



'haunted'

w. Burke

LIGHTS OUT

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Chosen by *Cosmic Daffodil Journal* Members

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AN ODE TO POE

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I'm Not Karen

Back when we were in college, when most people still had landlines, Sylvia and I had an answering machine that had a glitch. When the machine was disconnected from the power cord, it erased all the messages whether they had been listened to or not.

In a way, it was like the age old question, if a tree falls in the forest, and there's no one to hear it, does it still make a sound? If a message is left on a voicemail and no one listens, does the message still exist? Or is it just lost in digital space?

It was this question, this fear of not wanting messages to be lost, unlistened to, trapped in mailboxes that compelled me to play all my voicemails. I don't know why it mattered, but I felt that, if I listened, I could set the trapped messages free.

Even if the majority of the messages were useless, telling me that the warranty on a car I didn't own was about to expire, that I had won a lottery I hadn't entered, or that a customer of a plumber with a different phone number needed me to call him back, I still felt compelled to play and release them. I didn't want anything once real to be trapped in time, in a state of in-between.

I'm Not Karen

Most of the time, I didn't interact with the callers. I just played the messages and deleted them. But this one message, this one caller rather, was the exception. She called wanting to talk to Karen. At first, I listened and erased those messages too. But the caller kept calling regularly, persistently. So I felt like maybe it was an act of kindness, compassion to call her back and tell her that she had the wrong number, that I wasn't Karen. I didn't know what her name was because the messages didn't tell me. She just said, "Hi, Karen, it's me. Please give me a call."

It was a Wednesday evening after work when I finally did.

"Hello," said the voice on the other end of the phone. I recognized it from all the messages she had left. "Karen, is that you?"

"I'm not Karen, I said. "You keep calling this number, but it's wrong. I don't even know who Karen is."

It was like she hadn't heard me, or she didn't understand.

Because she kept talking to me as if I was this Karen.

"Karen, it's so good to talk to you," she said. "It's been so long since I've spoken with you, and it's wonderful to hear your voice."

I'm Not Karen

I felt like I had no choice but to listen. Besides, maybe if I let her say what she had to say, then she would stop calling me (as Karen).

Who was Karen to her, and what would she say next? I wondered.

"I haven't talked to you since Georgie died. I know that was hard," she said.

"Yes, it was hard," I said because it seemed like she expected me to say something in response though I couldn't say much because I didn't know who Georgie was.

"Why did you leave him?"

"Who, Georgie?"

"No, Georgie died," she reminded me. "You left Ken after George died."

"I did," I said, agreeing.

"You should come over, Karen," she said.

"I should," I said, "but my schedule's rather busy right now."

"It makes a woman sad when she makes it her life's work to raise four kids, and none of them ever comes to visit her," she said sadly.

I'm Not Karen

"What about . . ." I began, trying to guess the name of Karen's siblings.

"Oh, the boys," she said. "You should know by now that most men are useless, except maybe Ken. Ken was a good one, but this is why I'm counting on you, Karen."

"Oh, yes, of course, right," I said. "Listen, maybe I can make some time to visit next Tuesday."

"That would be fabulous," the woman said. "I'll call you Monday to remind you."

This created several problems. One was that I didn't know what Karen looked like and if I resembled her in any way. Another was that I didn't know where this woman lived. The best case scenario was that the woman would forget that I had said I was coming to see her, that she wouldn't call me Monday to remind me. That she would stop calling me altogether. But, of course, that's not what happened.

I knew her number now, and I had even programmed it into my phone as Karen's mom. I didn't answer the first five times she called. But she was relentless. She wasn't giving up.

I'm Not Karen

"Karen," she said.

"Um," I said.

"Why didn't you answer?"

"Because of Georgie," I said trying not to sound uncertain.

"Now, Karen, we've talked about this. You can't use Georgie's death as an excuse to ignore everything and everyone."

"Okay, right," I said. "But, look, the truth is, I'm not ready to come over to your house. It brings up too many memories of Georgie. So maybe we can meet somewhere else, somewhere less painful." What I really meant was maybe we can meet somewhere public. Maybe if I met her once, she would be satisfied. If not, I could flee, and she wouldn't be any of the wiser of who I really was and where I really lived.

"Karen, why didn't you say this earlier?" said the woman, sounding annoyed, "instead of ignoring me for months and months and months."

"You're right," I said. "I'm sorry."

It was determined that I would meet Karen's mom at the Oak

I'm Not Karen

Hill Diner.

"I don't have to tell you where that is," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Right."

I googled the Oak Hill Diner. I didn't think I had ever been there.

But the street view pictures made it seem quiet and safe. It was in a nice neighborhood near the college. It looked like a place where I could comfortably eat.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said. "At six o'clock sharp. And, Karen, don't be late."

I wasn't late. In fact, I arrived 25 minutes early, so I could scope out the place, figure out the best place to park in case a quick getaway was needed. I also wanted to decide what I wanted to order so that I wouldn't waste time staring at the menu while sitting with this unfamiliar woman. The menu was interesting. It was printed on red and white paper that reminded me of an old time movie theater or a box of Cracker Jacks. It served standard diner fare, but with a twist. Like instead of broccoli cheddar soup, they had broccoli cheddar sandwiches. Instead of mashed potatoes with gravy, they had mashed potatoes with cheese

I'm Not Karen

cheese and bacon and french fries with ham and grits. I settled on ordering the mango lemon pancakes just as I heard a tap on my car window. It was a white haired woman with small square shaped glasses and a thick winter coat. It was her, it had to be her. But how did she know where to find me or what I looked like? I rolled down my window.

"Karen, what are you waiting for?" she asked. She didn't even seem surprised that I had arrived in work scrubs, my carmel colored hair pulled back into a tight ponytail.

"I was just looking at the menu on my phone," I said.

"Why? You always get the mango lemon pancakes," she said.

"Oh, right," I replied with confusion.

I followed her inside. The diner, like the menu, was red and white, retro. The staff seemed to not only know her but confusingly me. Did I not only resemble her missing daughter but also have her exact same phone number? This didn't seem possible.

"Now, Karen," she said, after we had ordered, "don't be angry, but I have a surprise for you."

"I won't," I said. Because anger wasn't the emotion I was

I'm Not Karen

"I won't," I said. Because anger wasn't the emotion I was feeling.

"I asked Ken to join us," she said, as a tall muscular man with a red brown beard walked into the diner to join us. He was attractive, just my type.

I tried to remember who Ken was to Karen. Ken was the man who she had left after Georgie's death, I realized.

Ken approached us. "Karen," he said, "it's good to see you."

"Um, yeah," I said wishing I could leave before my pancakes arrived, even though I was hungry having skipped lunch because I'd been stressed about this meeting for most of the day. "Excuse me, I need to go use the restroom."

I got up and walked to the pink door that said *Ladies*. The bathroom that said *Men* was blue. Maybe this was to help small children find their way. Children like. . . I needed to orient myself. So once inside the restroom, I called my old roommate, Sylvia.

"Sylvia," I said, "do you know who I am?"

"Of course, I know who you are. We roomed together for two and a half years including that one awful semester that we lived in

I'm Not Karen

that ant infested dorm that used to be a frat house."

"Okay," I said with relief. "Good."

"Can I ask you something though?" she said.

"Sure," I said.

"Are you still taking the pills?" she asked.

I wanted to ask which pills, but I was afraid I already knew. The pills that made me forget what happened to Georgie. The pills that made me think my name was not Karen. The pills that allowed me to live an entirely different life.

"No," I lied. "I stopped taking them weeks ago."

"Okay, good," she said. "Because Ken was really worried about you, and so was your mom."

"I'm sure," I said. "Look, Sylvia. I've got to go."

I hung up the phone and tried to figure out what to do. On the one hand, there was the woman inside the diner who might be my mother, sitting with Ken, an attractive bearded man who looked like someone I could maybe love or had loved. But I (or Karen?) had left him after their son Georgie died.

I'm Not Karen

"I'm not Karen," I said to myself as I rocked back and forth on the toilet until it became a plea, a cry.

Outside the bathroom, I heard a man who I knew to be Ken banging on the door. "Karen," he said. "Please come out. Please come home."

"Ken," I said with a mix of fear and hope. I started to say, "I'm not Karen" again, but I couldn't because I knew I was.

The Lighthouse

I saw the pale spire of the lighthouse, vanishing softly out of the distant fog.
Surviving on blood oranges staining shaking hands red –
It had to be the first building after two weeks hiding in the waves.
Circling around, raising my eyes to rove the heights –

Surviving on blood oranges staining shaking hands red –
I quickly closed the distance and went headfirst through the dark space in the floor.
Circling around, raising my eyes to rove the heights –
Hands behind me pushed away – stairway slanting – air – into the gasping air –

I quickly closed the distance and went headfirst through the dark space in the floor.
They smiled first with greening eyes, then quietly pulled me under the surface.
Hands behind me pushed away – stairway slanting – air – into the gasping air –
I slowly sank deeper. Another bubble of breath escaped.

They smiled first with greening eyes, then quietly pulled me under the surface.
It had to be the first building after two weeks hiding in the waves.
I slowly sank deeper. Another bubble of breath escaped.
I saw the pale spire of the lighthouse, vanishing softly out of the distant fog.

NOCTIVAGANT

He was inclined to walk at night when no one would see the third ear peeking out from the back of his head. It picked up the soothing rise and fall of far-off traffic that relaxed him. There was a law against vagrancy, but none against wandering. At least that's how he saw it, as a confirmed noctivagant. He could always say he was going to the all-night store for cream cheese or fruit loops. Anyway. He liked his walks. He could hear footsteps behind him. Distinguish different sounds he made when snow was underfoot. One summer he heard the pointed ears of foxes poking through John's hostas behind him and the way the white full moon gave off a high frequency metallic vibration. Brass. A tiny gong.

Little Coffins

She collects boxes,
jars, baskets,
and tins.

She likes
putting things
away

consolidating
what's half full
into smaller containers

boxes within boxes
jars of buttons
beads and ocean shells

a velvet coffer
for her father's
heart stopped

before she grew
away
from home.

She empties herself
into notebooks
covered with collage

and fills
what's between
with little pieces of her anger.

For the Birds / Afterlife

On one side half of Body lies, liver pulsating toxins with nowhere to go. This poison ravages in blooded heat back to a still beating heart, now in cycle- liquor, lead, love. Other half of Body is made up of head, heavy breathing diaphragm. Mind and quiet breath now only adjunct the brain and tired lungs. It was cardinals which did descend, parting Body in two, a sea of red signaling deliverance. Ghosts stained permanently in blood gathered at the welcome party of a new. An afterlife which demands a cure for dissonance: a way of justice, a violent truth.

Each side of Body strives for survival of ligament and bone, not directly for desires of flesh. “A belief either held too tightly is either lost or uncontrolled,” speaks from the overhanging tree a crow, “blood becomes more important when the soul is met with deadly disappointment, continuous discontent. The body takes notes when the mind rages war with the soul.” Body hears only with ears split, a labyrinth of faulty lie detectors between the two of them. An off-key call screeches above. Then came jabbering for eyes the blue jays, bitter in collection of their

For the Birds / Afterlife

prize: muddy water hazel, salt crusted from cry, tears which have unbaptized. Body was given a walk in a world of water, sky, blue, returning now eyes are dry from sickness and smog.

Legs lay split in two - knees from hamstring, achilles from shin bone, half of feet tipped on toes while heels of the back half dig deep, slipping further into grains of sand. Each bit of foot worms about for rock more solid on which to stand. Body, now a collection of limbs, digits, and pieces, keens. Each half searching air with animated limbs, for a hovering dove with an olive branch in its beak. Holding onto this belief, that a simple sign of peace could be used to sew Body back to one form. That either half would ever belong together. A morning dove sits close, clothed in dusty gray, less than pure enough for this Body to receive an offer to be saved.

What descends instead is delivered straight from a heaven, brought in the beaks of goldfinches bleached by sun, angels which have ceased to

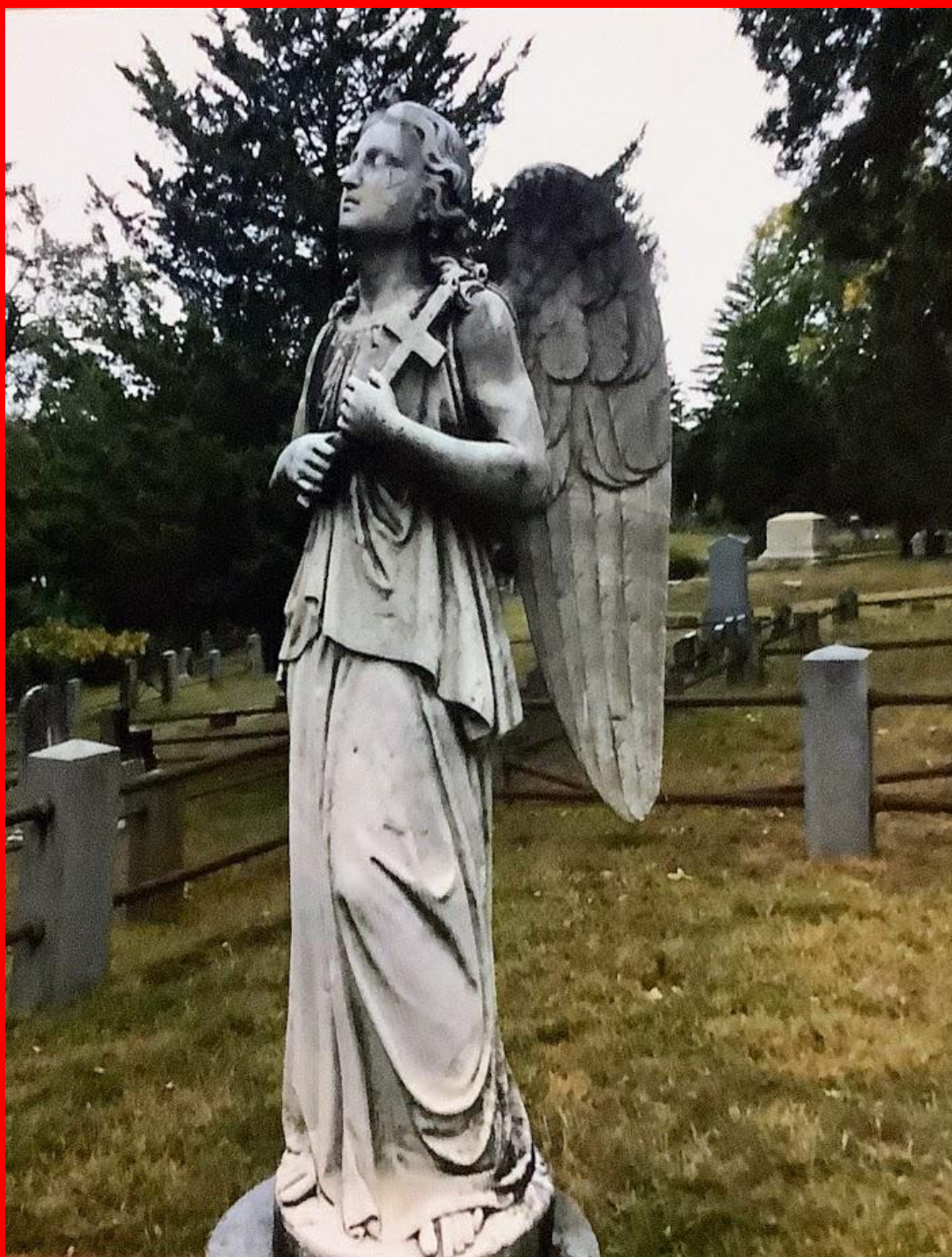
For the Birds / Afterlife

Speak. Mana, sweet, sticky for each half to suckle until whole,
independently grown. While fire burns, flickers at each half, as it rises
up from a hell. Flames to refine each side just as it was said that iron
sharpens iron. Waves lapping up just as it was said there would be a lake
of fire. Two Bodies re-emerge unburned, equally bleeding, unmasked yet
some kind of whole, to each other unrecognizable. What takes shape in
place of eyes are two Red Admiral butterflies, destined to forever
perform a circular chase. Claiming territory among land of waste. Each
believing in their own right to life, remains aimed at a stranger who
wears limbs that were once grown to be their own, anchored beneath a
red-winged face.

They All Came

They ascended
From the depths of the inferno
To the mortal lands
They came. All of them.
The raiders and the wraiths.
The rats and the wasps
They came for a man
Touched by love and a mind
The demons and the despots
Will you choose?
They asked the man
Choose what?
Wrong question, they said.
Choose you must
And then they ate him
First his legs
Because with movement you see
Then his hands
Because with touch you feel
Then his stomach
Because with hunger you judge
Then his eyes
Because with sight you dream
Then his nose
Because with smell you remember
Then his head
Because with mind you wander
And wander you may not, they said.

Cemetery Angel



Guilty Shadows

You close your eyes, sink into sleep, and I arrive. I move around your room en pointe, climb into your jackets, and watch you from inside. When your breathing slows, I bring my grin to your face, poke my sprig-like fingers up your nostrils, laugh noiselessly, and hide at the foot of the bed as you gasp. You drift off again and I slide along the floor on my belly, back to your side. I pull myself up to your head, liquefy, and slip into your ear like a silk scarf, twist through your mind, and sleep in the alabaster of your skull.

In the morning, you don't feel right. Your head hurts and there's a pressure on your chest. I'm squeezing and ballooning between the chambers of your body like bubblegum. I settle behind the eyes and watch from there. I watch your husband sleeping beside you at night and you wonder why you can't fasten your lids shut. You're exhausted but there's a hot itch behind your pupils.

I use your lips to whisper your secrets to him. No, not the ones you've already shared. The one about Phil who once helped fix the ergonomic chair in your office and you pictured your ballerina feet

Guilty Shadows

twitching on the crags of his shoulders. And then at the office party, where you and Phil performed ‘Bring Me to Life’ on karaoke and you couldn’t walk straight and you tripped into his house, into his room at the end of the night, landed in his bed with your skirt all hitched up around your hips. Those secrets.

Your husband doesn’t stir. But in the day, paranoia crawls into his thoughts. He watches your body ghosting under your clothes from the corner of his eye, turns your phone back to face-up, comes by the office with purple peonies, your favorite, and draws a crude pair of eyes on a post-it note he sticks to Phil’s computer. My work is done. I leave you be, and that unnerves you – the sudden squeaky stasis. You think I’ve left something behind, like scratch marks on the lid of a coffin.

One night, you feel the weight of tiny feet across the end of your bed. In the morning you search the house for droppings, holes in the floorboards. You bend down and sniff for the stench of enzymes. But nothing. You hear the scrabbling and scratching, though. We have rats, you tell your husband. Sure we do, hon, he says, thinning his eyes at you.

Guilty Shadows

At Christmas, he gives you a heart-pink box tied with ribbon.

You open it and ice up when you see the Evanescence CD inside. And you begin to think, maybe, that's where I've gone – inside your poor husband's soul, stretching through his body like fingers in a glove, getting ready for use.

The Missing Word

Little more than a year has passed
since my young brother entered the forest.
What he was doing prior, I could not say;
I always tended to push him away.

Decades ago, a group would have gathered
to search the woods and bring him back,
but the dwindling numbers of remaining men
dissuaded the searchers from searching again.

Mother catches me lost in thought
and tells me to mind my mind,
and Father keeps urging the barnboy to be bold
despite my short words and my heart gone cold.

But how can I marry or be merry in times
such as this without my brother by my side?
How could I raise a child next to these woods
that consume boy-shepherds and girls in red hoods?

One of our elders lost his sister to the trees,
back when his body was as strong as a bear.
Now he and I are alike, one and the same,
living with a sorrow that's given no name.

Women are widows when they lose their husbands
and men are widowers when they lose their wives
and orphans are ones without father or mother.
But what are siblings with no sister or brother?

Some say we're bereaved, or we're missing a limb,
or that we've lost our trailing duck,
but when I look into that webwork of pine
all I feel is my soul calling to its pair once entwined.

An Anniversary

My dearest Cynthia, I kept my vows

On this day of our anniversary.

I swepted the breezeway, pruned the Beech's boughs

And watered the long-swinging Peony.

Our bed is neatly done; a coverlet

In crimson-murrey is upon it spread.

At eve I'll play your favourite cassette

And on my bosom gently place your head.

As promised, I have lacquered your long nails

And helped you don a camlet red and bright,

I've locked the door to mute all outer wails

And shut the louver to dim out the light.

Long you have said, "My husband gave me naught."

Now look at you—all complaints are suppressed.

Now maybe you are smiling at this thought—

'My husband's good although he's not the best.'

An Anniversary

How meekly now you're sitting on the chair,

Your cheeks don't have the former fury's mote—

I wonder: If your habitude were fair,

I wouldn't have used that blade against your throat.

Out of Time



Red Flag

I don't know if writing about it
will satiate my ravenous thoughts,
or make them material – corporeal.

Do I give a crime scene
to my most gruesome murders?
Do I dip my brush in the blood
and paint a portrait for prying eyes?
Do I lay out a confessional
for the holy priests and their jagged crosses?

Or

Do I shake my head until it rattles
in hatred for what I see?
Do I keep a rosy smile on my face
as the victims linger in the corners of my basement?
Do I pretend the thought never
came to life behind my irises?

I can smear the ink across the pages,
laying waste to any inclination of innocence
as the paper sinks and rips into the crimson.
But I can still be disgusted
and wonder who wears my skin
when I'm not around.

Haunted



Ponce de Leon Was Such A Bloody Idiot

I screamed in agony for a week; burning, every cell in my body on fire. The injections were easy enough, once a day for seven days. Being strapped up in bed beside several others screaming in a symphony of holy torture wasn't.

"How are you doing, Mr. James? What a cute boy you are." The nurse asked, and like the day before, incoherent dribble came out of my mouth. "Oh, good. I see the treatment is coming along well." She smiled, gave me the needle and quickly left the room before the screaming started again.

Last month I attended the opening of the Washington Time Capsule. Buried for a nearly a hundred years. That was the cool thing to do back in the 1950's. We thought we were so advanced back then. Hell, we think we're advanced now. Fools.

They opened the capsule a year early due to construction of the world's first matter transporter, the Zip Matter Rail. At the flick of a

Ponce de Leon Was Such A Bloody Idiot

switch you could be deconstructed and whisked atom by atom across the world. Already airlines were declaring bankruptcy. I smiled to myself; something would go wrong.

I stood in the same spot as I did that last day in high school. I couldn't remember anyone's name, except Tanis, the brunette I had the hots for back then. My first love. But I was too shy, never even kissed her. If I lived my life over again. I laughed. IF. That would be the only thing I'd have done differently. I'd have kissed her and whisked her off to the nearest hotel. I mean, who'd have thought I'd be here, nearly a hundred years later, about the same physical age as I was then, only with a lifetime of memories. I was one of the last to take the injections, one of the last Young'n still alive.

If I ever could imagine what it was like to be accused of being a witch in the 1500's and being burned alive at the stake, this was it. I screamed until I lost my voice and then howled some more. But the injections worked and my body began to slowly reverse the aging

Ponce de Leon Was Such A Bloody Idiot

process. The Ponce de Leon Corporation had found a way to simply flip the age gene and make it go backwards. We became the 'Young'n's as the news media called us. Slowly growing younger every day.

Only they downplayed the pain involved. Said it was worth it if you want to live a second lifetime. In that case they weren't lying. The pain was unbelievable. Some died. Anything to make a buck, or in this case \$50,000.00 US, to live the dream of starting over again. Doing all those crazy things most of us too old, but rich, could ever enjoy.

There were a couple of decades where life just didn't get any better. I was 105, backpacked the Himalayas before the devastating 2020 earthquake crumbled many of them. At 110 trekked Brazil's rainforests and watched the last Manatee breath its last breath. At 115 walked the last polar ice cap over the South Pole, and laughably married at 128, for the twenty-eighth time. Cindy was only twenty-eight and I think just wanted me for my money. Didn't care. Yeah, those moments were worth it.

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Only the Young'n process gradually began to accelerate. As bones shifted, shrank, rebuilding themselves, taking age away. Pain. I seemed to be in a constant state of agony and it was worse for those who had plastic surgery and implants.

The Corporation's guarantee. To make you younger and live a much longer life. Well, couldn't fault them on that promise. But as the old expression goes 'It's not nice to fool Mother Nature'. Fuck with her and suffer the repercussions. No problem, they said. We'll find the technology to flip the gene back. Only it didn't flip. Apparently couldn't, once the cells were switched into growing younger they began to quicken the process, breaking themselves down into more natural states, the company explained. After a while I began to lose days then weeks at a time. Idiots, we were all bloody idiots.

Sure they got sued, went virtually bankrupt. Then everyone suing became technically minors. The lawyers fought over all of those points in court. I think they were the ones to really get rich out of

Ponce de Leon Was Such A Bloody Idiot

all of this.

Some governments declared it unlawful for Young'n's to collect a pension; they were still young enough to work and earn their own living. We found out later that we couldn't have kids. One woman was pregnant for nine years as the body fought to evolve and de-evolve. She died and the child was stillborn. Others imploded in screaming convulsions. Most of us chose abstinence or sterilization.

Seared concrete stank the air as lasers eradicated the seal over the Time Capsule. Three-D Vid reporters were in attendance filming as they opened the Capsule to reveal souvenirs and achievements of the fifties; vinyl records of Elvis, Chuck Berry, the song Tequila echoed in the background, a Sputnik replica, a NASA emblem, and an Edsel hood ornament.

Our class put in their own letters written on a typewriter. God I'd seen so much evolution. On the back of mine was a last second

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hand-scribbled note I wrote before anyone saw me sealing it. 'Wished I'd screwed Tanis Johnson'.

They read it out loud and everyone laughed. I was embarrassed. Not ever in a million years thinking I'd be here to live this moment, or how I could forget her last name.

The crowd parted, a familiar figure walked towards me. Tanis smiled, a Young'n' like me, she didn't look a day over 140.

We kissed. The crowd cheered and she said, "let's make this a memory worth remembering, while we have the chance." It was the last thing on my bucket list. We were literally, well at least physically, teens in love all over again. I got divorced and remarried in a day. She became my twenty-ninth wife. Aren't lawyers great?

I lost my halo-car's driver's license last week, got acne and pimples all over again and as of yesterday can't walk anymore. On Monday Tanis died and I'd begun puberty. It's Friday and I'm in

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diapers suckling from breasts I used to once lust over.

Mother Nature still won. Oh well, I gained a few good years. If only Ponce de Leon himself knew what the human race was getting into searching for the fountain of youth.

Some of the Young'n's had died or committed suicide early in the acceleration process, unable or unwilling to live through the excruciating pain. Of course, waivers and flanks of lawyers made sure the company wasn't liable. Technically they owned us and we were legally bound to the Corporation if a 'cure' was ever found.

There is one thing they discovered doesn't age; the brain. As our bodies shrank back to the womb states they came from, the memories of two lifetimes remained intact. 'What could be better?', some cursed.

Yesterday's headlines read 'Man materialized out of The Zip with one of his wife's breasts. Still searching who has the other'. Both are suing. The Zip company statement admitting to a slight power

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fluctuation and that Zip travel is still safer than airline travel. I laughed; little did they know.

By tomorrow morning all they'll probably find of me is a puddle of protoplasm, a sodden pillow full of tears and echoes of screaming, like all of the others before me.

The nurse strides into my room, armed this time with doctors and reporters. A needle gleams evilly in her hand. God, I hate her smiling condescending face.

I gurgle incoherently, trying to say 'no, let me die'. I try to fend them off with feeble arms, I've only newborn peach fuzz of hair left, the rest a pool beside my pillow. Another day would have ended all of this. I am at the legal mercy of the New Ponce de Leon Corporation.

"He's one of the last left alive. Give it to him now." A doctor yammers to the assembled journalists. He spouts about the last minute cure found by some scientist in Borneo, based on primate and iguana

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DNA.

Ponce de Leon was back in business, now able to flip the Young'n's back to aging. Their scientists claimed to be able to do it on a continual basis. Back and forth, to live forever, they'd be rich again.

The only true truth I've ever come to know is that your body never forgets pain. Coldness washed over me as the chemicals flooded in, every cell turned again to fire. I gurgled as the unbelievable agony I never wanted to go through returned, screaming at me from another lifetime.

"Oh God! Make this stop. Let me die and not live again," I tried to yell. Only the cries of a newborn escaped my lips.

Reality Overdose 02



@jacelyn.makes.stuff

Devour Me

I
Sink my teeth into the delicate, fine
Skin
On your forearm right near the crook of
Your elbow,
Leaving fine marks
A trickle of blood
I taste you.
Devour me.
Devour my body enriching your soul
I will devour You
The only thing I have holding me.
Red drips on the sheets as I bite down.
Suddenly-
Without pause
You tear into the side of my neck
That sacred place
Blood slides down my collar bones,
Down my stomach
Do you feel the ache in here?
Next
You put your holy mouth on my inner thighs
Leaving mottled purple bruises where
You stop
The blood is pumping
Heat fills the room and I can't breathe
This is the only place I can be.
Blood pools now
On white sheets
Skin and breath ragged
Devour me I plead!
Finally
The heart.

Devour Me

You hold it in your hands still pumping
One last bite
Blood drips down your chin
Oh how we can only be here and now

Untitled

Again.

The screech of an owl.

I claw at the ground. *Six minutes.* The soil beneath my skin is cold, always cold; grit building under my nails as I scabble through the loosely packed earth. My hands are fish-belly white beneath the moon, and my breath seesaws in and out, serrating my airways.

All around me is silence, the forest a rapt audience.

Five minutes. The swoosh of my fingers against nylon fabric. I exhale sharply through clenched teeth. I'm ahead of schedule; I dig faster. The body begins to take shape beneath the earth. I scrape back soil from the chest, the face; clumps skittering, pooling in the hollow of the throat and the tear wells of each open eye, between the slightly parted lips.

I can't get distracted again. I can't be lured in by the mask of death, mesmerized by the way the final throes loosened jaw and limbs into something slack and left wanting. In those other instances, I remained transfixed until time ran out.

Now, I focus. This time has to work. I know if I free the torso, I can pull. If I manage a firm grip, I can drag the body out of its shallow grave. If, if, if. *Four minutes, three minutes.* I've done this enough to know my internal clock is precise.

I force my hands under the shoulders, my heels digging into the ground on either side of the unhallowed plot. I pull, and the body comes, heavy and pliant in my arms. It's too soon for rigor mortis.

Around me, tree trunks slant and branches reach in the direction of the road. *Two minutes.*

Untitled

Still, there are obstacles. The weight of the body, the tree root I always trip over, my frantic breaths. The span between death and beyond can never be easy.

The forest thins the closer I get. A black ribbon, wet ink in the moonlight, runs horizontal across the landscape. The road. *One minute.*

The road means the car and the car means my chance. I need the driver to bear witness that I was here. That I *am* here—this shell of myself, at least. If I can't drag my body to the road, where the oncoming headlights surely won't miss, my time is up, and I'm doomed for another round. A soul forever seeking permanent peace in consecrated ground.

And so, I pull.

I hear the car rounding the bend. The same car every time, the same countdown, the same situation. Every time. *Thirty seconds.*

Feet slipping on decaying leaves, I tug my body up the embankment, shifting my grip again, then again, seeking the most efficient hold. A glance over my shoulder—darkness and gloom frame the car's headlights as they move closer. I'm nearly to the pavement now. I have the time, I have the time, I have the time.

My grasp slips and the corpse's clammy fingers slide through my own. I scream in frustration, clutching at air. I can't keep doing this.

Twenty seconds.

I grab hold once more.

Fifteen seconds.

Untitled

I strain backward, arms embracing my body's trunk.

Eight seconds.

The ground vibrates with the vehicle's approach.

Five.

I turn, flinging my corpse forward, hoping it's close enough to the pavement to catch the driver's eye; a pale crumple of human limbs by the side of a road in a lonely, dark forest.

One.

The car streaks by, phantom-like, white headlights blurring to red taillights. Driver unaware of my need. I wail, my body a forgotten and battered marionette at my feet.

Then, darkness.

Again.

The screech of an owl.

I claw at the ground. *Six minutes.*

The Concubine's Lament

I did not hear the last wisps leave your ribcage. No pitter-patter like fairy feet, nor scent of a beastly wind.

And to think I imagined
our fingers married by fate's red string;
my crimson cry clawing
the thicket in your breast,

you staining my mouth a poet's
midnight, as we seized each daybreak
by the morning star.

Alas! I now quiver the flesh-yearned thread
lining panels of your jade coffin,
knowing that my kisses still lay warmth

to the specter of girlhood that once was,
decaying within — wide-eyed,
in wait for its next half-life.

You lie, in your fine suit for a sovereign past —
but what of me? Which kingdom shall honor me?

Burial

Center

Leaves, decay, earth mounded

Detritus from animals

Left

Hands, fabric moving, proprioception

Uneven ground

Right

Hands, shifting feet, deep breaths

Bracing

Behind

Wind, trees, trodden grass

Distinct lack of presence

We hold fast

Rise together

Breathe in

Breathe out

Feel the fear growing in my stomach

Feel the anticipation grow on my skin

We all brought our own pieces

Of ourselves for this

Now buried, more physically than they used to be

The ground wavers

Liquid seeps

Groundwater or blood

Same same

Burial

We build our breaths
Let out our barriers
No one is here to see

You remember cutting your finger
As a child
Blood sisters
Dance out in the darkness
You thought this couldn't happen
Not anymore
Not here
We can't do this
Some one
Someone will come

No steps come
The grass starts to rise
The shimmers start
Warm, turgid liquid slowly drips
The ground continues to swell
And the safety is gone

These trees have no one
To whisper your secret to
To tell this story
To mourn the loss

The ground rises
To meet your face
You fell

Burial

We catch
Breathe in the ochre
Embrace your new home

APOCALYPTIC

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Wildfires

Dancing in the wildfires
the heat licks my legs
as the wind whips the flames,
Filling my lungs with the ashes and smoke
Coughing, I fall
Inconsequential scuffed knees,
My vision blurs
as this body is consumed
and I return to the earth.

I'm no Phoenix.
When this body crumbles
I'll be dead and gone,
Just dust drifting through the air.

My chest feels empty
I can't save the world
She'll save herself.
Through the heat and fire and rising tides,
She'll clear us away
Next time,
She won't make the same mistake
Next time,
She won't suffer man.

VISITING A PUBLIC GARDEN WITH YOU WHEN SOCIETY HAS CRUMBLED

At the end are the hyacinths, bursting into bloom,
bombing us with pollen, yellow-scented, dry.
And the fences are stacked like bread loaves,
their rivets stolen, too damp to burn. Beyond,
the trees chatter with starved birds, stripped to their mid-points
and reaching, otherwise, beyond our grasp.

You read, before, that to escape a maze
you have to trace the right-hand wall. We walk in greenery,
waltz circular, toe the line. At the centre, the swings,
the information board still standing, the bones of a bird
who flew too soon. *Taxus baccata*, which forms the walls,
lethal at fifty grams.

Outside only the sculptures, in their protective cases,
remain dry. Their scaffolded bodies, propped upright,
is a kind of melancholy loneliness. We ache to touch and perhaps
they, too...

Later we find our map has dried and crusted at the fold,
has fallen into dust and ash. All those hidden routes
we breathe into our lungs, other people's bodies,
other people's breaths

Lights Out

There was no darkness like the gloom of a city without any lights. No matter how many power cuts Sofia had lived through, it was always shocking to make her way home in the streets given over to chaos, with no stop signs or traffic lights. Everyone rushed by, only worried about getting to their own homes and shutting their doors behind them. Hoping the electricity would be back in the morning.

But that night, there was something different in the air. The area affected was more extensive than ever before, and the reasons behind it were unclear. Had a fire broken out on a main electrical line? Or was there something to do with a nuclear power plant? People were driving faster than usual, and there was no subway service, so the streets downtown were overflowing.

She didn't want to admit it, but she felt uneasy too. She made dinner but didn't eat it. The electricity still wasn't back, and her phone was dying, so she went to bed but couldn't sleep. She sat out on the balcony looking out over a sea of blackness, waiting for the day to come, for the sun to rise. Only it didn't.

Lights Out

Sure, a tinge of red stained the horizon. A murky greyness replaced the velvet air. But there was no yellow sun and blue sky. Instead, smoke filled everything around her. She could feel it in her lungs, in her bones.

The streets below her apartment remained empty. It was as though the whole city had unanimously decided to stay behind locked doors, so she resigned herself to wait. She was so tired she was dizzy, but once she lay in bed and started drifting off, something started growing in her stomach, making her breath quicken. Her head ached.

Sofia couldn't tell if the sun had set or the air had gotten thicker, but suddenly it was dark again, a deep, primitive darkness. The northern horizon began to glow a bright orange that contrasted starkly against the deep sky. And the silence and awful calm of the day was gone. People were out on the streets below, and their screams and cries of pain echoed over the concrete. Sirens started to fill the night, one after another.

Just as her utter exhaustion started to take over, she was jerked awake by someone jiggling the doorknob, trying to get in. The

Lights Out

screaming of metal on metal filled her apartment, but she was frozen in place with no where to run if the lock surrendered. After what seemed like forever, they gave up and their footsteps pounded away through the corridor.

There had been so many other outages. But as Sofia struggled to breathe in the thick smoke, she knew that the usual wait until the lights turned back on would never end. The murk of that night sky, lit only by a faraway fire, could only inevitably fade into a far deeper dusk.

SOMETHING HAPPENED ABOVE THE EARTH

Like shadows stretching into oblivion, like tight-clasped grasps of night-gray stoning boulders of dark matter into infinity, the malign clouds congregate, bruising light.

There is a certain beauty to all of this. It is not a beauty that is seen, but one that is anticipated. Say, the beauty of a new year ensconcing itself within its eve, so much that all the pizzazz is lived before the dawn seals history. It is that anticipation that enlivens, for we know too well new years bring very few new things. Hence, we pour all the excitement into an expectation that is scarcely met. Such is the beauty of this darkness. It holds an inarticulate promise. A foreshadowing that I so earnestly crave is brought to *gray*. This darkness holds a tearing away. A deliverance. A breaking forth. It holds the future. Rid of flesh. Rid of soul. It holds death; I crave death. And lo, it comes to me.

Something happened above the earth. *Implosion, explosion,*

SOMETHING HAPPENED ABOVE THE EARTH

collision, they said. Whatever it was, it did happen, and it birthed the clouds. They float, they creep, they grow, they eat. They brought heaven down to earth, but that heaven was hell.

The clouds' breaths wisp across my face as they inch closer to me—snakes creeping to prey. The air is a chill warmth, a marriage of seasons: Winter resting her silver hair on Summer's maroon shoulders. They come. Hesitant, yet sure. I stretch my hands forward.

Accept me, dear death. This body is no home. You are home; become body for my sake, so I may possess home.

I picture the people in the bunkers, stalling death. Clinging. Hoping on hope, their hope an infinite slope, a descent into nothingness—empty, void, null. Not me. I have found purpose. They know nothing of destiny. Nothing of miracles. The miracle of ceasing, they know not. The death of a thing sculpted to hold life is in itself a miracle.

SOMETHING HAPPENED ABOVE THE EARTH

So my miracle lies here, in the belly of death. Not in their shelters, with clumsy food, walls bedecked with grime, wails and laws. Useless! This world is over! There is only one destiny, and it is a few inches away from me.

I do not take a deep breath. I do not fidget. I do not think of what was, nor of alternate universes and what could be. No. I don't. I affix my gaze to the most beautiful sight, arms outstretched still. The darkest gray reaches my fingertips. I taste its hunger as it squeezes itself into my pores. It teaches me the biology of my being. I feel every tendon, every distinct cell, and every seed of life gyrating within me. The pain sweeps in. My joints quake. Anointing. Mighty. It rids me of the curse of flesh. Muscles lose their grip. Bones melt into nothing. My vocal cords thin and vibrate, but the clouds take my screams too. How hungry. How sweet. They take everything. And I let them.

Judgement Day

So what if we dream like tomorrow's guaranteed,
knowing well we won't live to see sunrise?
It turns out Revelation doesn't hold a candle
to the manmade beast that is now upon us.

The last time we saw Jesus was in the look
the girl with the golden hair gave us
before the radiation withered her body,
and her eyes went blank.

Who do we have to thank for the failure of
such an abundant world? Whose holy tongues
convinced us to believe in such a thing as scarcity?

How quick the kings of the city crumble
when the poor they have ravished fight back
in unending waves.

And you thought God was gonna save us
from the hell-on-earth we created in his name?

Party At the End of the World

On the night the world collapsed
the ice-caps melted and the land burned
we counted all our shareholder dividends
and took photos of our swollen profits from hostile takeovers.

On the day ten million people died
billions starved, destitute and cried
we celebrated our new mansion purchases with champagne and all
because we had done nothing to stop the fall.

On the evening when all we heard was sirens and screams
and all the satellites fell from the skies
we kept ourselves warm with blankets made of wealth
lit by the satisfaction of being market leaders of top FTSE 100
companies.

On the day after hundred and sixty species became extinct
and we knew we'd likely soon be next
we all lounged around on big yachts with models
had a massive party at the end of the world.

On the afternoon of Armageddon
apocalypse, catastrophe and everything collapsed
we all wolfed down the finest Caviar, oysters and White Truffles
and made plans to use this present crisis to make more money.

On the week when disease spread as fast as the fires
which consumed and killed people like flies
the skies and the air turned orange and red
we were thankful we'd made billions instead of invested in renewable
energy.

Party At the End of the World

On the month when chaos reigned and the terrible darkness happened
the perishing cold and warmth froze and tortured us
we leaned back in our executive chairs, lit cigars without a care
in the world, satisfied we had done all we could to become extremely
rich.

On the year life itself faded to black
and all of human life was not coming back
we hesitated: and wondered, considered, for a moment
how we were going to make money now our world is over?

SAVE YOURSELF

I'VE DRAGGED MYSELF UP FROM THE PITS OF DESPAIR LIKE
DREDGING UP MY BODY FROM THE FLESH OF THE EARTH /
MY KNEES STAYED WET AND SHAKING LIKE THOSE OF A
FRESH LAMB / IN A UNIVERSE WHERE
THE EARTH IS
MY MOTHER
IS A GRAVEYARD
I AM THE MESSAGE BOY, THE MIDWIFE, THE GRAVEROBBER
RIPPING MY UNFURLING BODY FROM THE WOMB.
I AM ALL OF THESE BECAUSE MY MOTHER IS BUSY BEING A
BURIAL SITE.

Boy/Crow/Cat/Fox

The city streets were cracked and flaked like sunburnt skin. Cars, tossed by the caprice of the streets, gleamed dully, blocking the way and littering the sidewalks.

The boy didn't know what cars were for. He saw their discarded husks, rusted and rotting into nothing, as he walked along the city streets. A morning mist rolled in, weaving through the high-rise buildings and wobbling light poles. As the droplets hit the boy's skin, it blistered and peeled, but he didn't so much as flinch. When the water found its way into his mouth and lungs, sores appeared, but he didn't cough.

It would heal, or it wouldn't. The boy continued walking, shuddering.

"Apocalypse," he muttered. The sound echoed strangely around him. "Apocalypse," he rasped. "Greek. Unveiling. An uncovering. Greek. Apocalypse."

He kept walking through the city, and into the mist. His hair, already thin and ragged, came out in clumps when he itched his scalp. He didn't notice. He shuddered, and his face twitched.

Great vines, green and otherworldly, climbed the skyscrapers and choked the foundations. Windows, long musted over, reflected dull light hardly visible through the mist. Crawling greenery wormed between the cracks in the street, so insistent it was as if they had been the ones to break the streets so long ago.

The boy climbed over a large break in the street, holding onto a rope necklace with one hand. "Apocalypse," he kept muttering, and the sores in his mouth popped as he talked, but he just spat to the side and kept going. "Unveiling. Uncovering. Cover?"

His raspy voice was the only sound. A dark shape glided through the mist, swooping down to investigate. The boy looked up at the crow. The crow blinked three of its four eyes and continued.

Boy/Crow/Cat/Fox

The boy shuddered, curling into himself, and he became a crow. The boy/crow shuddered and became a cat with two tails. The boy/cat twitched and became a badger. The boy/badger ambled down a side street, claws scraping the concrete. The boy/badger tried to dig.

“Apocalypse,” the boy rasped when he shuddered and became a boy. His nails broke and bled on the concrete. “Uncover.”

The boy shook and became a deer, and he pawed at the ground. The boy/deer became a worm. The boy/worm wriggled, almost hissing in the mist. The boy/worm shook and became a cow. The boy/cow became a fox. The boy/fox circled the ground, tail swishing. The boy/fox tried to dig into the cracks with a keening that grew quieter and quieter as the mist rolled over the city, all the way to the edges.

Two streets away from where the boy/fox was digging, the city ended abruptly, dark woods encroaching. The boy/fox’s faint howls reached even there, to the trees. At the base of the largest tree, in a bowl-shaped hole, a metal door was fastened shut. In the center, a small light blinked red, red, yellow.

More Android than Androids

When looking back at film predictions
of what the future would entail,
these always visualized empowered
thugs clamping down the speaking few
or bleaker wasteland death depictions,
the follow-up from countervails
as the warheads soar, detonate
above the waiting crowded queues.

Who would've guessed machines would make
us able servants, not by force
or lasers shot by Nexus-Six,
but by wavelengths of lambent blue.

New breakthrough tech is science fiction
grown wildly from once-new email.

Mother Earth Births:

Cells programmed to survive and replicate; Cumulonimbus clouds
spilling oceans; Igneous rocks erupting landmass; Interconnected fungi
to nibble micro plastics despite betrayal; Dinosaurs evolving chicken;
Ice preserving time; Fruits dangling forbidden; Thick vegetated utopias
unpaved; Ants transporting farmland; Hunting gathering destructive
Homo sapiens; Currency bartering unearned commodities; Occupations
selling capitalistic matter; Plastic groceries lodging inside turtle shells;
Nuclear power plants radiantly dependent; Seagulls sifting Wal-Mart
trash; Viruses balancing nature; Mosquitoes pricking blood donors;
Buried fossil fuels suffocating present; Regret not acknowledging
mistakes; Another species avoidably extinct; The next intelligent life
form discovering remains and questioning *What the hell happened here?*

GHOULS & GALORE

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Clowning Around in Darkness



Inheritance

I have an ancestor who was burned at the stake as a witch. Luna lights up a cigarette, stains it with her lipstick, uses her dinner plate as an ashtray. She stares at us and exhales a curl of smoke. Watches with clinical interest as our faces pale.

Any idea what made her a target? asks one guest, hoping for a list of abnormal ancestral behavior, embroidered (if Luna is drunk enough) with bonus stories of bad genes still sloshing around in the gene pool. He is eager to lead a discussion of the history of cures for mental illnesses once mistaken for witchcraft. Perhaps Luna's bloodline is braided with purgatives and bloodletting, electroshocks and lobotomies, Freud and Jung. Maybe she carries a bottle of Lithium in her purse.

Luna looks at him from beneath her long false lashes and says, *She was the most beautiful woman in her village. Her beauty enraged everyone.*

I didn't know they burned witches for that, says someone else.

They didn't burn witches, Luna replied. *They burned women.*

Horror of the Night



NEVER TOO LATE

Bone splinters drilled out her captor's flesh.

His blood went down her throat
and stuck in there,
suffocating,
as the words she never dared to say.

A life wasted refusing to refuse.

A life of people passing over her
like the dust to which now
they wanted her to return.

Only now she understood
she didn't have to swallow
what didn't please her.

She could just spit out her words,
like spitting his remains.

NEVER TOO LATE

Then she turned towards the others
and shouted her first-ever no.

She wasn't going to let them bury her
just because she happened to be dead.

Spawn Camping

She shifts to relieve the pressure on her legs. Cold marble bites into her back. The freshly dug earth beside her begins to stir. Her grip on the machete in her lap tightens but she doesn't move. Not yet.

Triggering the creature's defenses will only complicate things. She doesn't like messy. She waits. Watches chipped nails claw at loose dirt.

Finally, a head crowns and hands push against the ground until two shoulders emerge. She moves soundlessly, swings with purpose practice ensuring she cuts clean.

The zombie's head rolls past mouth agape like even this second death can't stop its hunger.

Hypnagogia

(after Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Conqueror Worm")

With my sunny eyes wide, floodlit,
clear light blue and silver-flecked,
I believed that I was done shielding myself,
done with blinking and flinching,
So, you will understand why I shudder now
at the spectral sight of you,
Out of the corner of my eye,
at first, a tiny blur on a tip of lash

Hands flailing, wildly swatting
and missing, crying, kicking,
Soaked with sweat, my clothes
cling to my body, my mind suspended,
like a ghost ship aimlessly afloat

Relishing the cut and bleed of it,
like the children's nurse
with a lancet hidden behind her back,
You dive into my eye, sweeping sharply
cusped wings across glittering convex surface,
dripping obscene color, a thick brackish swirl
permeates the lens, eating the sunny blue of my eye,
then seeping further into
my hoop and stave barrel head,
all thought sloshing in paralytic ooze

I feel the echo of a thud rolling down
a pathway not yet flooded,
a single dry synapse sparks and
momentarily lights the interior,
I see you there,

Hypnagogia

*A slow-motion thing, wax-papered, crooked,
black veined batting of wings,
limbs rubbing out an industrious cicadid sound
dusky tymbalic beat, churning a sickly smooth
hypnotic drone*

You stop to study me with coldly calculating compound eyes,
then with a sideways twitch of your tiny proboscis,
like a disapproving bloodless old aunt knitting,
you return to your singular work,
casting torporous seine lines just far enough from shore,
my ensnared brain caught up in cell-numbing gray gauzy shroud,
looking for leverage, I can't gain any purchase,
badly bruised hands and fingers frantically
searching--sinking--slipping--

Daffodils in the Dark



House of the Dead

The empty house welcomes darkness.
The cold mist of an autumn evening
drifts through the broken casements,
the half-open, creaking doors.
Cobwebs hang from dusty chandeliers;
their shattered glass jingles crazily as
the wind whispers through cracks and crevices.
A single, severed hand, with bony fingers
plays at the old piano, the notes linger
and echo among the ancient rafters.

In the portrait on the parlour wall,
the soulful eyes of the young girl
range over the white-sheeted furniture.
A single tear rolls slowly down her
sallow, painted cheek.
In the armchair by the bare hearth,
a skeletal figure sits. Empty eye sockets
stare unseeing at a clock face which
which never moves from midday
or midnight in a house where time
itself has died.

Night has flooded the cold kitchen.
An old crone sits by a century of ash.
The black cat at her feet, frozen
in time, only its burning, amber eyes,
stare at the door at which loud footsteps
sound, but their owner never arrives.
On the floor above, the dead are
searching, searching for a bed,
for the rest they can never find.

Autumn Rites

Halloween brings back spirits of the past.
A yearly autumn rite of passage
where ghosts lead me back
to walk through streets of my childhood.
I willingly go back,
streets as familiar as my skin.
It was upstate New York
on crisp October days.

Smells changed along with leaf colors.
The old oil furnace woke from summer sleep.
It's octopus arms of ducting
reached into rooms where no one slept,
where rest did not easily come
to those who sat up in the night
waiting for a sign of life
from spirits who still dwelled
in the century old houses.

The big kitchen oven came alive again
after summer heat and humidity
shut its doors for the season.
In autumn it's wide mouth opened
to bake hearty meals and cookie treats
for kids to devour wholeheartedly.

The compost grew rich
over the season's worth of kitchen scraps
that decayed and rotted into new soil.
We turned it over with the rusted pitchfork
and breathed in the fresh smell
of opened gardens, or perhaps graves,
almost awaiting the presence,

Autumn Rites

the feeling of long tendrils
reaching for our near-by necks.

Crunching through fallen leaves
the weather was damp, the sky heavy with clouds.
Maple leaves rained down
and shiny horse chestnuts cracked out
of green spiky shells for kids to collect.
Autumn, season of Halloween, season
of heavy scents and colorful leaves,
come, walk with me down foggy sidewalks.

The Monsters That Escaped My Picture Books

I feel safe in the haunted house.
The jump-scares, the fake blood,
the playful screams, the soft darkness,
cannot bother me
if I am expecting it and
if I have prepared for it.
There's comfort in the fear
that is known.
We knowingly enter to be
scared, but to be scared
and for the laughter that
follows.

I am afraid of the other places.
The dim alleys, the bustling streets,
the packed buses, the public park,
where your eyes can linger
for a little bit too long.
An unwelcome closeness
that does not hide in the shadow
and needs no invite to enter.
The garlic becomes ineffective
on the creatures that have
no typecast myth to
follow.

Cemetery



The Third Weird Sister: Upon Seeing Banquo

Disclaimer: this story references William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

They will come for you in the forest. They will come for you and your son. They will come for you on your best friend's order. They will cut you down as your son runs through the trees. They will return to your best friend and whisper it is done. Whisper about your throat. Whisper about your blood. They will whisper until your likeness returns to haunt the hall.

My sisters and I see them. My sisters and I hear them. My sisters and I feel them as we kneel upon the heath. Kneel between fixed stars. Kneel under lightning and thunder and pinpricks of rain. Chanting our pronouncements to the clean and the wicked. Telling them what the forest will devour. Chanting words until our eyes roll in our sockets and one of us starts to break.

I am pulled by sour memory, like an itching in my chest. Like a

The Third Weird Sister: Upon Seeing Banquo

wriggling of newts above a cauldron with one last chance to stretch their bones. You are too close in countenance to one that I knew. Too close in loyalty. Too close in calamity. I feel it in my frame, down to my splintering marrow.

You must leave when the fire is low and untended. When bad intentions are starved of fuel and daggers are only visions. When the blessings have dissolved with the wine and those who can't sleep are plotting. You are not joined at the hip, as I am to my sisters. You are not beholden to generals, kings, or your murderers. You must leave tonight. Leave with your son. Leave with your questions. Leave with your contempt for me and my sisters. But do not ignore this. Ride to the furthest kingdom and rip a portentous star from the sky. You are betrayed. You are alone. You must outrun this.

The Ghost of Michaux Forest

Wild grapes and creeper vines volleying
between trees have knit a shape like a man—

slender and slanted. As I move to the place
where the torso twists, a scarlet tanager

trills for his sleeping mate which launches
a frenzied doe, her tail a flag of alarm.

Leaves scatter where once stillness hissed
through springs and ancient hemlocks.

The figure remains, a sentinel suspended
above limestone the edges of holloways

slope toward a path scarred deep into
this Appalachian ridge.

Book in Hand

The author persists for ages after
he is done atop the earth
like a normal soul with legs and hands
in daylight hours, and pursues
potential acolytes such as us
much like a vampire, only in
reverse: Every tome's a tomb
and when you jimmy one open
especially at a midnight hour
some dead soul's brought back to life
not with sharpened fangs, but as
a spray of blood, an offering to yours.
And that is why, at book stores and
in libraries, especially
the vaulted stacks, I breathe so hard—
and drool.

Ghoulish Night



BIOGRAPHIES

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

Lori D'Angelo (she/her) is a grant recipient from the Elizabeth George Foundation and an alumna of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Recent work has appeared in Beaver Magazine, Bullshit Lit, Idle Ink, JAKE, One Art Poetry Journal, and Wrong Turn Lit. Find her on the app formerly known as Twitter @scly21 or Instagram and Threads at lori.dangelo1.

Cheryl Snell's books include her Bombay Trilogy, and poetry collections from Finishing Line, Pudding House, and Moria Books. Widely published online and in print, her work has been included in anthologies such as a Best of the Net and Pure Slush's Lifespan series. Most recently, her work has appeared in Gone Lawn, Cafe Irreal, Roi Faineant, Literary Yard, New World Writing, and elsewhere. A classical pianist, she lives in Maryland with her husband, a mathematical engineer.

Abigail Guerrero is an aro ace and ESL author from Mexico. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Bloodless: An Anthology of Blood-free horror, The Voidspace, Toil & Trouble, All Existing Literary Magazine, and Radon Journal. You can find her on Twitter as: @_gail_guerrero

Mary Jo Robinson-Jamison lives in St. Paul, Minnesota where she and her husband, Kent, raised their two children. She worked with the severely multiply handicapped as a music therapist for forty years. Her work has been published in Eastern Iowa Review, Still Point Arts Quarterly, Driftwood Press, Talking Writing, Talking Stick, Minnesota Voices, and others.

Monique Renee Harris was born an African American woman with spastic cerebral palsy. Her digital graphic artwork has been published in Spoonie Journal, Defunkt, Raw Art Review, Pentimento Magazine, Penumbra Literary and Art Journal, Aji Magazine, Hey, I'm Alive Magazine, Fauxmoir Lit Mag, and Rogue Agent Journal. She won the Red Planet Magazine Cover Art Contest. She has exhibited in California at Makers Paradise Gallery, Raw Artist Gallery, Las Laguna Gallery, and Red Bluff Gallery. In 2019, she self-published a poetry and art book titled Strength and Tragedy: The Mystery of the Blue Lady. She lives in Emeryville, California.

BIOGRAPHIES

D.W. Baker is a submerging poet from St. Petersburg, Florida, where he writes about place, bodies, belonging, and the end of the world. His work appears in *Soft Star Magazine*, *Feral Poetry*, *Corporeal*, *Green Ink Poetry*, and elsewhere. He is a poetry reader for *Hearth & Coffin*. See more of his work at linktr.ee/dwbaker.

Gabby Gilliam lives in the DC metro area with her husband and son. Her poetry has appeared in *One Art*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Pure Slush*, *Deep Overstock* and others. You can find her online at gabbygilliam.com or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GabbyGilliamAuthor.

Matthew Ellis (he/him) is a queer poet living in Columbus, Ohio with works published in journals such as *The Howler Project* and *Pamplermousse*. With a background in chemistry, he spends his time teaching yoga and following creative pursuits in music and writing. To keep up with his work, you can follow him on Instagram (@matthewellismusic3) or visit his website (www.MatthewEllisContemplation.com).

Charlotte Newbury is a queer poet from South East England. She likes witchcraft, ecofeminism and spider plants. You can find her (& her most recent publications) on Twitter @charnewbpoet.

Eric Machan Howd (Ithaca, NY) is a poet, musician, and educator. His work has been seen in such publications as *River City*, *Nimrod*, *Stone Canoe*, *Caesura*, and *The Healing Muse*. In 2021, his fifth collection of poetry, "Universal Monsters," was published by *The Orchard Street Press*. He is currently working on an erasure project using a work by author H.P. Lovecraft.

Calla Smith grew up in a rural community on the Western Slope of Colorado, where she quickly discovered her love of reading, writing, and language. Another great love, travel, led to her settling in Buenos Aires in 2009, and Argentina remains her home to this day. Her work was first published in *Dream Girl* and *Rainy Day Corner* as a teenager, but more recently has appeared in *Immigration Diaries* and *Bright Flash Literary Review*.

Tom Okafor is a Nigerian writer, a reckless daydreamer who loves to spend his time reading, writing, shuffling through Beyoncé's discography on Spotify, and—obviously—daydreaming. He won the *Smile Calls Writing Contest* in 2023, and made the Longlist for the 2023 *Bold* contest. His stories have been published and are forthcoming in *Entropy Squared*, *National Flash Flood*, *Ibua Publishing Journal*, *A Coup Of Owls Press* and *Fiery Scribe Review*. You can reach him on Twitter—@tomnotes1—where you'll find him obsessing over *The Queen*, Beyoncé, and celebrating writers' achievements.

BIOGRAPHIES

Sloan Churches is an Oregon-based artist and poet. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, he enjoys creating work inspired by the personal and shared experiences of the queer community. In his creative work, his focus has developed into one of truth-telling, radical humanity, and simplicity. He was awarded first place in the poetry category for Central Oregon Community College's 2023 writing contest and won the crowd vote for best runner-up at COCC's "Be The Voice You Wish To Hear" poetry slam. His mixed media art has been displayed in exhibitions at the Pinckney Gallery and Open Space Event Studios.

Peter Devonald (He/Him) is an award winning UK poet/ screenwriter, joint winner of FofHCS Poetry Award 2023, winner Waltham Forest Poetry Competition 2022 and Heart Of Heaton's Poetry Award 2021. Nominated for the Forward Prize: Best Single Poem. Poet in residence at Haus-a-rest. His poems have been extensively published including London Grip, Artists Responding To..., Forget-Me-Not Press and Greenhouse. Featured in Poetic Map of Reading, 6 group poetry gallery shows, 50+ film awards (Gold Remi WorldFest), former senior judge/ mentor Peter Ustinov Awards (iemmys) and Children's Bafta nominated. www.scriptfirst.com
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Sonny Walker (they/them) is a twenty-three-year-old poet and novelist from Newquay, Cornwall. Their work draws inspiration from personal experiences with queerness, sexuality and the body, using violence, gore and occasionally explicit language as a means to express and celebrate the imperfect, the ugly, the shameful and the dirty. They write and hope to help establish a literary environment that rewards openness with kindness, understanding and solidarity.

Emma McCoy is a poet and essayist with a love for the old stories. She is currently pursuing an MA in Writing at PLNU. She is a poetry reader for Whale Road Review and Minison Project. Her debut chapbook is "In Case I Live Forever" (2022), and she has poems published in places like Flat Ink, Paddler Press, and Jupiter Review. Catch her on Twitter: @poetrybyemma

Rachel Orta (she/her) is from Milwaukee, Wisconsin where she lives with her spouse and their dog Mumford. She gravitates towards dream-like themes, often inspired by the mysteries of nature and the complexities of family. Orta's writing has recently appeared in Prose.onl, Curio Cabinet, and boats against the current mag. She has artwork in swim press and she can be found on Twitter @orta_rachel.

BIOGRAPHIES

Mohit Khodidas Patel is a poet, photographer and founder of an alternative school and a retreat. He returned to his hometown in India after graduating from Harvard University and Cambridge University (UK). He writes about phenomenal experiences at the intersection of absurdity, paranoia and tragic beauty.

F.D. Jackson lives in the southeastern U.S., along with her husband and sundry furry family members. When not writing or reading, she can be found wandering the Gulf Coast with a cold drink in her hand. F.D.'s work has been published in *Book of Matches* and *Poetry Breakfast*. She has work forthcoming in *Plum Tree Tavern*.

Catherine Roberts is powered by black coffee and illuminated by a laptop at night when she finds the time to write. Her work has been published in *Idle Ink* and *Five on the Fifth* and is forthcoming in *Flash Frog*. She can be found on Twitter under the handle: @CRobertsWriter

C.M. Ellis lives in Texas. Their affair with poetry and art has been wildly inappropriate and deeply embarrassing for all involved. They also really like pistachios. You can find them here, <https://linktr.ee/poemsandwhiskeypod>

Christina Ellison is an MFA candidate at SHSU, a Publishing Fellow at the Texas Review Press, and managing editor of *The Measure*. Her work appears in *Do Geese See God?*, *Epistemic Lit*, *The Afterpast Review*, and more. She lives in Spring, Texas, with her best friend, air conditioning.

Christopher Fried lives in Richmond, VA. A poetry collection *All Aboard the Timesphere* was published in 2013. His novel *Whole Lot of Hullabaloo: A Twenty-First Century Campus Phantasmagoria* was published in 2020. Recently, he was an advisor on the 1980s science fiction film documentary *In Search of Tomorrow* (2022).

Sarah Das Gupta is an English teacher who has taught in the UK, India and Tanzania. She lived in Kolkata for some years. Her interests include equestrian sports, the countryside, Medieval History and Ghosts. She has had work published in journals and magazines online and in print, in 12 countries, including US, UK, Canada, Australia, India, Germany, Croatia and Romania.

Leigh Brady is a writer from Dublin, Ireland, currently living in Edinburgh, Scotland. She has completed a MA in English literature, and a BA in English and Sociology, both from Maynooth University. She is interested in short form fiction, especially gothic, sci-fi, magical realism, and Fantasy. When she is not writing she can be found immersed in musical theater.

BIOGRAPHIES

Megan Diedericks writes poetry and fiction, everything from meek to macabre can be found in between the lines. She has a poetry collection available on Amazon, and her work has been published by Tales from the Moonlit Path, fifth wheel press, Last Leaves Magazine, Cloaked Press and other wonderful literary journals. Visit her website (<https://megandiederickspoe.wixsite.com/writer>) for more information.

Diane Funston writes poetry of nature and human nature. She co-founded a women's poetry salon in San Diego, created a weekly poetry gathering in the high desert town of Tehachapi, CA and most recently has been the Yuba-Sutter Arts and Culture Poet-in-Residence for the past two years. It is in this role she created Poetry Square, a monthly online venue that features poets from all the world reading their work and discussing creative process. Her first chapbook, "Over the Falls", was published in 2022 by Foothills Publishing. Diane is also a visual artist in mosaic, wool felting, and collage.

Frank J Talaber has been called a natural storyteller who writes like his soul is on fire and the pencil is his voice screaming. Literature written beyond the realms of genre, whose compelling thoughts are freed from the depths of the heart and the subconscious before being poured onto the page. Known to grab readers kicking, screaming, laughing or crying and drag them into his novels. To date he has over fifty articles/short stories and fifteen novels written or published. One, The Joining, top three finalists in the Canadian Book Club Awards in 2020, out of nearly two hundred entries.

David Boyle has painted many oil paintings since the mid-nineties which have sold well in Wellington, Palmerston North and has sold sculptures from Hastings City gallery New Zealand. David's art has been seen in online magazines and paperbacks such as Last leaves, The Woodward Review, Five on the Fifth, Radar Poetry, Mollusk Lit., Thimble Lit., Creative Mag and Backwards Trajectory with more coming. Website is boyleswellington.

Shamik Banerjee is a poet and poetry reviewer from the North-Eastern belt of India. He loves taking long strolls and spending time with his family. His deep affection for Solitude and Poetry provides him happiness.

Claudia Tong is an artist based in London, dedicated to exploring storytelling and humanity. Her practice spans from landscape, architecture and illustrations to mixed media, visual computing and music. She has recently exhibited in the US, Italy, New Zealand, the UK and online. Claudia graduated from Brown University in computer science, and she is also a member of ArtCan and Assemblage Collective. Check out more here: <https://linktr.ee/clauidaxt>

BIOGRAPHIES

Wayne F. Burke's drawings and collage have been widely published in print and online, most recently in *About Place Journal*, *Inspirational Art Magazine*, *Red Savina*, *Flare*, *Portland Review (ME)*, and elsewhere. He lives in the state of Vermont (USA).

Michelle Steiner is a disability writer, advocate, and para educator. She published articles on *The Mighty*, *Non-Verbal Learning Project*, *Dyscalculia Blog*, *The Reluctant Spoonie*, *Imagine the World as One Magazine* and *Word Gathering*. Recently she began a blog called *Michelle's Mission*. Her photographs were featured in *Word Gathering* and *Independent and Work Ready*. She works as a paraeducator in a school with students with disabilities. She lives in The United States with her husband and two cats.

Darlene Eliot lives in California. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Cleaver*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Heavy Feather Review* and elsewhere.

Elizabeth Porter is an educator and poet living in south-central Pennsylvania. She is a current MFA student at Lindenwood University.

Corey Miller's writing has appeared in *Booth*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Atticus Review*, *Hobart*, *X-R-A-Y*, and elsewhere. He has been awarded the 2023 Literary Cleveland Breakthrough Residency. He reads for *TriQuarterly* and *Longleaf Review*. When Corey isn't brewing beer for a living in Cleveland, he likes to take the dogs for adventures. Follow him on Twitter @IronBrewer or at www.CoreyMillerWrites.com

James B. Nicola is a returning contributor. The latest three of his eight full-length poetry collections are *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*, *Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies* (just out). His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a Choice magazine award. He has received a Dana Literary Award, two Willow Review awards, *Storyteller's People's Choice* magazine award, one Best of Net, one Rhysling, and ten Pushcart nominations—for which he feels both stunned and grateful. A graduate of Yale, James hosts the Writers' Round Table at his library branch in Manhattan: walk-ins are always welcome.

Jacelyn Yap (she/her) recently started focusing on her art proper, having persevered through an engineering major and a short stint as a civil servant. Her art and photography have appeared in *adda*, *Chestnut Review*, *The Lumiere Review*, *Barren Magazine*, and more. She can be found at <https://jacelyn.myportfolio.com> and on Instagram @jacelyn.makes.stuff.

BIOGRAPHIES

Jo Horrigan is a nonbinary butch lesbian who has been writing on and off for more than ten years. Jo is currently also a Master's of Social Work student and hopes to work towards their goal of becoming a trauma therapist in addition to continuing working on their poetry skills. Jo enjoys exploring mindfulness in nature and relationships through writing.

Alex Hoeft is a news reporter covering the Truckee/North Tahoe region in California and Nevada. She has both her bachelor's and Master's in journalism, from Brigham Young University and University of Nevada, Reno, respectively. When she's not journalism-ing, she's wrangling her toddler or reading a book – or doing both at the same time.

Angela Patera is a published writer and artist. Her short stories have appeared in Livina Press, Myth & Lore Zine, and more. Her art has appeared in numerous publications, as well as on the cover of Selenite Press and Penumbra Online. When Angela isn't creating, she likes to spend time outside in nature. You can find her on both Twitter and Instagram @angela_art13.

Ardamori is a Malaysian writer. Her work has appeared in Eye To The Telescope, Strange Horizons, Spellbinder Literary Magazine, and elsewhere. She can be reached on Twitter at @armori_ or at <https://ardamori.wordpress.com>.

Zoe Davis is an emerging writer and artist from Sheffield, England. A Quality Engineer in advanced manufacturing by day, she spends her evenings and weekends writing poetry and prose, and especially enjoys exploring the interaction between the fantastical and the mundane, with a deeply personal edge to her work. You can find her words in publications such as: Acropolis Journal, Livina Press, CERASUS Magazine, Full House Literary and Poetry Bus. You can also follow her on X @MeanerHarker where she's always happy to have a virtual coffee and a chat.

Savannah Hanson is currently a resident of Minnesota, a long time hopeless romantic, and someone who has finally started to write down all of the words that flow through her head.

Special Thanks

We would like to thank our incredible content reading team for reading over and reviewing all of the submissions for our fourth issue LIGHTS OUT.

Kelly Brocious - Poetry, Fiction, Non-fiction
Kate Schnetzer - Poetry
Glenis Moore - Poetry
Callie Jennings - Poetry, Fiction, Non-fiction
Karley Milito - Fiction
Melissa Witcher - Fiction, Visual Art

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With love,

Madisen Bellon, Editor-in-Chief
Jenith Jebasingh, Managing Editor