils, and I handed her my handkerchief, white with needle-point illustrations of ash trees. *She told me to search for you. She believes that you will give me the assistance that no other dares to provide.*

Stand, sweet one. She obeyed, trying to hold herself upright on uncertain legs. I brought my hands to her elegant face, wiped the moisture from below her eyes with the worn pads of my thumbs, pushed back long strands of hair that had fallen out of place in her flight. *This house will take care of you. Tell me what has happened.*

There was a man who visited months ago, a friend of my uncle. He took me — The girl gasped in the middle of her sentence, tears welling up again. *And I did not want to be taken.* She clutched her stomach, staring straight at me with eyes that screamed for understanding.

My assistant came in when I called and she took the trembling girl down the hall to the doctor's office. He had stayed after hours to rearrange his equipment, clear out the cupboards in time for the new shipment we had organized from the English markets — yet, he would not turn one of our visitors away. I would in no world allow it. When the girl was led away, she pressed her palms together at me as if she were a pilgrim, and then the herbs took effect and her eyes rolled back like marbles towards the roof.

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The velvet coat in a deep plum shade, with gold eagles embroidered on either side of the heart, a line of the softest ermine around the collar. It hangs in a teak wardrobe between ceremonies. One of my housemaids perfumes it with lilac every second day. For tea, I dine on choux pastries and fresh salmon, candies shaped like birds, cinnamon-soaked peaches, macarons stacked in layers like a crown, while ladies in silk and pearls and jewels as bright as the moon on a cloudless night comment on the beauty of my imported Persian rugs. I have bronze goblets with volume to hold three-
portions worth, and spheres of carved amber on my dressing table. My throat is white as milk, my arms soft, nails always clean. We eat salt with every meal. Music exists where I am, my velvet coat has silver buttons.

They say that I have love for the Devil, that I let the Darkness lay me down and take my maidenhood. I know not their pariah's face, but if I did, I must have met the Devil one day in the walls of my room, looked into his cavernous eyes and said polite salutations. Then I must have shoved my fingers past the Devil's lips, down his throat, and left him sated and terrified and searching for breath on my floor.

My velvet coat cost 1500 livres, and everyone knows my worth when I wear it around.

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A man and a woman stand on the stairs and he becomes angry. The bricking of the walls is suffocating in the day but always looks black in the night, someone has left their gloves in the apartment entrance. There is a new god on the throne today. There is, up the stairs, a child listening to the sound of a street musician playing a requiem on violin that the child only recognizes as a lullaby. Then it is a lullaby. Voices are raised, and it is a lullaby of boots on skin, a solar catastrophe on a throne, as there is today, the child hears her mother come back home. Someone is choking on old water, someone is taking off their coat. *Mama?* She, the woman from the stair, knows that a hero is simply a glorified existence and an existence is alone. A dress is pulled up above her engorged stomach, next to the child's bed, to show the deep blue shadows of where fists go on dead skin. The woman leaves, feeling blood between her legs, feeling a presence in her bed. The child decides to kill her father, but it is cholera, and it is the way that lovers move in twos, that takes him before she has the chance.

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February 2, 1680, I am burned at the stake on a cloudless day in Paris. When they wheel me out, in chains like an animal, I am half-conscious but for the sounds of the roaring masses that crowd the square. You curse at me? I'll curse right back at you, they shrink with fear when I call upon spirits I've never spoken to before, pretend to tear out my own hair, call their fathers whores and mothers scoundrels. Wrists that no longer feel like mine are forced to cross behind the rough wooden pole they truss me up on, they are tied with the same rope that winds around my feet, hips, breasts. Bales of straw are thrown at my feet, they will make lovely kindling, pray the strong wind will help the fire catch fast. Witch, daughter of Satan, the traitor! The children scream the loudest. I hear lots of names but none of them are my own, this is no lover's bed and there are no lips against my ear, just the furious and unintelligible noise of how the people pretend to hate me. The sky is an ocean and the fire lapping my feet is a barrier against the cold air. Those who watch me wear thick coats, scarves, as I shake in my torn frock. Their faces are tinged red and shielded from the curses of the abortionist or the loose woman or the heretic, not just the one who is convicted of this crime. I spit on them. I spit on them and scream and burn. The sky is an ocean and the fire lapping my feet is an isle in it, my father always told me I would come to no good. Look as my legs singe as if they are pigs over the roasting pit, look as the executioners laugh, I cannot look now my vision darkens at the edges. It is dark and the sky is an ocean. The sky is an ocean there are no clouds in it just smoke rising rising rising rising rising

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Arsenic, belladonna, venom of snake. That is all. You would not believe how many have been set free from as simple elements as these. This act seems like a thievery but it is the cry that starts an exodus. Look how the wide forests and gardens of our world have prepared for us to build churches and gladiators' rings, for us to cut down age-old trees for timber and dredge the minerals out of the very ground, to create and call ourselves the captains of destiny. Standing by as cities are razed and girls, children become the tokens of glory, as waves and storms take back what is theirs. The good earth has given us all we need — purple flowers and black masses.

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I was seventeen the time that I went down to the furthest edge of the city one spring day, to where the river passes through a lush field of grass before vanishing into miles of dried mud. With me, the blacksmiths' two eldest daughters, twins, with hair the color of wheat and long spindly legs — Louise and Jeanne. We ran down the hillside towards the riverbed in long white dresses made from scraps of the unused tailor's cloth, the skirts brushed our ankles all the same, flew back in the wind. Jeanne had been elected our champion, our priestess, through a game of cards the night before. Across her shoulder rested the strap of a woven sack, heavy with parchment and fruit and talismans of stone. She clutched it tight to her chest as we ran. There was a wet heat in the air, our cheeks flushed pink. At the grassy riverbank Louise and I cast a circle with ash from her father's workshop, plucking dandelions out of the ground and throwing them into the center, drawing intricate patterns with the blunt ends of fallen branches from the almond trees. All the while, Jeanne sat on her knees by the river, dipping her fingers into the water, exploratory and calm-eyed.

When the circle was drawn, Jeanne stood, wiping her wet hands on her skirt. *Everyone to their place.* We heeded her instructions, and in silence clasped each other's hands until all was connected, all was one, just as the woman selling amulets on the street corner had told us it would be. A bird cawed above our heads, twice.

Wine was poured on top of the dandelions, then we sang of gates and storm clouds, crouching to light tall candles the color of raw meat and break open the ground with our nails. Then, Jeanne pulled the knife from her bag, which still smelled sweet from the flesh of fruit. One by one, we held the serrated blade in our cupped hands, then drew the edge across a trembling palm, trying to make no sound to prove how we could handle pain. The twins went first, angel-soft faces contorting with the shock of it all. When it was my turn, I felt a hot breeze just before I made the cut and knew that it

was the most beautiful moment of my life. Watched the familiar liquid drip down my pale fingers and spot the grass, strawberry-preserve red.

For me to marry a beautiful, kind, and stupid man. Louise.

For my sister to help with housework more often. Jeanne.

For vengeance, I said, looking into the sun. For a moment there was nothing. Then, the twins each held up their warm bleeding hand and pressed it against one of my cheeks, holding my mind and all of its thoughts as the scent of metal filled my throat. Many years later, when I am put in a cell, beaten, when the Grand Inquisitor presses flaming irons to my back and howls for a confession, I will be able to think of nothing but this day.

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In the morning I visited the Marquess' daughter, who lay on a thin bed frame in one of the house's darkened back rooms, concealed between two mauve velvet curtains. Her eyelids flicked up when I entered, and then she began to speak — quiet, low, with a throat still raw from the hysterics of the night before.

Many tell me that you should be killed. But then again, there are those in the court who see you as near-godlike, who are ever so deeply indebted to you. As I now am.

I placed a tin cup of water into her hands, coaxed her to drink. *You will repay me one day with measures twice as kind, surely.*

The girl opened her mouth as if to ask a question, then paused. She wrapped her fingers around her the chain of her necklace, and I leaned over to see the pendant that sat in the indentation of her collarbone, an ornate gold cross inlaid with diamonds. *How do you justify it to yourself? I know of what you do beyond this.*

Darling? I said, and she dropped her gaze. Scared. The cycle renewed itself, the snake began to gnaw on its own tail again, my mother wept in the stair. *There is something in human emotion that surpasses what one is told is right. Surpasses what even may truly be right. Every woman knows what it is to feel like an animal in her body.*

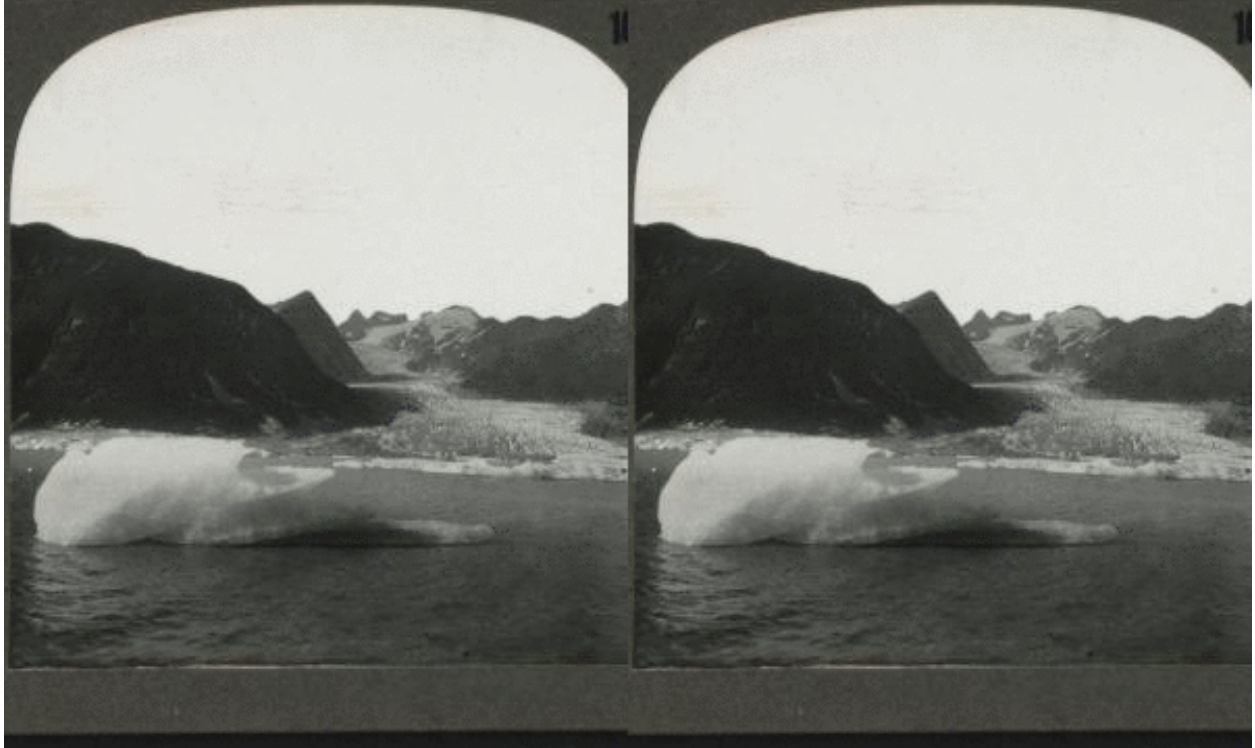
In the reversal of what is beautiful, holy, clean, and quiet, I have always found truth. Call it a corruption and I will make love to this corruption; the masses will stand there all the

while and will want to run, but as with all things they will decide that it is their civic duty to watch.

But you hurt people. The Marquess' daughter, lying there a spectacle of the songs of orchestras the songs of quails and blackberry tarts the songs of all there is to covet and desire, she raised her hands to her face and shielded her eyes from me. *There is nothing great about that.*

If war is honorable, then we can say violence is divine.

Sylvan Lebrun is a student, writer, and musician living in Tokyo, Japan. Her work has been previously published in Up the Staircase Quarterly, CONSTRUCTION, The Hunger, and Crab Fat Magazine, among others.



MALE BONDING

by Derek Andersen

I. Father

It all rushes back to me like a Biblical flood: my father's naked body, rippling in the feverish, fluorescent light of the bathroom. His shoulder coiling as he turns the faucet, sending the bathtub squelching to life. The thick, matted hair clinging to his brawny frame, conjuring images of bizarre, subterranean beasts. There is a violence embedded in even his most mundane movements — the way he hacks at his steak and whips his car out of the driveway. But here he reveals an uncharacteristic tenderness, as he extends two fingers to calmly probe the water temperature.

For reasons I can't explain, an Oedipal madness pulses through me. *Turn around, you old bastard*, I want to say. *Let's see that cock*. Of course, the instant my brain blurts this thought into existence, I become terrified that something is wrong with me. After all, why the hell am I still here, peering through this crack in the door like some deranged voyeur? Why aren't I locked away in my room, like a normal preteen boy, bombarding

my eardrums with the senseless racket of some mildly talented emo band? Unable to ascertain a suitable answer to this question, I push it out of my mind, at which point I realize just how incessantly my heart is beating. Try as I might to deny it, I'm excited. I work to untangle the root of aforementioned excitement, breaking it down into several factors:

1. I'm curious. In my twelve years on this earth, I've never seen my father's exposed flesh.
2. I realize that, perhaps, this is my father's natural state. In the privacy of his domicile, he's free to remove the stiff, violent mask he dons for the masses (either consciously, or unconsciously).
3. I'm afraid:
 - a. that if he catches me, his routine threat to put me "through a fucking wall" will become more than an empty hyperbole.
 - b. that his manhood will be bigger than the little cocktail sausage that dangles between my legs, adorned in a sparse layer of peach fuzz.

Of course, I soon conclude that identifying the factors is one thing, but prescribing a value to each of them is a far more daunting task. My father grabs the Atomic Bath Bomb, a hand-packed mixture of essential oils, modeled after the nuclear weapon that decimated Hiroshima, instantaneously melting the flesh off of 100,000 innocent civilians. I can almost hear the B-list celebrity with the salt-and-pepper beard belting out: "Guys, take bath time back!" My father sniffs the bomb's chalky payload, and cringes. He places it back on the countertop, and instead reaches for my mother's Dove peach-mango bubble bath. Just before he squirts it into the tub, he glances back over his shoulder. When his gaze reaches the door, he pauses.

My heart is about to kick itself out of my goddamn sternum. I try to pry myself away, but I can't move.

II. Doug

Whenever I'm holding a one-on-one conversation with someone, be it a man or woman, attractive or unattractive, there's this little voice in the back of my head that

urges me to lean in and kiss them. I'm not a fag or anything — I swear. I've had intercourse with six different women (the latest of which is Chelsea, my lovely wife), I drive stick, I avoid drinks with little paper umbrellas, I religiously follow the 1-3-5 urinal rule, I loathe rom coms (though, admittedly, I enjoy Hugh Grant's witty banter), I refuse to cuddle after sex, and I keep my feelings bottled up so tight they manifest themselves as physical ailments.

I've spent many a worry-fraught evening in the waning light of my computer screen, researching possible explanations for my subconscious urges. However, there is no scientific consensus as to why humans kiss. Some researchers assert that human osculation is a means to express affection and promote social bonding, as it releases large quantities of oxytocin and cortisol. Others insist kissing is a tool to help us select compatible mates — it, essentially, serves as a pheromone exchange, allowing each party to assess the strength of the other's immune system. And still others believe this phenomenon is purely a social construct, citing isolated indigenous tribes that fail to practice it altogether.

As my new neighbor, Doug, mans his Weber Genesis E-330 Propane Gas Grill, and the aroma of burning animal flesh seeps into my nostrils, I try to quiet that dark corner of my mind. I look the bastard over. His scraggly hairline, waging a valiant, but hopeless battle against old age (already, it is retreating to the far reaches of his scalp). His shiny forehead, permanently creased from years of paternal concern. His novelty apron, bearing the inscription "I like pig butts and I cannot lie." His crisp, blue polo, carefully tucked into his baggy cargo shorts. His cellphone belt clip, hanging trustily by his side. His sterile white New Balance sneakers, securely triple-knotted. His burgeoning beer gut, jutting out of his otherwise gangly body — a body completely and utterly desexualized by fatherhood.

I don't want to kiss Doug. I'm sure of it. But still, that insidious whisper clouds my brain. The more I try to shut it out, the louder it gets. I'm caught in a hopeless feedback loop — by trying not to think about it, I'm only thinking about it more. The voice is gaining momentum, now almost screaming at me. Furthermore, the several beers I enjoyed earlier have depleted my resolve.

"How about them Cubbies?" My new neighbor asks.

"How about them," I reply absently, watching the icy blue veins traverse his forearm as he sears my porterhouse.

III. Brandon

"I gotchu, man," Brandon steadies me, as I puke my guts out into a skid-marked communal toilet.

Outside, a chorus of male voices pulses with a tribal energy, chanting, "Chug! Chug! Chug!"

Brandon massages my shoulders as a particularly violent spasm forces more of the stinging bile out of my stomach. "It's ok, buddy. Let it all out." Though his hands are hard and calloused from his religious devotion to the weight room, there is an inexplicable tenderness in his touch. No homo. I catch a whiff of his cologne: it's a subtle, elegant scent — most likely European. Far more refined than those thick, musty sprays teenage boys use to pollinate their bodies, in a desperate attempt to garner female attention. I may need to sneak into his room and take peek at the bottle later, just to figure out the brand.

As I start to relax my body, recovering from my last expulsion (but knowing very well another wave of nausea will hit me shortly), I make the mistake of gazing directly into my upheaved stomach fluids. The mawkish, yellow juices, in addition to shooting a fresh dose of queasiness into my stomach, flood my brain with memory clips from the previous few hours:

- I crack open my first beer — not, as in: "first beer of the night" but, as in: "my first beer ever, in my entire eighteen years on this planet" — and try not to wince as I choke down the warm, rusty potion.
- I'm dangling upside down, ingesting a torrent of Busch Lite through a rubber tube, as my soon-to-be brothers roar like animals, "Freshman! Freshman! Freshman!"
- I'm out back, behind the house, with Brandon. The seismic bass of the stereo system feels miles away, in the cool fall night. I square up next to the upperclassman and undo my zipper, heart pounding in anticipation. For a moment, I drink him in: his broad, Grecian shoulders towering above me, his meticulously-styled hair standing resolutely against the breeze, his phosphorescent smile gleaming in the darkness. Brandon's every movement is

shrouded in mystery — the lore surrounding him is so extensive, I'm completely unable ground him in reality. "Ready? En garde!" He snickers, shooting a healthy stream of urine just in front of me. Laughing giddily, I release my bladder, and engage in the sparring match. I feel a strange tranquility waft over me, as I watch the two arcs dance in the moonlight. They intertwine with one another, and then drift apart, yearning for connection, but doomed to trickle away in quiet solitude.

- I'm lined up next to the other whimpering pledges, watching Gramps and Crazy Pete engineer a sinister cocktail in an inflatable kiddie pool. Gin, vodka, Everclear, dish soap, rotten eggs, Mountain Dew, dead locusts, dog excrement, and, allegedly human semen, swirl menacingly around in that seething cauldron of misery. Gramps cackles like a mad scientist, ladling the concoction into a row of Solo cups, making sure each is filled to the brim.
- I'm running through the dim, Spartan hallways of an unfamiliar dorm, clutching a pair of red panties. I'm gazing in the bathroom mirror at a droopy-eyed, sunken-cheeked stranger — one who's unable to hold his laughter, as he bleeds profusely from his temple.
- I'm parading down the street naked, with Dopey gripping my cock, as I'm gripping Shaggy's cock, who's gripping Chunker's cock, who's gripping Baby Face's cock, who's gripping Belcher's cock, who's gripping Jizz Stain's cock, who's gripping Steve's cock. No homo. A gruff drill sergeant voice booms through the night, hurling a barrage of profanities in my direction (nothing too imaginative — just basic stuff like "pussy" and "faggot"). The frigid night air sends goosebumps down my flesh, pulling my scrotum so taught my balls ache. And now, I feel the blood rushing to my cock, beginning to harden it ever so slightly. It's just from Dopey's hand touching my junk — not that the fact that it's Dopey's hand has anything to do with it, it could be anyone's hand: it's purely the physiological sensation of human flesh on my junk that does it. No homo.

Fade to black, and I'm here, shivering on the bathroom's cold laminate tile.

"Here ya go, bro," Brandon wraps me up in a big warm Miami Dolphins blanket. "Have a little sip for me," he carefully passes me a glass of lukewarm water.

I humor him, sucking the tiniest possible drop through my puke-flecked lips.

Soon I feel myself begin to drift off, inhaling his comforting fragrance. As he gently slides a pillow underneath my head, I want to thank him. Not just for the pillow, but for being my brother. I don't mean "brother" in the same hollow, diluted way the other SAE's murmur it, between drunken belches. I mean actual flesh-and-blood brother — the kind of devoted masculine presence I prayed for in the most alienated moments of my adolescence, when I had not a soul to confide in. Though I'm thousand miles from my parents, in a house where the stench of fermenting beer has soaked itself into every microfiber of carpeting, this feels like home. No homo. I imagine an alternate childhood, so beautiful it's painful to bear. One where Brandon and I roughhouse each other in a backyard game of smear the queer. Where Brandon and I joyride my father's prized 1977 Trans Am, and narrowly avoid a brush with the law. Where Brandon and I commit a minor act of arson that leaves our mother no other recourse but to shake her head, intoning "boys will be boys." Where, behind closed doors, Brandon teaches me the subtle nuances of the female anatomy, and then farts in my sleeping mouth. I want to inform him that if a situation ever arises in which he requires a kidney transplant, I'll donate in a millisecond. Except, there's something that's making it hard to speak up and express these emotions. This nagging voice in the back of my head: *what if I sound like a faggot?*

Fear constricts my vocal chords. I don't realize that I'll never have this chance again. That, in two weeks, Brandon will perish on the bench press of a 24-hour gym, fatally crushed by the weight of his own mighty barbell.

"Hey, Brandon," I finally manage.

His steel blue eyes meet mine wordlessly.

I clear my throat...

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THE CHILDREN'S CABINET

by Stephanie Feldman

The baby — well, she's no longer a baby. She stands at the cabinet door, only wobbles a little as it swings back. The baby — the youngest and the last, forever the baby — has inherited the amusements of three older siblings. To you, the cabinet is an archive of ten years of raising children, but to the baby, it contains the future. She swats at the crammed toys with fat fingers, points wildly, cries, "Dat one!"

What does she want, though? The red and black Checkers box, the stray yellow Lego, or maybe the delicate plastic fairy, feet painted into pink high heels?

You pull out the fairy, her nylon purple hair tangled. Ask, "This one?"

"No," the baby says and points into the cabinet. "Dat one!"

Fish your hand in the narrow space the fairy left behind. Pull out a wooden puzzle piece, a spotted cow big as your palm, red crayon tracks over its mouth. "This one?"

"No," the baby says and points into the cabinet. "Dat one!"

Now you're in up to your elbow, wriggling to create more room between the crammed boxes — Life and Scrabble, Twister and Candyland — the corners split, revealing game pieces like poison treats, small enough for a mouth but too big for a throat. Pull out an old action figure, face rubbed blank, articulated fingers stretching to the jointed knees. You vaguely remember it — a construction worker, part of a set — but the shape has changed.

"No," the baby says, bouncing with frustration, and points into the cabinet. "Dat one!"

Reach deeper, to mid-bicep, and find a playing card, an unfamiliar old maid with a cyclops eye, her disfigurement a sign of atrophy or perhaps a dangerous flourishing. The gilt edge pricks your knuckle, and the lines seep pink.

"No," the baby says, voice warbling with emotion, and points into the cabinet. "Dat one!"

Reach deeper still, almost up to your shoulder, though the wall behind the cabinet is only half an arm's length away. Something's wrong, but there's no time to wonder. You'll do anything for the last baby, though she's not a baby, she can walk, she can talk, soon there will be school, there will be friends and teachers and private lives, silences and wailing you can't read. You'll miss the baby's simple frustrations, fixed on things like toys or exhaustion, assuaged by your affection, your embrace, your cooing. In just a few years, an adult's dark frustrations will bloom in her child's body, the need for meaning, for the love of people who are not required to love her — needs you can't meet. There will be nothing you can give, and she will no longer want you.

Pull out a wooden telephone. You hold the receiver to your ear and hear a voice. It's your voice, but what are you saying?

"No," the baby shrieks and points into the cabinet. Her voice is pure and selfish; it eclipses all other sound. You drop the phone. It has left a splinter in your palm. "Dat one!"

So back in you plunge, your shoulder in the cabinet, your face pressing the painted frame. The splinter slides into your flesh, it is gone, it is inside you. Already, your mind has reoriented the pain; it's just another sensation to bear.

The cabinet contents, farther back, are soft, indistinct. You pull your arm out and there is something black and gummy under your fingernails—mold, you hope, instead of rot. It is better to grow than to melt away.

“Dat one!” the baby cries. Her face crumples, her cheeks go red. “Dat one!” her voice shrill. “Dat one!”

You don't want her to cry. You hate when she cries. You love her, you love all four of them, you've loved every moment of their smallness, you're sure, now that the smallness is almost gone. You need to hold on to it, these last moments of the life they made for you. Once it's over, what will be left? Giving away the folded baby clothes, cleaning the toys for garage sales, emptying out this cabinet, these years of your life.

Reach deeper, duck your head beneath the top, lift your hip over the bottom. Squeeze inside the children's cabinet. In the dark, the past and future are the same. Crawl toward that thing, her desire and your own, nameless and forever beyond your grasp.

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COTTON COBWEBS

by Joshua Storrs

There were no crumbling ruins near to where I lived, so I built my own. I found a piece of land halfway up the valley, covered in concrete foundation, then abandoned when the developer lost their investors. Concrete faded in and out of sand and rocks and homes for rattlesnakes. It was the perfect place to start.

There was no phone service that far up the valley. Every once in a while the little screen in my pocket would chirp up, sensing some brief connection, but only long enough to tell me about a stack of missed calls, a voicemail, or a text, asking where I was. I forgot it was in my pocket. I forgot I had pockets. I forgot I was wearing clothes.

I built the walls carefully, applying mortar and using tools. Then I knocked bricks out of the corners, spray-painted tags across the walls, and chiseled out pock-marks as evidence of enemy arrows.

Walls wrapped around to nowhere. Rope-bridges connected two places that I could not reach. I got a text message asking when I was coming back, but I didn't read it. In the basement I imagined an old dead machine. In the attic I imagined a little girl reading stories to her stuffed animals while her parents fight in the kitchen. I saw a broken window, and imagined a group of kids fooling around. One of them throws a rock through the glass.

I conjured a pulley system to help me erect a parapet, but the rope snapped and something happened to my back. I spent a week sitting in the shade I'd built, finally looking at my phone. When loved ones get desperate they switch from text to voicemail. There was only one. I listened to it over and over. It was an apology. I didn't know what for, and neither did they, I think.

I watched the situations in my head turn to decay. I watched the machine scream with age, then go quiet forever. The little girl's parents stopped using silence to fight, and started using other things like insecurities and glassware. The broken window let the mice in.

I don't know anything about machinery, or domestic abuse. Mice probably don't get into a place through broken windows. But there weren't any crumbling ruins where I lived, so I built my own. The enemy fired arrows, leaving pock-marks in the walls.

My phone was dead. It had been dead since I arrived. I liked to imagine it blowing up whenever it got a signal. I liked to imagine a voicemail containing an apology. I liked to imagine that I had been wronged, then I would have an answer for why I felt the way I did. But I didn't. My ruins were fabricated. All histories invented. Maybe someday a curious explorer will find what I built, and marvel at the rot.

Joshua Storrs is a finalist for the Barry Hannah Prize for Fiction and his work has appeared in Jersey Devil Press. When he's not serving coffee at Starbucks, or crying over his humanities degree, he makes comic books with his friends, which you can read at JoshuaStorrs.com. Joshua lives in Pittsburgh, and goes by @Bloombeard on twitter and instagram.



FROM THE EDITORS

The images in this issue shift and shiver, creating movement that reminds us of the changing of seasons, the awakening and restlessness of things in the natural world. This shift is a theme that emerged from the stories in this issue — the movement between realities, ways to somehow exist in two places at once. What lies beyond reach, what boundaries might be pushed against? What might we build and what (or who) might we burn?

At the end of last month we had the privilege of hosting an AWP off-site reading in Portland, OR, featuring many of our past contributors. It was such a treat to meet so many of our writers, to feel the buzz of the writing community in the air. It was great to hear some stories from our past issues, and to see the wild breadth of Shirley's contributors together in action. We're so thankful for everyone who came out to read and listen.

Finally, for the past couple weeks, our collaboration with Chelsea Grimmer and her project The Poetry Vlog have gone live — again involving many past contributors as

well as some in this issue. You can hear them reading their work in two minute flash briefings on her The Poetry Vlog podcast. We've loved hearing so many voices and excerpts brought together in this way. The run of Shirley readers caps off today with an interview with editor Colleen, discussing some behind the scenes process that goes into Shirley. Find more about The Poetry Vlog [here](#).

Thank you, as always, for reading,

CB & LP
editors

P.S. all images in this issue were created using the NYPL's Stereogramimator, one of the best toys on the internet.