

SUPERLATIVE

FUTURES

- Keeping writing alive -

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- Keeping writing alive -

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Short Stories – Flash Fiction – Mini Sagas

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Preface

The future of our world, now perhaps more than ever, seems to be in a state of flux. Maybe that has always been the case, and with each new decade and generation and century we feel as if our lives, our species, and our planet are teetering on the edge of a precipice. *Superlative*'s future has been on our minds too, so much so that it became the theme for this year's issue of the journal.

For three years and three issues now, *Superlative* has been proud and privileged to publish some fantastic writers – some emerging for the first time with their debut publications, and others more well established. This year especially, the competition has been particularly fierce. 2021 saw double the submissions that *Superlative* received in its debut year, which was, of course, fantastic. We hoped to double that new figure again this year, but were delighted to be proven wrong in our predictions. For this year's 2022 Futures issue, we received over ten times more submissions than in 2021. This was phenomenal, and we are very grateful to everyone who submitted, and wish many congratulations to everyone who has been successful.

The pieces we received hit the theme of Futures across many genres and styles, from science fiction and artificial intelligence to dystopian worlds and characters of all kinds, all staring down the barrel of time. Of course, we always want to publish the best fiction, and one of the things we thought we might find most difficult – selecting a wide range of story genres and styles – was blessedly straightforward. A whole host of superb stories came to the fore, helping us produce our shortlists. It was then a simple, yet incredibly difficult, matter of selecting winners from those shortlists. If we could have published every piece, we would have done, but we have to stop somewhere.

Very many congratulations to all the contributors in the 2022 Futures issue of *Superlative*. We hope you enjoy this year's journal; thank you for keeping writing alive.

Ross Turner
Editor-in-chief

Feature Piece
Thoughts Had When Successfully Strung Out, and
Other Unsustainable Delusions

Self-Pitying Bullshit and Similar Thoughts I
Nash Reynolds

To Do:

- ~~Take Pill (Work Day!)~~
- ~~Homework~~
- ~~Exercise~~
- ~~Call Her~~

To Do:

- ~~Brush Teeth~~
- ~~Apply~~
- ~~Homework~~
- ~~Excercise~~
- ~~Take Pill~~
- ~~Call Her~~

To Do:

- ~~Brush Teeth~~
- ~~Cancel Flight~~
- ~~Work~~
- ~~Exercise~~
- ~~Take Pill~~
- ~~Take Pill~~
 - Skip a day this month can't run out early

To Do:

- ~~Brush Teeth~~
- ~~Work~~

- Call boss. Apologise.
- ~~Take Dad to appointment~~
 - ~~Take His Vitals~~
- Call Her.
- ~~Take Pill~~
 - ~~Take Pill~~
- Eat

To Do:

- Brush Teeth
- ~~Shower~~
- Hospital In Morning (Room 706)
- Homework
- Call someone
- ~~Take Pills~~_____
 - ~~Raise dosage.~~
- Sleep
- Eat

To Do:

- Brush Teeth
- Shower
- Clean out his office
- Take Pill
- Homework

To Do:

- Get out of bed

To Do:

- ~~Take Pills~~
- ~~Take Pill~~
 - ~~Take Pill~~
 - ~~Cut Pill in half~~

- Sleep
- ~~Take pills~~

To Do:

- ~~Take Pills~~
- Look up safe heartrate\
- ~~Take Pill~~
- ~~Check Heartrate~~
 - ~~Drink~~
 - ~~Check Hearttrate~~
 - ~~TakePill~~

To Do:

- Sleep
 - Sleep
 - Sleep
- Go To Class

To Do:

- Call Mom back
- ~~Take Pills~~
- ~~Work~~

To Do:

- ~~Take Pills~~
- ~~Work~~
- ~~Take Pills~~
- ~~Work~~
- ~~Take Pill~~——s
- ~~Work~~

To Do:

- .

• .
• .

Self-Pitying Bullshit and Similar Thoughts II

Nashh Retynolds

She found a grey hair on me a few months ago.
A couple.
It makes sense. Even if it fucking blows.
Going grey at 22.
Fuckin' stud.
Now I'm 23.
Not sleeping makes me feel like shit.
It's not fun anymore.
Still don't. I even see scary shit if I stay up long enough.
So cool.
I listen to podcasts now.
I read non-fiction now.
I have 'projects' now. I even own power tools now.
I don't like doing anything.
So sophisticated.
I have more than one doctor now.
I don't do illegal drugs now.
I just do legal ones now. I even sometimes take just one pill
now.
I try to not think about my heartrate.
Such a rebel.
I use hairgel now.
I fuck now. I even buy condoms now.
I'm still bad at it.
So sexy.
My family is getting older now.
Some of them are dead now.
The ones that are still alive are forgetting things now.
I have to help them now. I even call my grandparents now.
So responsible. So mature.

I have money and a girlfriend a bright future and I'm gonna graduate and I pay taxes and I'm an adult and I fucking hate it I don't want to keep doing this it's not fun anymore I just keep working and when I'm not working I think about how much work I have to do and .

Self-Pitying Bullshit and Similar Thoughts III

Nhs Rhynold

I hate when a cliché is right:
Sand, slipping through my fingers.

So much is gone.
A taste of what was promised.
What I expected.
All taken away.

The best time of my life;
Spent next to a hospital bed
Soundtrack to youth steady beep of heart rate monitors.
When that beep turned into one long screech,
then nothing.
After,
I returned to quarantine.

In between beatings, I work.
Sacrificial lamb of health and happiness put before the altar of
success,
Little coals of freedom burned in the furious engine demanding
more and more.
The goal is not to be happy. The goal is to achieve. The goal is
to find a bigger goal.
Achievement is not a feeling of satisfaction. It is a box
checked.
Hollow gaze immediately turned to the next.

Until I crash.
Destitute, depressing, slob. Numb soul sucked by blinding
screen.
Self-hatred nurtured. Bitter fruit tossed to hungry flame.
Older. Too old.
Too much time spent away, doing what needed to be done.
Older.

The fire burns, it's once hopeful heat now dim and the cold
bites the edges.

It still belches smoke. Choking

Older.

Expectation of feeling that electric tingle again is gone.

I had that.

I should be grateful for it.

What I have now is work.

I should be grateful for that.

Self-Pitying Bullshit and Similar Thoughts IV Rynddl

How obvious is it?
Any of it. All of it.
They don't get it. Or they do.
I think I'm so special that it matters.
That I deserve something.
That it makes this and that ok.
I can wriggle out of anything.
I always have.
So what if it's closer every time.
I've always been ok.
I don't need to change.
I'll just do better next time.
It's worked so far.
I'll be ok.
As soon as I have some free time.
It's ok if it doesn't work out.
I'll figure something out.
It's ok I have time.
Or I will.
As soon as I get a break.
I'll send that email. That'll fix it.
It always has.
I only do it if I need to.
They'll get it. They always have.
People like me. I've always had friends.
I'm just busy.
As soon as I'm free I'll call someone up.
They always understand.
I'll just make them laugh. They always have.
They just don't get my sense of humour yet. They will. They
always do.

They're just looking worried because they don't know I'm just joking. They always have.

I'll stop it as soon as I'm less stressed. It's just a bad time to try to quit.

I've always quit. I've always gotten back in shape. I'm just so busy.

It's still ok to live like this. To say things like that. To do this. It has been so far.

I've always been ok. I'll always be ok.

I'm still young. I have time.

Self-Pitying Bullshit and Similar Thoughts V

nr

i lied but i didnt mean to and im not sorry and its not going to stop but it does scare me,

Nash Reynolds

Nash Reynolds is a fresh college graduate, bright eyed and bushy tailed, with wonderfully unemployable degrees and numerous exciting opportunities to grievously stretch the definitions of ‘experience’ and ‘related fields of study’ on dozens of alluring job applications.

A note from the author:

I’ve only recently entered the fold of submitting my writing to the public, and it is as exciting, nerve-wracking, and clumsy as losing my virginity – but, unlike that particular endeavour, I’ve been told I have a knack for it, so I’m taking the leap to indulge in my rampant narcissism. My writing tends to focus on addiction, relationships, growth, loss, and mythical immortality. I have a separate google doc folder for the last one. I write funny things sometimes, but people tell me it just seems angry. So, ‘Comedy’ is an optional additional genre, depending on your temperament. Whoever ends up reading this, I hope you enjoy it. And if the ugly bits resonate, I hope you’re ok. Thanks for taking the time.

Short Story Competition Winner
Rich Girl

Tevye, the milkman, was on stage. The burly patriarch. The glue holding his family together, fighting to keep the modern world from encroaching on traditions, suffering at the hands of barbarous Russian Cossacks. As he began singing *If I Were a Rich Man*, Grace squeezed David's right arm. She leaned into him, whispered, 'Dad, Dad, I can't believe they stole this song from Gwen Stefani!' David looked at her, gaze still riveted to the stage. She was so young, so innocent, so light, so – American.

'Yes,' David said, flatly, 'I guess they did.'

He watched the show. At the end, the fiddler stood atop a roof on stage, playing a plaintive melody. David somehow knew, wherever life would now take him – home, prison, the grave – he would never see the fiddler again.

The day before, early morning of July fourth, David was driving his black convertible, top down, to the nursing home where his grandfather Aleksey had been moved a few months past. Grace, just fourteen, graced the front passenger seat, the warm jet stream coursing through the open cabin, her long blonde hair a field of tussled mustard. In the cramped back seat: a new king size pillow, encased in clear thick plastic; a wooden box of cigars; two carry-on suitcases for the flight from Boston to Manhattan later that day. The car whizzed along the highway while Grace belted out lyrics to the rap song *Rich Girl*.

A morose melody – the theme from *Schindler's List* – cut in on Grace's full throated *Rich Girl* rendition. David's cell phone ringtone. David pressed the button on the steering wheel to answer the call hands-free.

'This is Tevye,' he joked.

'Mr Bronstein?' the woman asked.

‘Yes, sorry, not Tevye the milkman. This is David Bronstein.’

‘Are you bringing the new pillow?’ the nurse said. ‘Your grandfather dislikes ours.’

‘Of course,’ David replied. ‘It’s right here in my car.’

‘Fine,’ she said, flatly, then, ‘you should stop bringing him cigars, Mr Bronstein.’

David glanced at the back seat, next to the white puffy pillow, at the new box of Garcia Vega Blunts. The only kind of cigar his grandfather smoked. The kind he had smoked since time began. When David was young, Aleksey chain smoked Blunts. He had no memories of his grandfather without a stubby fat cigar in his mouth, or delicately balanced between two fingers, as he flicked black ashes into the clear, hefty glass ashtray on the table next to the spotted, century-old armchair in his living room.

Although David’s grandmother died before he was born, the living room was still adorned with the wallpaper she had adored. Delicate pink roses on trellises. After decades of Garcia Vega soot, the pink had turned to battleship grey. But with Aleksey’s move to Hemlock Ponds Rest Home, in Boston, a few months ago, the Blunts were now only allowed outside. This was an indignity for Aleksey which David felt sharply.

‘He follows the rules,’ David told the nurse as he guided the convertible lickety-split along the highway. ‘He only smokes outside.’

‘Yes, but it’s unhealthy,’ the nurse chided.

‘He has an enlarged heart,’ David noted, ‘hardening of the arteries. Dementia. The clock is ticking. You want to take away his cigars?’

‘I see,’ she offered coldly.

‘How has he been this week?’

‘It’s getting worse,’ the nurse said. ‘He cries out at night.’

‘It’s like he escaped from Ukraine yesterday,’ David mumbled, more to himself than to the nurse.

A day earlier, David had bought the largest, fluffiest pillow he could find, at Bed, Bath and Beyond. Then the box of Blunts at the beyond badly named local smoke shop, Smoke and Mirrors. Then he drove home and packed his bag for New York.

‘It’s time to go, honey,’ he called out to Grace, as he stood in his kitchen after breakfast next morning, pillow and Blunts box in hand. The carry-ons were already in the back seat. Grace was flitting about the house in the way teenagers often flit. Still too young for either her body or mind to be weighed down by regret, David thought. How he missed those days when he, too, was light. He smiled as he heard Grace, buzzing about somewhere upstairs, singing *Rich Girl*. It was a song she first sang years earlier. She’d loved it during its initial fifteen minutes or so of fame. Then, as with most songs, it was forgotten, at least by Grace. Now she was singing it again.

When Grace was nine, *Rich Girl*, a hit from Gwen Stefani’s first album, topped the charts. Grace would bob about the house singing the lyrics with electric delight, her golden locks waving frantically, her fists pumping upwards as she punched holes in the sky. She had no idea, David had assumed then, that the song was a take-off of the original *If I Were a Rich Man* from *Fiddler on the Roof*. There was Gwen Stefani, on MTV and radio, singing a rap song about growing up in the hood in LA. Not exactly the original version from the musical about a peasant Jewish milkman in Ukraine, suffering from brutal Russian pogroms, fighting to preserve his family traditions as outside, modern forces encroached.

David himself was secular, quite removed from his heritage, and, as he delighted in Grace so much, he didn’t mind the rap-hood shtick. What did offend him was bad grammar. It bugged David, the college business major, the pernickety accountant, that Gwen’s lyrics were grammatically incorrect. In Gwen’s version, she fantasised about what her life would be like if she ‘was’ a rich girl, instead of the grammatically correct ‘were’ a

rich girl. ‘You’ll never get rich with that kind of grammar, girl,’ David had mumbled under his breath, knowing, ironically, that Gwen Stefani had indeed become rich at the expense of proper grammar. He didn’t note the grammatical transgression to Grace, back then, because experiencing Grace’s singing and dancing through the house warmed his curmudgeon blood. It warmed it five years ago. It warmed it again now.

David was taking Grace for her first trip to New York City, her first Broadway show. Afternoon flight on the fourth, matinee on the fifth. ‘You can pick any show you want, Grace,’ David had told her a month earlier. He knew there was a Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*, which had opened to rave reviews. So, he told Grace about when his parents first took him to see *Fiddler* when he was young. And about how it was – unexpectedly – played at his wedding, and at other major occasions of his life. His father played it on his record player when he was home dying of cancer, the year before Grace was born.

He even sometimes dreamt about the fiddler.

David didn’t want to make the decision for Grace of which musical to see. He didn’t want to be that father, the overbearing one.

‘*Cats* is playing,’ he had told Grace, ‘and *Wicked*.’

He wanted to see *Cats* or *Wicked* even less than he wanted to listen to Gwen Stefani’s grammatical bastardisation of *If I Were a Rich Man*. But this trip was for Grace.

‘I want to see *Fiddler on the Roof*,’ she replied.

He was surprised. Why her interest in such an old show, about peasant Jews in the old country, when there were plenty of modern shows to choose from? He’d raised Grace in a secular household. They’d never had a family Seder at Passover. Never been to a synagogue. Grace was further removed from Judaism than David was. He in turn was further removed from Judaism

than was his father, who in turn was removed further than David's grandfather.

Aleksey was orthodox. He and David's grandmother had kept a kosher household. They held Seders every Passover. Attended synagogue every weekend for Shabbat. David's father also held annual Passover Seders, but he didn't belong to a synagogue, didn't attend weekly services, and, rather than orthodox, was secular, an atheist, a man of science. David had fond memories of Seder dinners and Chanukkah parties as a youth, but he had no connection to Judaism as an adult, especially since his father, Reuben, died fifteen years ago. David was just American. And the first in his family to marry outside of the Jewish faith.

Grace's mother, Bridget, was Protestant, of Lithuanian, Polish and Irish descent. Bridget, too, was completely secular, an atheist, a woman of science – a psychologist. Each generation more American, until there was nothing of the old country left.

'I don't want you to choose *Fiddler* because of me,' David had told Grace. He feared that his recounting for her the numerous times his parents had brought him to see *Fiddler on the Roof*, as well as the time his father snuck a bit of *Fiddler* into David's wedding, was unduly influencing Grace's doctrinal Broadway show choice.

David had hired a classical violinist to play Bach and Mozart at his wedding. *Only* Bach and Mozart. As David and Bridget were exchanging vows, in front of a hundred guests, he heard, to his annoyed astonishment, *Sunrise, Sunset* from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Somehow, his father had got to the violinist. 'Maybe my father isn't as removed from the past as I'd thought,' David muttered when he'd heard the fiddler of *Fiddler on the Roof* intruding on his modern American wedding.

'This is your trip to the big city, Grace, you should pick what you really want,' David had insisted. She wanted to see *Fiddler*, had been her firm reply. A month later, suitcases and theatre tickets packed and ready to go, they were driving to Hemlock

Ponds to drop off a pillow and cigars for Aleksey before the airport.

Aleksey had been doing poorly in recent months. The dementia startlingly acute. Often not recognising David. Often chattering as if he were still a boy back in Ukraine. David hoped that Grace would have a good visit, perhaps her last, with her great grandfather. That Aleksey would be here, in the present, with her. He worried about bringing her, as she was sensitive, young, but he felt the chance for them to connect once more was too important.

David cringed as he pulled the convertible into the parking lot. He detested Hemlock Ponds. As far as he could tell, there were no hemlocks. And despite a thorough walk about the property, no ponds. The building felt institutional. A humongous, rectangular, multi-story brick building with a thousand ‘apartments,’ which were, really, just rooms. Not the cosy cottages nestled on rolling hilltops ringed by thickets of hemlocks he’d pictured when he first heard the name, ‘Hemlock Ponds.’

The most cringeworthy thing for David was the light system. Each resident had a small light on the outside of his or her apartment door, just above the keyhole. The lights, on timers, turned red overnight. In the morning, each resident was to push a button on the inside of the door, which would turn the light green. This was the residents’ way of letting the staff know they were still alive. Staff began rounds starting at 10:00 a.m. If a light was still red, they’d knock on the door. No answer, they’d use a master key to enter and see who was dead or just sleeping in. David found this depressing. Red light, green light, dead or alive, welcome to Hemlock Ponds. Being the pernickety business major who didn’t want Gwen Stefani to sing that she ‘was’ a rich girl, he felt the nursing home had no right to call the place Hemlock Ponds, when the more accurate Waiting for Death Rest Home was available.

Grace and David walked into the lobby. David had the new pillow under his left arm and the Blunts box under his right. They rode the main elevator up many floors, exited the elevator, began trudging down endless, narrow, windowless, dank hallways, each one identically papered with sepia-tone wallpaper. Following arrows, numbers.

Turn left, walk, walk, walk; turn right, walk, walk, walk.

Left, right, left, right, past hundreds of manilla-coloured apartment doors, each nameless, identical, save for the diminutive black plastic apartment numbers on each. It felt more like prison than home, David always thought.

‘There must be a retiree like me in every nursing home in America, I guess,’ David said, riffing on lines from his favourite flick. ‘I’m the guy who can get it for you; Garcia Vega Blunts, a bottle of Mogen David, a bag of weed, if that’s your thing...’

‘What are you talking about, Dad?’ Grace asked. ‘Does Great Grandpa smoke *weed*?’

‘No, Honey. Blunts. Just Blunts.’

1881

The little light by the keyhole of room 1881 was green. David sighed. He knocked, pressed his right ear on the door when there was no response. He heard voices. A man’s. A woman’s.

Man: ‘Look, I don’t know what’s bothering you, but don’t take your bedroom problems out on me.’

Woman: ‘I have no bedroom problems. There’s nothing in my bedroom that bothers me.’

Man: ‘Oh, that’s too bad.’

David and Grace looked at each other. Grace shrugged her shoulders. David knocked on the door again. The man said, ‘The State Department could use her. What a party girl she’d make; in Moscow.’

David turned the handle. The door was unlocked. He opened the door a wedge. He and Grace sidled in. Smells of urine. Lysol. Peaches.

‘Great Grandpa?’ Grace asked.

Aleksey was in his chair, an unlit Blunt dangling between two wrinkled, yellow, willow-fingers. He looks so small, David thought. Aleksey was watching the television sitting atop the desk on the other side of the little room. His chair was nothing like the lush, plush, once but not future king’s majestic armchair in the living room of his house. No, this was a square, squat, steel framed affair, with a slim-jim thin black vinyl seat pad. Perhaps, David thought, the chair used to strap in convicted prisoners for their executions at Shawshank State Penitentiary.

David had desperately wanted to move Aleksey into an upscale retirement home at the time of the move, but the money wasn’t there. David just didn’t have it. He was barely squeaking by as a sole practitioner accountant, while also bleeding cash on attorneys for his divorce, which dragged on as interminably as a frigid Russian winter.

Though he’d seen it many times, David routinely surveyed the sum of Aleksey’s ‘apartment’:

One twin bed.

Two white sheets.

Two white pillows.

One small television.

One executioner’s chair.

One small steel nightstand.

One Torah, black leather cover.

One lamp, olive drab lampshade.

Two open, empty boxes of Garcia Vega Blunts.

One clear glass ashtray taken from Aleksey’s home

Two framed photographs: one of Aleksey’s wife, Edna; one of Grace.

Pillow Talk was playing on the television. The man David and Grace had heard from outside the room was Rock Hudson; the woman, Doris Day. A romantic comedy from 1959, the year of David's birth.

Aleksey looked away from the movie, glanced at David and Grace. His burnt caramel brown eyes raced wildly about the room, then settled unsettlingly on David.

'You're here to kill me,' Aleksey said, matter-of-factly.

'Am I gonna see you tonight?' Rock Hudson asked.

'I'd love to, Rex,' Doris Day replied, 'but I already have a date.'

'You're here to kill me!' Aleksey shouted this time.

'Grandpa, it's me,' David said. 'David, your grandson.'

'You're here to kill!'

'No, I'm not,' Doris Day said.

'And I ain't the kinda guy who'd ask you to,' Rock pointed out.

David placed the pillow and Blunts at the foot of the bed, then walked the few feet to the television, turned the power knob off.

'I'm David,' he said. '*David.*'

Aleksey stared at David's face. He leaned his gaunt frame forward in the chair. The unlit Blunt, nestled in his wispy willow-fingers, flesh so paper thin it seemed to David that with a whoosh of air it would crinkle-crack open, slipped to the antiseptic white linoleum floor.

'David...David...it's you?'

'Yes, Grandpa. I'm David. I'm here with Grace, your great granddaughter.'

David walked the few steps back to Grace and put his hands on her shoulders. Grace's pool-blue eyes welled.

Aleksey's eyes, still wild, in flight. 'You must hide her, David. They're here!'

'There's no one else here, Granddad, only me. Only Grace.'

'They're here now. We'll die. We must hide!'

Aleksey rose from his chair, feebly. With his walker, made his way to head of the bed.

‘We’ll hide now.’ he said, ‘We’ll hide now.’

David instantly knew he’d made a terrible mistake bringing Grace. He felt ashamed of his stupidity. He’d been hoping for her to have just one more visit. During his own visits in the few months since the move, David was startled by Aleksey’s rapid decline. Sometimes lucid. Conversational. Sometimes not knowing David. Every time, the desperate urge to hide.

David’s father had told him the stories. How Russians had murdered men, women, children in Aleksey’s village in Ukraine. Dozens murdered after rumours that Jews had used blood from Christian children in their rituals. When pogroms began in nearby villages, Aleksey’s parents cut a large hole in their mattress. As the pogroms got closer to their own village, they’d hide Aleksey, just a few years old, in the mattress hole, then make the bed, until the Cossacks departed. Many times, David’s father had told him, his grandfather hid in darkness, hour after hour, buried in the mattress. He was there one night when his parents were murdered.

An uncle fled the village and brought Aleksey to America.

It was thirty years ago, when David’s father told him the stories. And the pogroms had happened decades before this telling. So long ago. Aleksey went on to have a good life here, David had thought. He met Edna. They married, had a little house, children.

The pogroms seemed to David like a chapter in a history book, the photographs black and white. A story, somehow, not real. And yet, now, here was his aged grandfather, curled in a foetal position, whimpering, looking for the hiding hole in his mattress. David could not bear it. How can this be? His strong, strapping grandfather, a burly blacksmith in his heyday. The family patriarch. The glue which bound together all the family. Who fled murderous Cossacks. Who witnessed the worst, the

ugliest, that people do. Who survived. Who overcame. Who, with a lifetime of healing, work, family, and love, thrived in a new world.

Now this disease, this vile dementia, in its own way as cruel as any Cossack. This disease, which took everything from him. Which took everything good. Which took away all the days, years, decades of love, family, healing, happiness. Which left his grandfather to hide, day and night, again and again. Which left him whimpering, foetal-folded, on the mattress, as he relived his parents' murders over and over in a vicious, cruel, endless loop. At the maddeningly named Hemlock Ponds Rest Home, which David thought itself was a vile mockery.

'No,' David mumbled out loud. 'No.' David knew what he had to do. But how could he?

'No what, Dad?' Grace asked.

David did not speak.

'Dad?'

'Grace, why don't you wait in the car, sweetheart? I just want to talk with the nurse. I'll be right along.'

He pulled the car keys from his jeans pocket, slipped them into Grace's hand, walked her to the door. In the hallway, just outside Aleksey's room, he whispered, 'Don't worry, honey, everything will be OK.'

'Are you sure, Dad?' Grace asked, clearly shaken.

'Yes, sweetheart. These things tend to come and go. I'll just talk to the nurse and be right along.'

He watched her amble down the hallway, then begin to walk more assuredly, until she was swallowed again by the maze of carbon-copy corridors. Inside the apartment, David pushed the little call button on the wall of the bathroom. A few minutes later, a knock. He opened the door to let the nurse in. Aleksey was still curled on the bed.

'Is he like this all the time?' he asked.

‘Most days. Sometimes he’s quiet, other times he calls out. I’m sorry.’

‘Yes,’ David said, flatly.

He walked to the bed. ‘Grandpa, it’s me, David,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of.’

Aleksey opened his eyes, looked sideways at David. ‘You’re here to kill me,’ he said, matter-of-factly again.

‘No.’

‘Who are you?’

‘It’s me. David. Your grandson.’

‘Whoever you are, you must hide!’

‘Alright,’ David said softly, ‘let’s hide.’ He covered Aleksey completely with the white bed sheet, then walked quietly over to the nurse, standing by the door.

‘It’s alright,’ he whispered to her. ‘I’ll stay with him.’

He closed the door behind her, locked it from the inside. He slid the executioner’s chair over to the door and jammed it under the doorknob, since, he knew, the nurse had a master key. He stood by the door, his mind – somewhere else. It might have been a minute, or a few; it might have been a century. Then, at last, he said quietly, to himself, ‘No.’ He walked slowly to the foot of the bed. He glanced at Aleksey, still under the white sheet, completely invisible, hiding, cowering from Cossacks, as he did now every day, every night.

‘No,’ David murmured. ‘No.’

He wouldn’t let an animal suffer so.

He picked up the new pillow, still encased in its plastic sleeve, from the foot of the bed. He stood next to Aleksey, clutching this, the best pillow he could buy, the pillow he’d hoped would bring comfort. He gently pulled back the white sheet, revealing his grandfather’s head.

‘Let’s hide together,’ David said.

‘I don’t know you,’ Aleksey said, his burnt caramel eyes now looking vacantly at David’s face, searching for recognition, finding none.

David stroked Aleksey’s head gently. ‘It’s alright,’ he whispered. ‘It’s alright. You’re safe now, no one is going to hurt you now.’

‘I don’t know you,’ Aleksey murmured.

‘I know,’ David whispered, ‘but hush, little boy, it’s alright. I know your parents from the village. They sent me. So you see, you’re safe.’

‘We have to hide.’

‘Yes,’ David assured him. ‘Let’s hide together.’

David leaned down and placed the pillow over his grandfather’s face. He pressed hard with both hands. The thick plastic felt surreal. Was he home, in bed, dreaming?

‘I know this is wrong,’ David murmured, crying. ‘To hell with you, God!’ he blurted out, as he pushed and sobbed. ‘If there is a God.’ He pushed harder. ‘How *dare* you?’ he asked. ‘How could you?’ His tears made tiny serpentine tracks on the clear thick plastic encasing the pillow.

‘How dare you?’ he repeated, sobbing. He pressed the pillow with increasing firmness to match the degree of resistance from the other side. He held firm while soon the counter-push decreased. He held while the resistance was less, less, less – gone. Still, he held fast. Was it for five, for ten, for fifteen, for a thousand minutes?

David stood up. He unzipped the plastic case, removed the pillow. Placed it under Aleksey’s head. He leaned down, kissed his grandfather on the forehead. He stood, blinking blankly at the wall ahead. Unsure of what happened. Unsure of who he was. Or what.

Then he remembered: Grace. She was in his car, waiting. He walked to the door, slid the chair from under the doorknob. He placed the chair where it belonged. Walked to the television.

Turned the power knob on. *Pillow Talk* was still on air. David slipped into the hallway, closed the door behind him.

‘Are you getting out of that bed,’ he heard Rock Hudson ask through the closed door, ‘or am I coming in after you.’

‘You wouldn’t dare!’ Doris Day exclaimed.

But he had.

Then David dove into the maze of hallways, following arrows to the lobby. ‘I must remain calm,’ he told himself. ‘Must go on. Must think of Grace. As if nothing has happened.’

He smiled weakly at Grace as he plopped into the driver’s seat. Started the engine. Turned on the radio. Drove to Logan Airport in Boston. He was on autopilot. He wasn’t sure where he was. Not on this flight to NYC. Not in Ukraine in the village. Not in the old country. Not in the new. He felt as if he was floating through time, through space, like figures in a Chagall painting. He was neither here nor there.

He had to push on. For Grace. It was her turn now. Taxi in the city. Casablanca Hotel by Broadway. Matinee next day. Orchestra seats just five rows from stage. Grace’s eyes blue saucers when the orchestra struck the opening chords. Her gaze riveted to the stage. David’s mind was floating. Through time, through space, through Ukrainian pogroms, American playgrounds, weddings, divorces, first kisses, last kiss. The movie of his life was playing in vivid colours in his mind, but something was wrong. As Grace watched *Fiddler on the Roof*, he watched so many scenes of his life, but playing out of order, sometimes the scenes running forward, sometimes backwards. A divorce, followed by his first kiss, followed by the birth of Grace, followed by his father’s death. It was all out of sequence. Out of time.

But the fiddler was there.

In the scenes he watched when his parents took him to dinner and the theatre to see *Fiddler on the Roof*; in the scenes of his first wedding, when his father surreptitiously slipped an extra

cheque to the violinist for her to play his favourite song from *Fiddler*; in scenes at his father's deathbed, when David placed a ruby red vinyl RCA Red Seal record of *Fiddler on the Roof* on his father's turntable. The fiddler was there, in all these scenes of his life, and many more. He had been there, in the background. Always.

Jeffrey Feingold

Jeffrey Feingold is a writer of short stories and essays in Boston. His work appears in magazines, such as the international *Intrepid Times*, and in *The Bark* (a national magazine with readership over 250,000 – *The Bark* has published many acclaimed authors, including Pulitzer Prize winning poet Mary Oliver). Jeffrey's work has also been published by award-winning literary reviews and journals, including *The Pinch*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Hare's Paw Literary Journal*, *Schuykill Valley Journal*, *The RavensPerch*, *PAST TEN*, *The Wise Owl*, and others. Jeffrey's stories about family, about the push-pull of heritage versus assimilation, and about love, loss, regret and forgiveness, reveal a sense of absurdity tempered by a love of people and their quirky ways.

Short Story Competition Runner-up
ETA

Sally Hitchen sipped her morning coffee at her regular booth in the Apollo Cafe. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and her coffee was sweet from the seven sugar packets she'd dumped in. Samuel, a tall blonde lad and the owner of Apollo, tutted as usual and teased her for her taste. And as usual she teased him back about how he could possibly drink straight black coffee while snacking on an 80% cocoa chocolate bar.

The smooth rich smell of freshly ground beans permeated the air warmed by the sunlight that shone through the window next to her.

'Big day tomorrow, huh?' Samuel said, as he slumped in the seats across from her, the leather creaking.

'Yeah, big day,' she agreed. 'I can't believe it's already here.'

'Doesn't feel like three-hundred years, does it?' He snapped a piece of chocolate off and tossed it up, catching it in his mouth with ease.

'Three-hundred-and-twelve,' Sally corrected him, 'but you're right, it really doesn't.'

'What do you think it'll be like?'

'What?'

'Waking up? Will it hurt?'

'I don't know, it shouldn't.'

Samuel huffed a little, tapping his foot and nibbling on the last of his chocolate, taking tiny deliberate bites.

'What's the mayor doing about it?' He asked.

'There's nothing to do, Sam, the computer's set to wake everyone in Phase One up when we arrive. It's all automated.'

'But there's got to be a way to shut it off, right? What if it's wrong and we're early? I don't fancy spending the next ten years on a hunk of metal. I know some other folks have been antsy

about this whole thing' – he nibbled his chocolate a bit more – 'but, I mean, *I* can't wait to get up. Can't imagine spending any longer in this little town. And the Jamesons? They're so excited to finally start their family. Can you imagine waiting two-hundred years to have a baby?' Sam carried on, sipping his coffee, always a chatterbox.

'We *have* been on a hunk of metal for three-hundred years, though,' Sally said.

'No, we haven't.' Samuel raised an eyebrow. 'We've been here.'

The bell rang as the cafe door opened. Patricia walked in, a counsellor and event organiser from the community centre. 'Chilly today, huh, Sammy?' she said, rubbing her arms through her light jacket.

Samuel left Sally with a strained smile to return to the counter. 'Sure is, the usual?'

Sally watched him go and sipped her coffee once more, grimacing when she received a mouth full of grit instead.

The sun was shining, the birds were singing, her coffee was gone. But that wasn't true, was it? She wasn't sitting in a cafe, holding an empty cup and listening to bird song. Sally was in a stasis pod on a ship in deep space, suspended in time as she awaited the end of their long and impossible journey to the frontier world EL-2047.

Sally's phone alarm blared loudly. Shocked out of her reverie, she quickly dismissed the alarm. She was going to be late for work if she didn't leave now. So, she promptly gathered her bag, shrugged on her jacket and said goodbye to Samuel as she left. It *was* quite chilly out, she thought.

The old town of Horizon was just waking up; the morning dew glistened in the neat flower beds that lined the path, separating pedestrians from road with pleasant decor. A cyclist whooshed by, shouting 'Good morning!' to Sally as he went.

She passed a few shops and homes, old stone houses that probably would have existed in a three-hundred-year-old village on Earth. A few more residents greeted her as she passed, familiar faces she'd seen nearly every day since her routine began including the Apollo Cafe about fifty years ago.

'Oi! Sally!' Patricia called and Sally turned to watch her jog up while awkwardly balancing a to-go mug. 'Listen, I have to tell you something.'

'Yeah?'

'You're good with the Mayor, right? I mean, you're his PA, of course you are. But, you see, a lot of us down at the community centre are concerned. Lots of people are getting nervous about waking up. Quite a few have been in denial or coping badly. You've seen Roger, haven't you?'

Sally nodded; Roger was an engineer who had taken to spending most of his time in the pub the past few months.

'Well, that's because he doesn't want to go out, you know? He's not coping well with it. We've got all the counsellors working overtime because of people like Roger. We've sent emails and letters to the Mayor but we haven't heard anything.'

Sally shook her head. 'What's the point in this? I know about them; I sorted them all myself.'

'And he read them?'

'Yeah, he did. He didn't say much about them, though.'

'Well, that's useless.' Patricia huffed in annoyance and looked at her watch. 'I better get to the office.'

'Wait.' Sally stopped her. 'There's got to be some people who are happy to be waking up, right?'

'Probably, but those aren't the people who ask us for help.' Patricia looked at her watch once more. 'Right, I really got to go. Can't be running late today. We've got to finalise things for tomorrow. I'll see you later!'

Sally frowned at the abrupt exit. Patricia had left her feeling unsteady. Preparations for Phase One had been going on for a

while. People had been anxious, scared, excited, happy, but there didn't seem to be a consensus.

She returned to her walk. Her thoughts turned ever inwards as she thought of the past couple weeks. The endless letters, the announcements and care packages. She remembered getting one at her door. The 'Rise and Shine' information pack with everything she'd need to know about waking up from stasis. A rather on the nose and perhaps distastefully positive name.

Everything from the effects it had on her body to the current predicted climate of EL-2047. The stasis was near perfect, but not quite. She'd need to get used to using her body again. Her actual body.

Not that she needed to worry about that quite yet. Phase one was essential workers only; the Mayor, medical staff and engineers would be the first to wake up. She would stay behind to help ease the transition for people yet to wake up. Effective tomorrow, she'd be acting Mayor until it was her turn to wake up.

Before she knew it, Sally was in the town square. A lovely little space, with cobbled pavements and a fountain in the middle. At the far side was the town hall, an old stately building with manicured hedges and trees just starting to take on their autumnal colours.

The square was usually quiet, with only a few people milling about. But today there was commotion. A crowd of people sat outside the main entrance, some sat in fold up chairs looking stubborn, others waved cardboard signs. A couple appeared to have chained themselves to the fence surrounding the town hall, aggressively yelling at a police officer.

'Ridiculous, isn't it?' Sally didn't hear Sergeant Himmel approach, a stout middle-aged woman who tutted at the sight. 'Don't understand what they're all so worked up about.'

'They're afraid to wake up,' Sally said, Patricia's words still at the forefront of her mind.

‘There’s nothing to be afraid of,’ Sergeant Himmel replied. ‘We always knew we’d wake up, and yet they don’t start making a fuss until it’s right on top of them. It’s not like this is a surprise.’

‘You actually want to wake up?’ Sally was almost surprised. Hearing and now seeing that so many people were opposed, Sergeant Himmel felt like the odd one out.

‘This isn’t real. None of it is.’ The Sergeant shook her head. ‘Our mission was to colonise a new planet and it still is. We’ve spent three-hundred years preparing for this. All our work is geared towards that purpose. It’s like they’ve forgotten that this isn’t their life.’

‘But it is, isn’t it?’ Sally’s brow furrowed.

‘No, it isn’t,’ Sergeant Himmel said. ‘I think we should have all just been put to sleep, not this. We didn’t even know what the long-term effects would be, you know? Humans aren’t meant to live this long and yet, here we are.’

Sergeant Himmel rubbed her temple, as though a headache were coming on.

‘We were supposed to be living as though we were already on EL-2047, remember?’ she continued, ‘and we kept that up for what? Ten years? And then everyone started voting to change things. They wanted nicer houses and different jobs. God, even I bought into it back then. And now look at us, spent so long playing pretend that we’ve lost track of reality.’

The protesters started getting louder, a few raised voices here and there, which drew the attention of Sally and Sergeant Himmel. The officer attempting to remove the chained protesters was now face to face with a large man, who Sally recognised as Roger. He already looked quite drunk. Roger swung a fist at the officer, going wide in his stupor and stumbling.

‘I better help him out,’ Sergeant Himmel sighed. ‘You tell the Mayor to get the people’s priorities straight, alright?’ She pointed a stern finger at Sally before jogging over to the crowd.

Sally looked at the crowd in apprehension. Given that she was definitely a recognisable figure in the town, she would rather not be harassed by a group of disgruntled protesters. So, she aptly turned on her heel and took a side street around the block. Soon, she was in the alley around the back of the town hall and fiddling with her many keys to find the right one. She let out a little triumphant ‘yes’ as the door finally clicked open, and she stepped into one of the back storage rooms.

Closing it behind her blocked out the light but Sally was quick to turn on her phone’s torch light. She hadn’t been down here in a while. The storage room was full of rickety metal shelves and filing cabinets. She spotted a few overflowing boxes of Christmas decorations and another labelled ‘Halloween’ that smelled like damp straw.

She continued into the storage room until she saw the exit at the far end of a row of filing cabinets. She was about to head out when the label on a cabinet caught her eye. ‘2150-2174’. Fifty years after they’d left Earth. She inspected the cabinet to the right, further away from the exit. ‘2125-2149’. One more and she was in the far corner away from the exit. ‘2100-2124’.

Sally really should have been getting to work. There was a lot to still prepare for, with Phase One practically on top of them. But she couldn’t help but be curious. She vaguely remembered that far back, a distant memory that felt more like the fuzzy images of early childhood than the memories of a twenty-six-year-old woman. She wasn’t twenty-six anymore, though. She was three-hundred-and-thirty-eight years old.

The number felt both heavy and meaningless. She didn’t feel any older. Technically, she wasn’t. Her body, her actual body, was exactly as it was three-hundred-and-twelve years ago. The

same twenty-six-year-old human woman from Earth. But Sally had been here, hadn't she? She'd been in the little town Horizon.

Sally stared at the cabinet a little longer, her muscles tensed, anticipating movement but not knowing which direction she would go. Until her fingers cupped the cold handle of the cabinet and opened it.

Dusty papers sitting in card folders filled the draw to the brim, each labelled with a year. Sally put her phone in her top breast pocket, keeping the light where she needed it, and pulled out the thick folder labelled '2100: Report 001-050'.

*Captain Lorenze - Horizon Mission report 001 - 17/08/2100
19:37 PM*

The colonists are aboard and all accounted for. We will prepare for lift-off tomorrow morning at 10:00 AM. Preparations for suspended animation have been completed and have passed all safety tests. The colonists will not be placed in suspended animation until after we leave the Moon's orbit and are on a confirmed trajectory to EL-2047. ETA for confirmed trajectory is six months from lift-off.

Sally paused. She didn't remember spending six months aboard the Horizon. Certainly not any time outside of stasis. Perhaps her memory wasn't as reliable as she thought. She continued reading, this time from a later report.

*Captain Lorenze - Horizon Mission report 021 - 07/09/2100
19:26 PM*

Some of the colonists have grown nervous of suspended animation. Nobody has ever been within a stasis simulation for as long as they will be, and they are worried about the long-term side effects. It will take a lot of reassurance, but there isn't any other option for them unless they want to die of old age before we reach EL-2047. We will try our best to ensure they are

comfortable and ready for stasis in time. It is frustrating that there are doubts now that the mission is underway, but it is to be expected.

Staggered short-term simulation exercises will be run for all colonists coming up to long-term suspended animation, so all will have experienced it before.

Sally sifted through a few more folders until she reached a particular date, six months after lift-off.

*Captain Lorenze - Horizon Mission report 182 - 31/02/2101
20:32 PM*

All the colonists are within suspended animation, aside from the essential crew who are preparing everything for when we wake up. Lieutenant Hitchen is already in suspended animation. She has sent reports via the simulation terminal, and it seems the colonists are adapting fairly well. We should be well prepared for colonisation by the time we arrive.

Lieutenant Hitchen? She remembered – yes, of course she remembered. She was the Lieutenant aboard the Horizon. Second-in-command to Captain Lorenze, just as she was PA to Mayor Lorenze now. She was still a Lieutenant, wasn't she?

The room was suddenly filled with light and Sally jumped, squinting at the sudden brightness.

'There you are, Sally,' Mayor Lorenze said, standing at the far end of the room with his hand by the light switch. 'You're late.'

'I– Sorry, Mayor, I was just–' She looked towards the cabinet, the files piled atop in her search, and Mayor Lorenze followed her gaze with a sigh.

'I see,' he said. 'Leave those, we have much to talk about for Phase One.'

He turned to leave, then paused. ‘Actually, bring them with you, Sally. I’d like to see them.’ And then he left.

Sally shook herself of the surprise quickly and gathered the files atop the cabinet. Everyone from the first six months of the mission.

She left the backroom, making sure to turn off the lights, and followed Mayor Lorenze. Her heels clacked against the polished wooden floor. The sound dampened when she went up the carpeted staircase and down the hall to the Mayor’s office. Her desk was just outside, in the small anteroom with plush chairs and green potted plants. She tossed her handbag onto her desk before she entered his office and shut the door behind her.

His office was much like the rest of the building; wood panelling and plush carpets, a fireplace with a television screen above the mantle stood to the right of his large mahogany desk and bookcases lined the wall to the left.

Mayor Lorenze stood looking out of the window into the square below, where the protesters were still gathered. She saw the officer and Sergeant Himmel talking with Roger by the fountain. He sat with his head in his hands.

‘More and more seem to want to stay,’ Mayor Lorenze said. ‘What am I to do? I cannot force them to leave.’

‘I thought it was all automated?’ Sally asked, still clutching the reports close to her chest.

‘Only once it is activated,’ he answered, then nodded towards the screen above the fireplace. ‘The ETA is calculated by the ship’s computer in real time, just in case we’re delayed.’

The screen above the mantle had been there for as long as the office had been. Always displaying the same countdown, which ticked away as an ever-present reminder of what was to come. Sally didn’t know when it began to feel almost infinite. Despite knowing that it would run out someday, it never felt as though it really would. A fact starkly plain for all to see, yet ignored utterly for the sake of familiar comforts.

The screen couldn't be ignored now. It was unwilling to let them ignore it any longer and throbbed on the wall like a painful bruise.

ETA 000 years: 00 months: 000001 days: 16 hours: 24 minutes: 42 seconds

'It is like a dream here, isn't it?' Mayor Lorenze said wistfully.

'Not really,' Sally disagreed.

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, we don't need to eat or drink, but we still feel the urge. We don't get sick or age, and yet we still feel tired. We could experience something fantastical and yet, we give ourselves limitations. These papers feel heavy, the lager still gets us drunk, and my morning coffee wakes me up. Why have those limitations in a dream?'

Mayor Lorenze considered her for a moment. Sally saw the contemplation in his gaze before he approached to take the papers from her. He felt their weight in his own grasp, carrying them with much more ease than she had.

'It is familiar,' he said. 'I suppose we crave this comfortable kind of challenge. It is just enough to keep us satisfied without ever truly causing us pain.'

Mayor Lorenze set the papers on his desk.

'It will be a tremendous challenge, returning to our mission,' he continued. 'EL-2047 has changed since we left Earth. Colonising will be difficult, even with our technology. I'm not sure we're ready for such frontier living.'

'Isn't that what we all trained for?' Sally asked.

'Three-hundred years ago, it was. But now we live as civilians. We live comfortably, and I do not blame them for wanting to stay.'

Mayor Lorenze turned back to Sally, and she saw the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. He was a middle-aged man, nearing fifty, his beard more salt than pepper.

‘I had arthritis. Did you know that?’

Sally shook her head.

‘It was manageable, and I was healthy enough to continue my position of Mayor.’ He didn’t seem to notice his mistake as he explained. ‘I don’t feel it here.’

‘So, you don’t want to wake up?’

‘I don’t know.’

He returned to the window and stared below.

Sally had never seen him look so conflicted before. She had always known him as the calm and fair Mayor, a steady presence amidst the lively town of Horizon. But he wasn’t Mayor of Horizon.

He was Captain Lorenze of the SS Horizon, and she was Lieutenant Hitchen, his second in command. They were deep space explorers travelling to a frontier world to establish one of the farthest-reaching human colonies ever to exist.

Captain Lorenze was also the comfortable old Mayor of the little town Horizon that never changed and never challenged more than that which is satisfying. He was comfortable here.

‘We will age once more,’ Mayor Lorenze said. ‘We’ve achieved something akin to immortality...It’s understandable that many are hesitant.’

Mortality. As ignorable as the countdown on the wall, Sally thought.

Sally lowered her gaze, scanning the carpet beneath her polished black heels. Each dyed fibre woven with precision, the lint tufts, the sunlight that highlighted the red. Everyone in Horizon had lived far longer than any human ever had before and would continue to live for many years more. She remembered now how the ship was designed to keep them alive for nearly triple the ETA. Just in case anything went wrong. To wake everyone up now would shorten their expected lifespan by centuries.

‘But none of this is real.’ Sally looked Mayor Lorenze in the eye. ‘We can’t even leave the town. And what about the Jamesons? They can’t have a child in a simulation.’

Mayor Lorenze’s lips thinned. ‘I don’t have an answer to that. It isn’t my place to decide.’

‘But you’re the Mayor— You’re the Captain!’ Sally shouted in indignation. The word felt foreign on her tongue and Captain Lorenze stiffened.

His eyes were wide, and he blinked once, then twice, as if waking from a dream. Sally hoped the word felt as blaring as an alarm clock.

‘And...’ Captain Lorenze started, slowly, ‘and, as Captain...it is my duty to do what is best for the safety and well-being of my crew. The mission comes second to their well-being.’

‘So, what will you do?’

He turned away from her gaze, paused in contemplation.

‘The system is automated. Once it starts it cannot be stopped. But it can be delayed,’ he explained. ‘I have grown comfortable here, as many of us have, to the point that we dismissed the looming change in our future. Despite evidence to the contrary.’ He looked to the ETA with eyes full of remorse.

‘I will delay Phase One, and call a town meeting.’ He turned his remorseful gaze to Sally, and she knew he didn’t have much faith in his next statement. ‘We will put it to a vote.’

‘But it seems most people want to stay.’ Sally’s voice was tight. ‘What about those who want to leave?’

‘There is little I can do for them, except make them more comfortable.’

The idea was dissatisfactory to Sally. It felt half-hearted and lazy. A plaster for a gaping wound. He must have known that those who wished to leave would resent it. Trapped in a little town they knew wasn’t real, and denied the calling they were promised?

Sally felt cheated; this wasn't the life she signed up for.

The rest of the day came and went. She watched as Captain Lorenze typed a few commands into his computer and saw the ETA change.

ETA 001 years: 00 months: 000001 days: 06 hours: 32 minutes: 27 seconds

A week passed by even faster as they prepared the vote.

Sally spent her time going through the motions. She got her morning coffee and listened to Samuel complain about the delay. She went to work and heard the Jamesons shout venom at the Captain for robbing them of their future family. She passed by the pub on her way home and saw Roger, completely sober for the first time in months, staring at the night sky as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

The day of the vote was hectic and messy, but when all was said and done, the majority voted to stay. It was a near fifty-fifty split and the arguments ran into the night.

The next day the streets were empty. Apollo Cafe was closed for the day, as were most shops. Everyone stayed home.

Sally went through the motions alone as best she could. She took her usual route, arrived at town hall on time and placed her bag on her desk. She didn't knock as she entered Captain Lorenze's office. He was already there, his desk piled high with reports from the storage room, a pair of reading glasses sat low on his nose. She wondered if he'd been there all night.

'I did the right thing,' he said.

'Of course, Mayor.' The title tasted like salt on her tongue.

Sally didn't do much work that day. She went through a few of the reports herself and, at the end of the day, offered to take the reports back to the storage room for Captain Lorenze.

'You don't need to do that, Sally,' he told her kindly.

'You made a very difficult decision, Mayor,' she said, an equally kind smile on her face. 'Go home, rest, I'll take care of it.'

Captain Lorenze placed a steady, warm hand on her shoulder. 'Thank you, Sally. I'm glad I had you by my side through this difficult week. You did well.'

Captain Lorenze gathered his coat and briefcase. Just before he left, he looked at her with a smile that deepened his crow's feet. 'You should take the next week off, enjoy yourself.'

'Thank you, Mayor.' Sally smiled. 'I'll do just that.'

With a final nod of farewell, he closed the door.

Sally stood alone in his office for a while longer, counting the seconds. She neatened a few piles of reports quietly. Going through the motions. It almost felt like acting, like she was playing a role in an old show. The ones that always centred on tiny, isolated little towns.

She rounded the desk and sat in Captain Lorenze's chair. Sally turned on his computer and typed in the password he didn't know she knew. Or perhaps he didn't remember.

Of course she knew the password to the simulation terminal; she was Lieutenant Hitchen. She needed to know in case the Captain was ever indisposed. In case she ever needed to take charge. Sally brought up the command prompt and typed in a few commands.

She hesitated on the last one, pausing just before she hit enter. She thought of the consequences for just a moment and decided it was better than living in a dream.

ETA 000 years: 00 months: 000000 days: 00 hours: 00 minutes: 00 seconds

Helen Newton

Helen Newton is a student and hobbyist writer from the UK. She enjoys reading and writing sci-fi and fantasy stories in her spare time.

Flash Fiction Competition Winner
Nature's Own

The room is as we left it just a few hours earlier. It is tidy, the curtains pulled halfway across, and for once the bed is neatly made. I can see faint hand marks where she eased out the creases on the green throw. A pair of carefully folded jeans sit in the middle, next to Piglet, and I wonder if she meant to leave them. Has she packed enough? On the dresser I see her hairbrush and a bag of hair ties. I pull out the grey desk chair and sit. I look around me, and after a minute or two or three, I notice the taut muscles in my back slacken just a little.

I had thought the room might feel emptier, I had thought that I might feel emptier. Weeks of waiting, waiting to hear results, waiting for confirmation, waiting to finally go. Weeks of holding my breath, hating the day that we would leave her, trying to hold onto those last moments, and she would catch me looking at her, roll her eyes and laugh, say, 'For God's sake, I'm not going far.' But it is far. Now as I sit on her chair, and slowly breathe out, I check myself, waiting for the rush of sadness, for the hot tears and hollow grief. I concentrate on my breath and as I inhale, I smell her vanilla perfume.

On the desk by the lamp is a collection of five shells arranged in a circle. They are from our beach, where the sanderlings hunt at the water's edge. I close my eyes and see them looking for juicy worms and sea snails – one eye on the incoming waves. They rake through wet sand for just one more morsel, until the waves turn, and chase them back up the sand. I hear her shout, 'Mummy, look at this one,' and watch from a distance as she lifts a shell from the sand, nature's own fan, painted by the sea in hues of deep aubergine that fade to baby pink. It is the best one. A pearly jewel for her treasure box. She places it gently into the yellow bucket and stoops to search again. The sunshine

warms our backs, and the whole world stretches around us. We are so very happy.

Karen Henderson

Karen Henderson completed her MA in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. She is a former teacher of Modern Languages, with a lifelong passion for reading and a newly found love for creating flash fiction and poetic prose. She adores spending time with good friends, drinking wine, listening to eighties music, cooking, dancing around her kitchen with her daughters and open-air swimming in equal measures.

Flash Fiction Competition Runner-up
Present Tense

I gaze at a transformed garden: beautifully smart, fresh green, vivid colours dancing. Our transistor radio, alone on the kitchen counter, fills the silence. Andy Williams' golden voice croons *Moon River*.

You enter the room, Albert. Take my hand as if it's a gift.

'May I have the pleasure, Margaret?'

Merriment sparkles in your deep timbre. You pull me into an embrace. Woody, citrus fragrance of Floris No.89.

We waltz.

This could be our first dance: hesitant, a stranger's body close, uncertain where to place feet and fingers.

It's a struggle to move creaking joints and aching muscles. Your hands support me, somehow firm and gentle. Steadfast. The beat cajoles. We find our rhythm, movements mirroring, we're one with the tune. The cold linoleum becomes Blackpool Tower Ballroom's warm, sprung floorboards. The decades fall away.

One-two-three. Rise and fall.

My summer dress sways, our steps light and frisk. You whisper three wonderful words in my ear that I haven't heard for so long.

The radio crackles occasionally. No trouble, the melody's within.

A noise from outside tries to disturb us. This could be our last dance: holding on for dear life, fearing the song's end, wanting to stay in this moment forever.

Another voice intrudes, breaking through like a stone smashing glass.

'Mum, what you doing shuffling around the kitchen?' Suspicion blends with bemusement in Shirley's tone. 'You in La

La Land again?’ Our daughter fusses with a packet and pan, clicks on the kettle. ‘I’ll get your breakfast.’

The music plays on without us. I cling to our dining chair just as I cling to the fragments of our past that fall from me like snow. Huddling into my nightie, I can make out through a clouded window the garden’s tangled mass of frosted weeds and brambles. On the table, an incomplete crossword bears the spidery scrawl of my once neat handwriting, the words trailing off. The kettle reaches its crescendo with a shuddering hiss.

Porridge huffs and puffs on the hob. Shirley looks at me, then touches my hand as if it’s fractured. ‘We can take Rosie to the park later. You could wear your new dress.’

She turns the radio off. Hands me a mug of tea. ‘And I’ll do your hair. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’

You’d adore our granddaughter, Albert. She’s grown so much. The years go fast, the days so slow.

The condensation begins to evaporate. I know the frost and mist will return but for now the view is clear. A chiffchaff lands on the dormant grass and begins its song of spring. The mug warms my hands into movement.

One-two-three. Fall and rise.

I think about completing that crossword. And dressing up. And of our delightful granddaughter playing in the park. A memory to be added.

I sit down at the table and sip my tea. ‘I’d love that.’
Until we dance again, Albert.

Richard Hooton

Born and brought up in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, Richard Hooton studied English Literature at the University of Wolverhampton before becoming a journalist and communications officer. He has had numerous short stories

published and has been listed in various competitions, including winning contests run by *Segora*, *Artificium Magazine*, *Henshaw Press*, *Evesham Festival of Words*, *Cranked Anvil*, the *Charroux Prize for Short Fiction*, the *Federation of Writers (Scotland) Vernal Equinox Competition* and the *Hammond House International Literary Prize*. Richard lives in Mossley, near Manchester, and is a member of Mossley Writers.

Flash Fiction Competition Runner-up
Night Song

We live on the shore near the smashed bridge, where the water is clean enough for fishing and bathing. When it turns red you should not drink. The redness comes downstream once a week. Our lifeguard sits in an umpire's chair to watch for it. The rain has a milky colour, with odours of sulphur and sewer. It makes the flowers grow enormous through rubble and metal, in fiery reds and neon oranges, but it also leaves painful lesions on skin. We stay in our shacks until it passes, playing with dice and telling stories.

If you are curious on a rainy day, the old men and women will tell you the name of each weapon that created the world. Bombs made the bridge and the road. Napalm scorched the forest. The great powers turned the rain and river into weapons. They'll tell you that the great powers were never more creative than when making weapons.

Something chemical destroyed the minds of our neighbours. The Green Band is psychotic. They cannot speak our language – they moan and shriek. They steal our food and clothes and the little art pieces we make. Sometimes they carry one of us off. They practice cannibalism.

Yesterday we stood with clubs and spears on the uneven stones as they rushed our camp. We beat them back decisively. I stabbed one in the gut – felt the point of the stick overcome the resistance of skin – and watched him walk away holding blood.

But there was no time for celebration. It was almost 8:30. We ran to our houses to get in beds. We did not want to get caught outside when the song began.

Every night the song comes out of the sky. Tinkling piano scales and a warm synthesiser, a voice in an unknown language, high and clear like bells from another world. When we hear the

song, we immediately relax, warmth fills our heads and our bodies, drowsiness comes, and within minutes we are asleep. We know it is another leftover weapon. We know it can be fatal to fall asleep outside, not only because of exposure to the elements but because without the protection of a roof and walls, the music can drive one mad. Still, many worship the song as a goddess. I don't go that far, but I understand why they worship. What is kinder than sleep? Especially the sleep of the nightly song, which is deep and replenishing, and nearly always brings pleasant dreams.

Nick Story

Nick Story is a writer living in the United States. His fiction has appeared in *The Normal School*, *The Indiana Review*, and *Monkey Bicycle*.

Website: <https://nick-story.com>

Mini Saga Competition Winner
After Light

Like her mother, she does not grow eyes. She scavenges by scent, scuttling amongst the ash and debris.

She does not see the crumbling walls, the vines that overtake them. She does not see the shadow people left from atomic flashes.

She has seven blind babies to feed.

Stevie Billow

Stevie is a creator and educator currently based in Cambridge, MA. Their work has previously appeared in *Meat for Tea: the Valley Review*, *Beyond Words*, *On the Run*, and *The Blood Pudding*. They also manage *Rotary*, a multimedia arts collective on Instagram @rotary_arts.

Mini Saga Competition Runner-up
Catching Fireflies

I'd caught fireflies with Dad before he left.

'Flyers are male,' he'd said. 'The girls sit and glow.'

I swoop the jar, and it fills with a lightning-like rhythm.

I give Mum the jar when a man knocks. She hides the screwed-up tissues, determined to shine for him.

Rebecca Klassen

Rebecca Klassen is an editor from Gloucestershire. She has had her work published in *The Phare*, *Glittery Literary*, *Msllexia*, and *Stroud Short Stories*. She has won the *London Independent Story Prize* for flash fiction, and read her work at Stroud Book Festival and Cheltenham Literature Festival.

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<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100070261364179>

Mini Saga Competition Runner-up
Emotional Artefacts

It's summertime in another dimension. I left my front door unlocked and all the furniture walked away. The cat is napping on the windowsill. Galaxies float past her and she swats them away like dust motes. At night, my eyes are open windows for strangers to climb into.

Carella Keil

Carella is a writer and digital artist who splits her time between the ethereal world of dreams, and Toronto, Canada, depending on the weather. Recently, she has been published in Columbia Journal, Wrongdoing Magazine, Myth & Lore, Solstice Literary Magazine, Deep Overstock, Paddler Press, Burningword, Nightingale & Sparrow, Querencia Press, Stripes Literary Magazine, Writeresque and Free Verse Revolution. Forthcoming publications include Glassworks, Door is a Jar, Grub Street, Boats Against the Current, Sunday Mornings at the River, Musing Publications, Sheepshead Review, MONO and Troublemaker Firestarter, among others.

[instagram.com/catalogue.of.dreams](https://www.instagram.com/catalogue.of.dreams)

twitter.com/catalogofdream

E T E R N A L L I F E

Some people think Neal Banks doesn't deserve disability funding. They argue that decades of self-inflicted drug abuse warrant his disqualification from any entitlements. The tax revenue collected from hard working ordinary men and women should not be wasted on someone who is drug-fucked and of no use to society. He should be left to suffer the consequences of his own actions.

I beg to differ.

And who am I to judge? you ask. Well, that is a good question. My credentials are certainly questionable. And the same people who want Neal to disappear would be pissed off if they knew how I earned good money – yes, taxpayer dollars – to simply sit with Neal and play Scrabble, drink coffee, eat donuts and talk shit. It's the best job I have ever had, which is not a hard call since every other job I've had has been tedious, tortuous, tiresome and lowly paid.

Neal takes his turn. In the style of a schoolteacher conducting a spelling quiz, as he lays down the tiles to form **F O R E V E R**, he announces: 'Forever. One day we will live forever, and our offspring will need to be shipped off to other planets. Forever.'

With the **F** and **V** both landing on triple letter squares, he scores twenty-nine points.

My turn.

*Now, if I had a **T** instead of the **Q** on my rack, I could make **T I R E S O M E** by backing it onto Neal's last word. Or, if I had a **K**, I could make **I R K S O M E**.*

*Don't you hate getting the **Q** when all the **U** s are already out on the board, and totally inaccessible?*

Stumped, I question Neal's sentence: 'One day we will live forever, and our offspring will need to be shipped off to other planets?'

‘Yes, I am absolutely certain. I had a vision!’

Here we go.

The game pauses, perhaps never to be finished. It doesn’t matter. We have plenty of time, neither of us are in a rush anymore. I work part-time, transitioning to retirement, everything is slowing down. And Neal no longer consumes drugs such as speed, ice or amyl nitrate to get a rush. Though, after dinner each night, he smokes one cigarette and drinks two fingers of Japanese whisky. There’d be bit of rush from that.

He had a vision?

Most of the time, Neal is rational and a staunch atheist. Occasionally though, he shocks me with some pretty out-there outbursts. Once, when I noticed him wearing this rose quartz bracelet, which I had never seen before, he told me, ‘I didn’t choose it, it chose me. And as I was paying for it, the girl in the shop said rose quartz helps to inspire an attitude of compassion and kindness. You know I need help in that area.’

I thought he was joking, but as he rambled on that day, I discovered he was seriously getting into some of the New Age bunkum. Then, two days later, the bracelet was gone and when I asked about it, he went on and on about the stupid things people believe in.

It’s quite possible these odd meanderings of his mind are flashbacks triggered by the years of drug abuse. LSD, THC, MDM, psilocybin, ayahuasca, opium, the list goes on. He’d done it all. Being a paid employee, I sit back and listen without judgement. Well, I do judge, just not out aloud. Besides, his visions are entertaining. And when I occasionally can’t help but laugh at some of his preposterous scenarios, he laughs as well and says, ‘Crazy, eh?’ and gives me a big wink.

Gotta love a bit of crazy every now and then.

‘I had the vision while floating in the hydrotherapy pool down at Mingara,’ he says.’ Suzie, the physio, was supporting me at the time. You’ve met her, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, I have,’ I reply. I have never told Neal that Suzie and I hooked up not long after we met one afternoon at his place. We agreed it might be best not to tell him about us. Sometimes, I think we should have, as on occasion he tells me how he’d like to fuck Suzie, which I do find a bit **IRKSOME**. As well, Neal has told Suzie how he suspects I might be gay. Mixing business and pleasure can be tricky.

Neal continues: ‘Anyway, Suzie and the pool and time and space all dissolved. I found myself sitting in a lecture hall in some university of the future. It was a history lecture and the professor was detailing the timeline of the discovery of eternal life. She had this large three-dimensional hologram suspended in the air before her. She could manipulate the hologram, expand it, rotate it, and highlight specific parts of it, by moving her fingers inside in a special glove she wore on her right hand.’

‘Really?’

‘A lot of what she said was way beyond my comprehension, but I got the drift. Do you want to hear our future?’

‘I don’t know. It’s not going to give me nightmares, is it?’

‘Nah, it’s all good Simon. Nothing to worry about.’

‘Alright then, take it away.’

Apparently, according to Neal’s vision, the history professor spoke of two major breakthroughs which occurred in the year 2032. One was pharmaceutical, the other genetic. The drug was named Telomax, and the genes came from the great white shark. Respectively, aging and cancer were eliminated. The only way a human could die was through misadventure, like falling off a ladder, drowning, or getting oneself murdered.

‘After the lady prof went on and on about these technical breakthroughs, she expanded a section of the hologram to focus on the first great emigration to Mars in 2078. Archival footage of young people bidding farewell to their parents as they boarded a large silver rocket played out in front of us. And you know what was really weird, Simon?’

‘What? Something was weird?’ I mock. Neal laughs, begins to wheeze, grabs his puffer and takes a few hefty sucks.

The salbutamol kicks in and he gets back to the story. He tells me how the soundtrack to the images of humans heading off to Mars in 2078 is none other than the opening theme music to Star Wars.

‘Can you believe it?’

‘Well, some music is timeless, I guess.’ I start singing the tune as best I can. ‘Buppa ba baaa bah! Buppa ba baaa bah!’ Neal joins in and after a few bars we both get lost as to how it goes and burst out laughing.

Yes, it’s the best job I’ve ever had. Oh, the things we talk about. Childhood memories from growing up in the sixties and seventies of last century, and our adult experiences, both the ups and downs. Then there’s music, movies, books, science, politics, history and philosophy – an inexhaustible supply of material to ruminate upon and laugh about.

‘So, Simon,’ he says, ‘we just have to make it to 2032, mate. Ten years, and we can live forever.’

‘Would you really want that, Neal?’

‘Shit yeah! I want to crack onto that history professor at the university. She is a real sort!’

*

The game of scrabble never got finished that day. Neal has a form of muscular dystrophy, thus the disability funding. It has nothing to do with his wild drug taking days, it’s genetic. But I’m happy for the government to support anyone who needs it, even the drug-fucked. If you heard some of the stories Neal told me about his own father, and the Father who was the local parish priest, you wouldn’t judge Neal for his errant past. And what of his future? Neal’s health continues to deteriorate. He is unlikely to make it 2032. I will miss him greatly.

I am writing down Neal's stories, both his real life and his crazy visions. I'm thinking about printing them out to put inside a time capsule which I will bury in his backyard when he goes. Maybe some things will live **F O R E V E R**, like Scrabble, and the Star Wars theme – Buppa ba baaa bah!

Sean Crawley

In his shed on the east coast of Australia, Sean Crawley writes short stories, songs, non-fiction and the odd angry letter. *Dead People Don't Make Jam* and *Long Jetty*, *Short Stories – Volumes 1* and *2* are short story collections published by Ginninderra Press. Sean's work has also appeared in literary journals, anthologies and has won writing competitions. When not writing, Sean can be found fishing, swimming, cooking, teaching, renovating an old house and yelling at cars that speed down his suburban street.

11:15 For Lisbon

Three weeks ago when they phoned to say Yes, grandmother sat down and began to cry. The future of my absence shook her in advance. Her quiet hands gathered in her lap; then touched her knees; then fixed her headscarf. The week before that, when I took the train north and went to Lisbon with my typewriter tucked underneath my seat, nothing whatever was solid; I felt the train was an iceberg, drifting with the current in such a steady way that it seemed motionless. After that call the first thing I did was go to the market square and get someone with a camera to come take our picture. Grandma's window and her elongated face peering through it – that's what I wanted to remember, not the garden, not the narrow road it gives view of, but the two of us framed by the window that has framed her life from birth to old age. A picture frame I was now to break out of, in search of what? A different angle? Another perspective?

Only tia Mafalda came over for a coffee and so sat down with us and stuck her head out of the corner of our window at grandma's urging, her busybody face never changing that expression of a bean weevil that has just broken out into the sunlight; I had to think of something else, and so turned to face the photographer and managed a smile just as the camera shutter closed on us. Snap.

The train, then. The one then and the one again. Getting on board I meet a woman's eyes; we lock, for a moment, a little mountain view in them, all smiles. Then I sit down, facing the opposite way, releasing her to her male companion. The memory of that moment ago pulls itself over the back of my eyelids as I close them, breathing in. Did she look at me like that; was that really? Will I find it all in Lisbon – *Maria Lisboa*?

Now the train starts, and we sit swaying like flames on many candle wicks in the same wind, all in unison. Oh, to be carried,

to be travelled; to abandon a life and slip into a new one; to slip out of it too, when the day has passed, and put it away on a dresser, then sleep freely a sleep of anyone. Not to be even Margarida the typist at Alves, Ramos and Lopes – advogados, 128/14 Rua de Angola. To enter a dream, and, spotting the eyes with smiles and a mountain view in them, place my hand over her hand resting on that little table.

Desire runs. I open my eyes again and think of the mountains outside, unmoved by the life abandoned. The sun inches closer and closer to their rim; grandmother, too, must be getting on with her diurnal journey from the kitchen to the sofa to the window, on repeat. She will take months to learn to cook smaller meals or may never learn; she will keep leaving the torn clothes around, thinking I would mend them; nights, she will wake and tell her dreams to an empty house, hearing nothing in return. Tia Mafalda will become a dear guest, together they will sit by the window, looking every once in a while at the framed photograph on the wall. In it I will forever smile and grandma will forever hide her sadness in the softness of her expression; tia Mafalda will forever squint her eyes and purse her lips like a bean weevil in the sun. Seventy years from now our photograph may end up at some flea market and some hand might pick it out from a box full of similar ones and buy it for a pittance, imagining who knows what? Oh, to be carried, to be travelled; to be framed and imagined; to be put away.

The train halts. Climbing down, stepping onto the platform, waiting for the commotion to peter out, for the current of stomping feet to subside, I am suddenly motionless. My eyes attempt to take in the bustle, wander left and right; out of the blue a man is looking at me, his eyes hold mine with a delicate attentiveness, then let go. Another life; I live it, for a moment, in this standstill. Then the time resumes. I notice the man again some metres ahead, holding the woman with the smiles and little mountain view by the hand. If they could be my life...

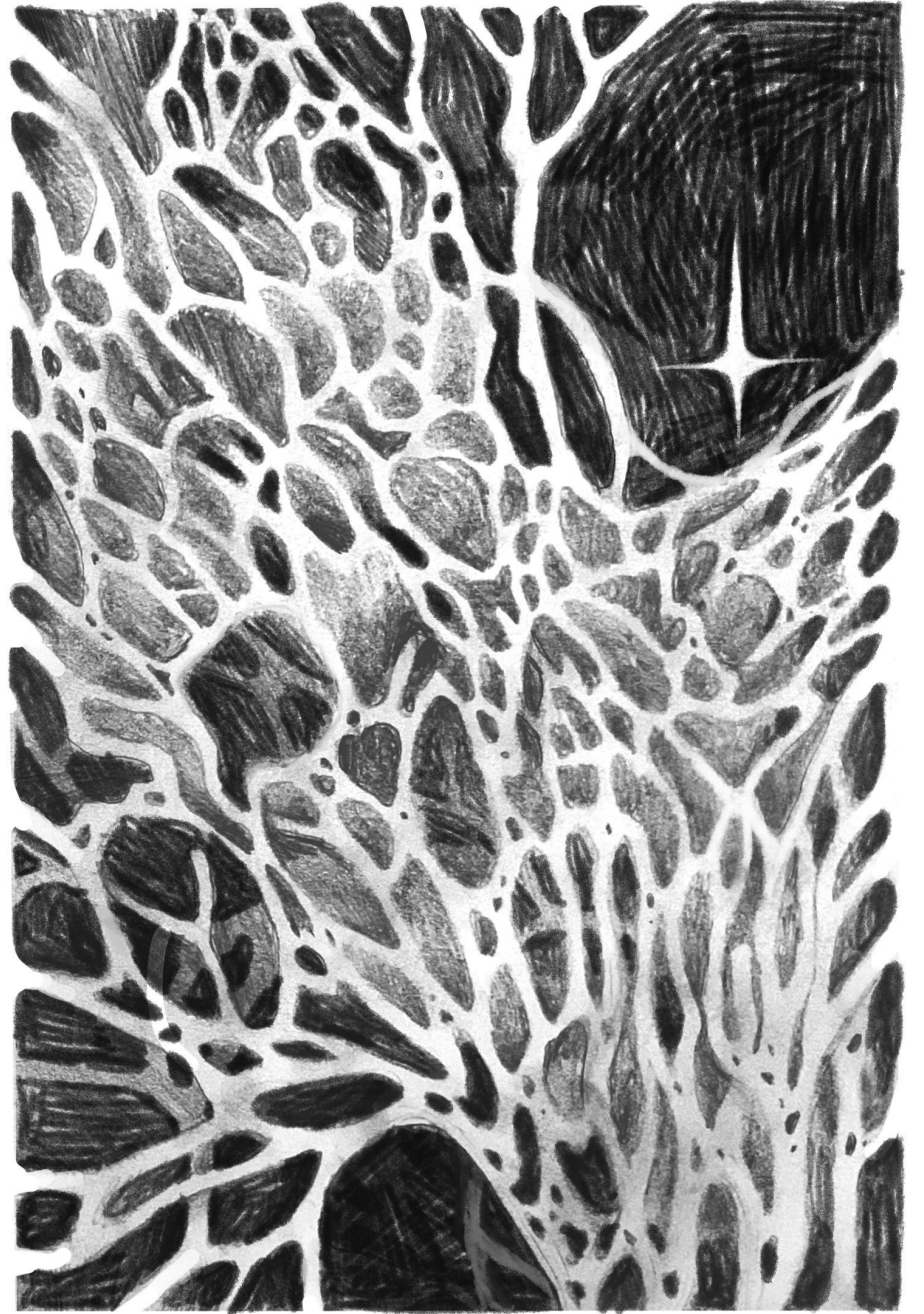
‘We’ve arrived in Lisbon! Final stop! Everyone, please get off here,’ several railway men keep bleating. I follow the couple with my eyes until they step out into the evening dark. Desire runs.

Velid Beganovic Borjen

V. B. Borjen (he/they) is a Yugoslav-born writer and visual artist based in the Czech Republic. His first poetry collection in Bosnian won the 2012 Mak Dizdar Award, while his second poetry manuscript won the 2021 Darma Books Best Manuscript Contest in Belgrade and is pending publication. Borjen’s work in English and his visual art have been featured in *EcoTheo Review*, *Folio*, *Rattle*, *The Maine Review*, *AZURE*, *Parentheses*, *High Shelf*, *Ice Floe Press*, *Moist Poetry* and elsewhere. He has further work forthcoming in *BOMB* and *Grist Journal*. He serves as guest editor of *Palette* and *Frontier* poetry magazines.

Tweets @Borjen.

Instagram visuals: samoniklo.



I Would Ask You for Coffee but There's No Milk

Louis had always said he would fill the bath with water. Not just the bath but the sinks too, in all three bathrooms. And the Belfast one in the kitchen was voluminous of course. Possibly if you blocked the plughole of the ensuite shower, it would hold a decent amount in the tray before it risked spilling over. Those were convenient and quick ways to store large quantities of water but there were other ways too.

Rose had collected some fifteen or twenty vases during her time in this house and marriage. Many of them that cheap, coloured glass type that came free with florist flowers, but water wasn't fussy. It was unlikely to say it preferred the blue antique one left to Louis by the grandmother he had rarely met. Or the crystal they had had shipped during their honeymoon, for risk of it shattering on the journey home. Lacing their fair-trade cotton clothing with dangerous shards.

And that was just in the house. Rose was sure there were likely to be any number of suitable receptacles in the garages or the large garden shed that she had never seen inside. The gardener definitely had a wheelbarrow and she had seen him use these strange, flexible buckets as he went about his work and she pretended not to notice.

In the end water wasn't an issue, well not a shortage of it anyway and Rose was sure that would have upset Louis, who didn't like to be shown up. Even by an apocalypse.

When the time for reflection came, Rose concluded that it would be grossly unfair to say she had had a bad life. The morning telly was full of women who had been beaten, trafficked, conned out of their lives' savings. Left for dead at the side of a road by the

person they thought was their long-lost uncle but turned out to be an Australian mass-murderer on the run with nothing more than three sets of clothes and a sharp knife. Bought a beautiful little handbag puppy which they named after their late sister only for it to die a day later of a puppy-farm disease, leaving them heartbroken and with five diamante collars that they now had no use for. Be left with self-esteem so low that they went for implants in someone's garage in a housing estate which burst and became infected and ate away at their flesh like an internal breast-eating zombie. Her life had been boring, but it hadn't been bad.

There were three weeks left now, or thereabouts. There was no concrete date and no one was willing to fund or conduct the research for that now. There were doubters of course but it was already raining and that was enough evidence for most people to be convinced. And worried.

Louis had wanted to go on a cruise, had mentioned it over supper almost straight away. Rose had laughed out loud, more unkindly than she had meant to. Asked him if he thought he was Noah, if he thought his IT-based new money made him worthy of the grandeur. It had hurt his pride and he had defended himself, saying he was only trying to keep her safe and keep her in luxury. Rose backed down and thanked him for the sentiment but declined.

She believed it would happen but she struggled to raise the passion that her fellow citizens conjured up with ease. It was happening and there was nothing they could do. And it wasn't personal. It's not like she would miss anything or anyone would miss her. It was the best way, really. A full switch off rather than a slow decline. More people should see it like she did.

It surprised her how many people stopped working. Chat shows cancelled because the host didn't show-up. The department store running on a half-staff and closing early for fear of looting. The coffee shop serving espresso only because

there was no milk now for her usual latte, dairy farmers having long since given up. Rose found it all nonsensical. There was little point in doing anything other than carrying on as normal. The need to make memories ridiculous given they would be forgotten soon. She didn't have a job but she would have gone to it if she had.

Louis had always had a thing for home security. Multiple locks on the door, each kite marked and fitted by a professional. The door itself some special material he'd had imported from America. Bullet-proof. CCTV which made Rose feel violated rather than secure. Home alarms that had to be deactivated when you got in with a six-digit code that Rose could never remember, much to his distaste. Rose could be accused of being emotionless at times but she took great pleasure in how useless a home security system was against torrential rain that was set to flood your planet and end civilisation once and for all. Thousands of pounds well spent!

She continued to prepare his dinner every night or pick up his favourites from the deli when she was out. Over quiche and salad he asked who she would like to see before the end.

'How do you mean? I've been going out so I see people every day,' she replied.

'Yes but is there anyone you need to tick off. To say goodbye to?' he asked, concern filling his eyes.

'No thank you, darling. I'm fine as I am.' Rose cut a neat little triangle from the end of the quiche and popped it in her mouth, gracefully.

'How about the golf girls?' Louis asked and Rose thought of their pencilled-on eyebrows and stifled conversation. 'Or your old colleagues?'

'I'm fine, darling. We can visit your mother if you like and that will be enough.'

The conversation moved on.

In the end it felt very much to Rose like waiting to go on holiday. There was roughly a week left and nothing to do with that time other than wait. It was increasingly hard to carry on as normal when no one else seemed to have the sense to do the same. Fuel was unavailable now but Louis had had the foresight to fill up the cars, his water plan being of no use now, so Rose still had the luxury of driving around. She turned on the radio but the host was at home with his children so nothing but static played out.

Visiting his mother hadn't been enough for Louis and now she was staying with them. Taking up the guest bedroom with the best light where Rose usually did her morning workout. And the gym was closed now, for obvious reasons. The break in routine didn't suit her. She wondered how she would get through the boredom of these last few days.

She poured herself a large red wine and took it into the conservatory with a book she had started in Greece but never finished. An irritating, shrill sound played and it took several seconds for Rose to connect it to the unused phone at the bottom of her deep designer handbag. She fished it out, stumbled through unlocking it and opened the one new text message.

Rose, my darling. I'm sorry. Please let's meet up. All my love
x

She hadn't realised but she'd been waiting for it, her breath held for two weeks now. It wasn't much but it was everything, and certainly enough. She thought of the home security, the bullet-proof door that was surely at least somewhere waterproof. The cans of food which they had never bought before but Louis had ordered in and lined his office with, just in case.

They had each other, they had money, they had his mother and now they had this. It was the best and strongest situation they could ever hope to be in. Rose lifted the wine to her lips and drew in its warm and comforting smell. Louis was at work,

feeling like her that he may as well continue and not willing to let things slip just yet.

Eventually the heavy door was pushed open as her husband returned from work, his dinner not on the table tonight but there was no time for that and he wouldn't mind – he never minded. She had stood up and met him at the door and he drew her into his arms, pleased to see her.

'Darling, how was your day?' he asked politely, as though she would have anything of importance to report.

'I was thinking, do you think the cruises are still running? Perhaps it was a good idea after all.'

Louis looked at his wife, confused but happy at the turnaround.

'Well I can certainly enquire. I know the best man to ask.' he said, his tone wise and important.

'Would it be possible to get a fourth ticket?'

And he knew then that the fight was back in her and they had six days to make it work.

Amy Cameron

Amy is a teacher living in the Highlands of Scotland with her husband and two children. She writes prose which is observational and mildly funny, in her opinion, and has completed the first draft of a novel.

She tweets @AmyOCameron

The War is Over

The war is over. And we shall not trouble ourselves with its name. It was a war, and as happens in wars, they hadn't enough time to think of a name for it. History had kept a record but forgot to keep a count after the thirteenth, it seems. So this one could be anything, a nineteenth or a ninetieth. But we haven't kept a count. And so a war it is. A plain war. Like all others before it. Like others to come after it, for they do come to us. And we fight, and lose, and sometimes win. And assign it a new number, until a next one comes. And then we ransack our bag of numbers to find one greater than the previous one. It must seem a fatuous exercise to assign numbers to events of such historical significance, but there's a reason to it. A wise man once reasoned that while the alphabet would fall short after a while, the numbers will not exhaust. The numbers are infinite; so humans shall never have to trouble themselves with distinguishing a war from another, for each shall have a unique number. So each time a war is fought, we have a fresh number. A wise idea indeed, we reasoned, for we are blessed with the ability to reason. And we named our wars with numbers until all wars seemed the same and someone decided to drop the wise man's idea. Like any reasonable race would do, we have now abandoned the numbers in favour of calling each war a war.

And as is the case with them all, this war has ended. And the usual business of a post-war land must begin. The land needs cleaning. And disinfecting, and wounds tending to. But the young nurse is tired. She hasn't moved since morning, not even when there were voices cheering for a victory that her people have won. She had risen with the sun for past six years. But today when all rise and cheer, she lies still in her cot. Her tent is to be removed, like all others in this field. She will have to be moved, for she seems not able to move herself. But then

someone notices her rough breathing. A soaring temperature, too. The tents now disappear. The field is quickly being emptied, just some red splotches here and there. Someone, an officer perhaps, lowers himself into the nurse's tent to discharge her from her duties. He thanks her for her services but the nurse doesn't move or speak. A fever seems to have taken hold of her overnight. The officer orders her to be taken to the nearest medical camp. She feels her body being lifted and shifted to a stretcher. She senses commotion and hurried steps. She hears orders being given and she hears affirmations. The stretcher moves now, but her body is still.

She hears footsteps; a pair of tired feet on each side of her moving bed. They move slowly and the terrain is even. Her mind eases. Calm descends. No more commotion. Only two pairs of soldiered feet and the occasional clink and clang of metal and the rolling of wheels of a moving bed.

She doesn't mind the clink and clang. Nothing compares to the deafening tanks and bombs. The sound of rolling wheels lulls her into something like a dream. With a heated body and closed eyes, she pictures herself, six years younger, entering the war office to enlist. They assign her the duties of a nurse. 'You are to tend and heal', they say, 'for as long as the war lasts, or you do'. Then they laugh. A war joke, perhaps. She steps out of the office to find an air of cheers and applause. On a TV screen at a shop's window, two men are shaking hands and hugging each other. The crowd around the window claps in unison. Their eyes water. They hug among themselves like the two important men on the TV screen. There is to be no war, the two important men have decided. The two men seem to have reached some understanding perhaps, probably because they couldn't find the appropriate number to assign to it. There is to be no war then. And so she turns around and hands her appointment paper back. Outside, the elated crowd is now dispersing towards their homes.

But the voices fade; only the metal and wheel sounds of her moving bed remain. The stretcher moves at a faster pace. The footsteps are now rushed. ‘Breathe!’ the two voices say. She hears them, but doesn’t comply. Her breaths grow uneven, so do the footsteps. ‘Breathe, madam!’ the soldier speaks again. She tries to recall her dream, to continue it. She strains her mind to picture herself walking away from the office and mingling with the dispersing crowd. But the sight doesn’t come back; only memories of her past years do. Six years of cleaning wounds, changing bandages, applying plasters, administering doses and nursing dying men. But the war is over. When it had begun, she had marvelled at its abruptness. One day the world was sane, the next it was echoing with cries of war. On the very first day, her uniform was stained, as if she had stepped into a puddle of crimson water. And now, it is over, as abruptly as it had begun.

The dream doesn’t come back to her. The dream is over, and she must go home. ‘Breathe Madam, breathe!’ the same voice again. This time closer to her ear, and more urgent. ‘Breathe!’ the voice commands. But she doesn’t. She doesn’t take orders. She only nurses, and tends, and heals. And now she must rest. ‘Madam,’ the panting voice says one last time, ‘Breathe.’ But she rests.

Ayesha Khan

Ayesha Khan (she/her) is based out of a town in Himachal Pradesh, India. She holds an MA degree in English from Panjab University, Chandigarh. She works as an Assistant Professor of English Literature.

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O Canada

Manitoba, November 1955

The class goes silent. Just one word out of place, but it's all it takes. She looks round to see if anyone noticed, but of course they have. And most importantly, Johnson has. I don't call him our teacher, because he doesn't teach us anything apart from who we aren't, and how to sing a song we hate. He grabs the wooden board from his desk and walks slowly towards her, his toothy grin showing satisfaction that someone has fallen foul of his rules. Her eyes widen. Her beautiful brown eyes. She trembles as Johnson puts the rope round the back of her head, holding her long black hair tight to her neck. He drops the board so it whacks her in the chest. She tries to hold in a cry of pain.

I look up at the clock. There's an hour to go – plenty of time for someone else to attract Johnson's wrath. Plenty of time for a word out of place, a forgotten rule to be broken, a word uttered in our own tongue. For us to be punished for being who we are.

I sit silent, consumed with hatred for this man, appointed to try to destroy us. I have talked back before, and I have had the board. I have been left with it as the end of 'O Canada' faded away, and I have paid the price. Opening my right hand, I can see the scars of the times I've paid that price.

She has soft hands. We held hands once, when no one was looking. She ran a gentle finger down the line of one of my scars. Of all of us, she's the gentlest, the smallest, the one who most wants to do what she's told. Her mother died in a car crash, or so she has been told. I'm not so sure. I've heard tales of the police stealing our people when an accident happens, spiriting them away to be forgotten in so-called care homes or foster families. I told her to hope, that her mother might be alive. That the police lied. That every one of the whites lies. And that someday, we will have justice in this land. In our land.

The snow outside is getting deep. I'll have a long walk home if I miss the bus, but as the clock ticks, I see her face again, and I see her fear. Her time is running out. Only half an hour left. Her eyes flick round, not willing someone else to make a mistake, because that would be cruel, and she is not cruel, but deep-down she is hoping, so the board will pass to someone else. That dreaded board. The board which says 'INDIAN' on it, but means so much more. Whoever has that board when the day ends, when the clock ticks away...

A tear falls from her cheek onto her pad. It spreads out. I see it. I want to wipe her face, to tell her that it will be all right, to tell her that someday we will stand up and shout that these men came and punished us for speaking our own language, for being the rightful owners of this land, for respecting the spirits of this land, and no matter what they do to us, we will get our revenge just by being alive. We continue to live here. We continue to exist, and we will not bow to them. We will not be wiped out by them.

Only five minutes to go. I look at my hand again. I look at the snow. I look at her. She is shaking. She has never faced the cane. She has never had to walk back to her foster family through the freezing wind.

Soon we will stand for the song. Soon it will be too late.

I know what I have to do. She must not suffer like I have suffered. She does not deserve that.

I push my book off the desk so it falls on my foot, hoping it looks enough like an accident. I swear. I swear in my own tongue. I look up at Johnson, trying to look shocked, resisting a rebellious smile.

He walks over to her, looking almost disappointed, staring at her a little too long. She stares up into his eyes. I remember her staring into mine. I will hold that thought. I will become that thought. I will wrap myself in that thought. He grabs the board from her, his hands brushing against her chest as he does so,

adding another line to my mental list of his crimes. He pulls the board up, and walks over to me.

He places the rope round my neck. The scar on my hand begins to throb, as if it knows what's coming.

I am doing a good thing.

My ancestors will be proud of me.

Robert Kibble

Robert lives west of London with a wife, a teenage son, and a cornucopia of half-finished writing projects. A few have been published over the years, which – it has to be admitted – is very pleasing. If only a less creative day job wouldn't keep getting in the way, he's sure it would be more. You can find him on @r_kibble on Twitter, should you so desire.

The Lost Fisherman

Andrew ducked through the cottage doorway and stepped onto the harbourside where the wintery light picked out the tree-bark shades of his hair and beard. The tide was fully in: a soft rippling beat against the seawall. He took a breath of the briny air and for a moment felt as calm as the bay. But as his gaze shifted out to sea, he noticed that beyond the harbour-mouth, everything was a blurry wash of indeterminate marine hues, like an amateur watercolour. He knew what this meant. He gave a short shrill whistle.

As Clara's muscled bulk passed unhurriedly through the cottage door, Andrew bowed his head a fraction. The Newfoundland acknowledged him with the slightest twitch of one dark ear-tip.

'There's some kind of thwart-field around the port,' Andrew said.

Clara raised her huge muzzle to sniff the air, detecting immediately the clumsy storm-masking. She gave a furious bark and then leapt. As she cleared the girth of the seawall, she was a shimmering streak of black and gold; by the time she hit the water she was a large grey seal. Andrew watched her torpedo-like progress, felt the soft pop of atmospheric adjustment as she pierced the thwart-field, then stepped back indoors as the full tumult of the storm was unleashed around the bay. Moments later, the siren at the lifeboat station began to sound in long rising blasts.

Station Head, Fergus McAllister, was already opening the heavy slipway doors when Andrew arrived.

'Hi Andrew, I see Clara beat you to it again,' he said. Clara was standing on the slipway in the pelting rain watching the maul of black-green waves below.

McAllister was a slight, energetic man, who spoke over his shoulder, iPad in hand, as he worked around *The Pride of Fife*, completing the pre-launch checklist.

‘Can you believe this storm?’ he asked. ‘Just came out of nowhere.’

Andrew grunted and followed him to the gantry steps.

‘What are we dealing with today, Fergie?’

‘An oil tanker off the Fenway Banks. Captain claims they’ve been putting out the mayday call for almost an hour. But we didn’t pick up the signal. None of the East Coast stations did. I can’t make sense of it.’

Andrew knew to change the subject.

‘Who’s our crew today?’

Ailsa Redgate is coxswain, Jake...’ Andrew, who was only half listening, tuned in again as McAllister finished. ‘...and, of course your good self as stern-man and dog handler.’

‘Not that Clara needs a handler,’ said Ailsa, appearing at the top of the gantry, already in her oilskins. ‘I swear that dog pre-empted all your commands anyway, eh Andrew?’ Her smile faded quickly as Andrew turned away.

‘Aye, Clara’s a smart one alright,’ McAllister said. ‘Lucky too. Not one life lost at sea in the three years since she joined the crew. Let’s hope her luck holds out today.’

When all seventeen rescued seamen were safely ashore and the de-brief had been completed, the lifeboat crew gathered around their usual table in *The Mariner’s Arms*. The mood was one of exhausted triumph: it had been a difficult rescue and they all knew how close the tanker had come to breaking up on the rocks.

‘I still can’t believe the Taraway lightship failed,’ one crewman said.

‘What are the odds of that happening on the same day as the comms problems at the lifeboat stations?’ another asked. ‘It’s almost like somebody coordinated it.’ Clara cocked one ear.

‘Who? Aliens?’ McAllister quipped. ‘Spare us the conspiracy theories.’

‘More likely it has something to do with the repair work on the under-sea cabling,’ Andrew said. ‘That probably caused some power outages.’ He hoped he sounded convincing, but in his mind’s eye he was replaying the scene his searchlight had picked out in the turbulent waters before he quickly turned it off: Clara, part-shark part-crocodile, twisting and writhing in pursuit of a sinewy black form that he couldn’t make out.

‘Listen everyone.’ Ailsa rose, glass in hand. ‘I’m too bone weary to make a speech, but here’s to my amazing crew and another spectacular rescue. And special thanks to Clara, who was awesome today. To Clara and the crew.’

‘Clara and the crew,’ they echoed, raising glasses round the big table under which the apparently exhausted dog was feigning sleep.

‘I have to say,’ Ailsa continued, quietly, to Andrew, ‘I was surprised you sent her in. I’ve never seen a dog in such treacherous seas before.’

Andrew said nothing. He had had no say in the matter.

‘And when your stern-light failed, I really thought we’d lost her.’ She paused, waiting.

‘The men in that raft were terrified,’ Andrew said, slowly. ‘They were going to cast off before we were near enough to pick them up. Clara had to get their line.’

‘But she could have died,’ Ailsa said, her face full of concern. ‘You both could.’ She touched his arm. He remembered that look, that touch, but they belonged in another world.

‘She’s a working dog. It’s what she’s trained for,’ he said, gruffly, looking down as Clara lifted her head a fraction, signalling *enough*.

Back at the cottage, he closed the shutters in the sail-loft, giving Akhathaon the privacy to assume her form. As always, he had to

turn away from the initial dazzling revelation. She, or perhaps the light around her, shimmered constantly, making her shape hard to discern. To Andrew she seemed woman-like in her powerful gold body and wolf-like in her sleek black head. She never spoke, but he was privy to such of her thoughts as she chose to share with him.

How dare he threaten this shoreline with his black-oil curse and try to harm the mortals under my protection?

Andrew didn't understand the ancient honour code of her forebears any more than he understood how she changed forms and moved through time. The thoughts she offered him by way of explanation contained concepts and images he could not grasp. He didn't care; he wanted only to serve her.

But Hekaris has shown himself at last and the Chennet will banish him. My wait is over, and yours too, fisherman.

Always she addressed him by his role, never his name.

I release you from my service. She bowed her dark head in what he knew to be a gesture of thanks.

He had always known that her time in these waters and their handler and rescue-dog masquerade would come to an end. He had feared it constantly since the night, three years ago, when she hauled him, unconscious, from the water and towed the impossible weight of his crab boat back to shore. Every morning, on waking, he listened for sounds from the loft above: footsteps, paw treads, wing beats, anything to reassure him of another day in her presence.

He turned to face her, not trying to conceal his tears of anguish but giving them up as her due.

'It has been my honour to serve you,' he said.

She extended a golden finger to brush a tear from his cheek. He felt a conflict within her. Abruptly, she closed her thoughts to him and moved a little way off. When she turned back there were flame-like darts of copper in her eyes.

I sense that you wish to serve me further, fisherman. There is a way.

‘Tell me,’ he said, without hesitation.

I can give you a new form so that you can travel with me always.

He couldn’t speak. It had never occurred to him that such a thing might be possible. He had no concept of ‘always’ and he feared it, but he feared life without her more. Her eyes were flaring and flickering, awaiting his response.

‘I...’ still no words would come.

Do you doubt me? After all you have seen me do, do you think this is not within my power?

‘No, Akhathaon,’ he said, his voice a dry scratch in his throat.

‘I do not doubt you. It is only that I am not worthy.’

Your loyalty has made you worthy, but to become such a being carries a harsh burden for mortals.

‘Whatever it is,’ Andrew said, ‘I will bear it. Take me with you.’

The vast sea eagle perched on the harbour wall where the moonlight picked out the many shades of tawny and bronze in her plumage. The tide was out: dark rocks and shimmering pools to the far white line of the sea-edge. She scanned the horizon, watchful, ready for flight.

Andrew closed the cottage door. He had left no note, not even for Ailsa. As he moved to stand beside Akhathaon at the seawall he wondered how the townsfolk would account for the disappearance of the solitary fisherman and his dog.

Are you scared?

He felt it as compassion rather than contempt and shook his head, drawing a long last breath of the salty air he had breathed all his life.

Just keep looking into my eyes, Ba-Amatha.

She had named him. *Ba-Amatha*. He sensed it as a benediction. Locking onto her eyes, he felt the thrum of her power surround him, then a moment of sudden cold and a sense of compression: a painless collapse into a tight mass of something which was no longer human, and from which two flecked wings began to unfurl.

Lesley Evans

Lesley is currently studying for an MA in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. After half a lifetime as a lawyer, she is re-training as the writer she promised her childhood self she would one day become. She writes mainly flash fiction and short stories, often with coastal themes and settings.

The Old Woman in The Red Coat

Sonja sat beside the rusted tin of cigarette butts under the eave, her leathery hands folded over her knitting. There was nothing to do but wait. Not wait for anything in particular, just wait. If she was lucky, the old woman in the red coat would come by.

Sonja had come too late.

Too late to find work,

Too late to make friends,

Too late to learn a language.

And there was nothing to go home to. Only rubble and dust and twisted metal.

Mila would finish pre-school in a few hours. That was something. But the girl didn't speak with her grandmother much. She understood alright, but she would answer only in English. English with its unintelligible labial sounds and flat tone.

The other pre-school parents would nod when Sonja approached. Some would even wave, but they knew better than to get tangled up in the awkward language of hand-signs and insincere smiles.

She had come too late.

Too late to find work,

Too late to make friends,

Too late to learn a language.

And there was nothing to go home to.

Sonja sat, hands folded on her knitting, as people passed. The empty hours stretched out in all directions. The family didn't like food from the Old Country, so Ivana would cook when she got home; television was in English; the apartment was too small to be tidied; even shopping required too much English and mobility.

So she sat, hands folded on the knitting no one would wear,
and watched. Watched everything and watched nothing.

She had come too late.

Too late to find work,

Too late to make friends,

Too late to learn a language.

And there was nothing to go home to.

Presently, the old woman in the red coat bustled into view. Sonja sat up and waved both hands. The woman pushed her overflowing shopping cart onto the yellow grass and marched over. She plunked down beside Sonja and began rambling in that strange labial, flat-toned language. She gesticulated wildly and grinned her half-empty grin.

Sonja didn't understand a word. She just nodded eagerly and smiled from her heart.

Erik Peters

Erik Peters is a teacher and avid mediaevalist from Canada. Erik's work with marginalised students has profoundly influenced his writing which has been published in numerous magazines including *Coffin Bell*, *Showbear Family Circus*, *Prospectus*, *The Louisville Review*, and *The Dead Mule School*.

Read all Erik's publications at www.erikpeters.ca or [@erikpeterswrites](https://twitter.com/erikpeterswrites).

Aubrey

Aubrey, when he was born, had the most beautiful toes. Wriggling delicately above his eyes, already beginning to sign, the ten pale stubs swayed in a tangle of damply curled golden brow. At that first sight I knew, with a rush of impaling, prescient numbness, that mine would be a special boy; although his digit-less feet might not clump far, his influence and consequence would.

Aubrey grew up to be a magician, of sorts. Standing motionless on his stumps, he mesmerised with a glance. Waving and leaping above the calm blue of his ocean eyes as he spoke; twirling, curling, almost seeming to spiral; his agile, brief digits communicated with people's passions, interpreted their expressions, and defined their innermost emotions. Since the advent of genetic migration of toes to foreheads – caused by shoes, extensive neglect of the art of walking, to say nothing of climbing or jumping, and finally by the replacement of much of human interaction by close-ups of faces on screens – Aubrey was the best by far at the luminous language of toes.

First the neighbours, and then people from towns near and far, began visiting our small home for a glimpse of him, a conversation, a grasp of understanding. Anyone who could still walk began the pilgrimage. I spent my days shepherding, serving tea and biscuits to weary travellers, sweeping up after them. Word spread, and soon people from all over the country clamoured for Aubrey's face, his eyes, the wisdom of his toe brows. I moved my few things to a closet so that we could convert my bedroom to a broadcasting studio. With my meagre savings we purchased the equipment he needed: a camera aimed at his face; an assortment of gizmos and cables. And there he stood, all day long, the camera trained on his toes, which waved continually like seaweed in current. No matter who encountered

him, via his video feed or in person, he understood: rage, hope, despair, confusion, aspiration, and his toes' swirls of understanding assuaged. He provided his services freely, indicating to me, with a rare motion of irritation in the kink and swipe of his left second toe knuckle, that the needs of our own household were of no consequence. His communications became increasingly famous; soon his toes, in all manner of languages, gracefully responded to people all over the world.

Aubrey became a televised show, then a channel, then a station, and finally my special boy – by then a full-grown man – founded the Aubrey Broadcasting Co. and developed a retinal nano-implant with the capability of continually promulgating a live image of his face. With a subscription and a medical procedure nearly as minor as the blink of an eye, anyone could, at any time, have Aubrey's eyes and brows in their peripheral vision.

Aubrey did also concurrently speak in the old-fashioned way, with words, but being in conversation with him, I was told, shifted the function of spoken language to something more like music: still useful in gathering emotional import, but nearly obsolete in transferring specific meaning. For meaning, you needed to look above Aubrey's eyes, to the words he was signing with the waving, homely softness of his toes. People all over the world clamoured for implants. In the interests of global peace and trade, nearly all national governments funded Aubrey Retinal Installation for their citizens. As I had foreseen from the instant he emerged from my womb, my boy's influence and eminence would travel far; he became the nucleus of human communication.

There was only one thing he never said.

Standing on his stumps in our home office with the camera on him, his face and toes spoke continually about everything else under the sun and beyond the stars. He could still ambulate, but with great effort; walking was as uncomfortable for Aubrey as

for the rest of those whose toes had completed their transit up the body. The huge effort of quads and hamstring to lift the dull weight of foot stump, and then the awkward lurch forward without the spring of the hind foot's big toe: physical human self-propulsion was becoming as arduous as mental propulsion into others' minds was becoming elegant, even facile.

But walking was still simple for me, and with my old-fashioned, toed feet, I cared for him. I kept the house and studio tidy, I tended equally to the electronic equipment and the needs of his body. It was strange, I admit, to know that billions of people were communicating with my son at the same moments that I silently brought him bread and jam, cleaned his piss pot, massaged the overworked muscles of his temples, or brushed the damp golden curls – just beginning to glint with silver – from his brow.

I don't think it mattered to him, or that he actually quite comprehended, that other people fought against their desires for smaller, more personal things: one's own room, grandchildren, thanks. His was the most important visage on the planet. Wars ceased, famines lifted. More and more toes travelled gradually upward to brows. Those with the most adroit digits studied Aubrey's communication skills and emulated them, and soon whole schools of what came to be called supra-communications developed. Humans moved less, thought more, communicated more, fought less. Presiding over it all, even over his own ocean blue eyes, Aubrey's toes waved gently, twirling at all their previously underappreciated joints. He was cherished for who he was. And that, I think, was his magic.

I have become ancient, barely able to wrap myself in sagging linen. Yet I toddle down the hall every day to Aubrey's studio and beam my pride at my son, my special boy who has never been mine, and the blithe toes dancing amongst his silvered tresses. Hoping against hope to catch a glimpse, exchange a glance, hear a word that is not shared with the rest of humanity.

That is, as I like to believe it was in that one instant in the beginning, mine alone.

Kimm Brockett Stammen

Kimm Brockett Stammen's writings have appeared or are forthcoming in *Litro*, *december Magazine*, *CARVE*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Pembroke*, *Prime Number*, and many others. Her work has been nominated for Pushcart and Best Short Fiction anthologies, and she holds an MFA from Spalding University.

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Lina's Choice

The sun peered above the horizon; the referee yelled 'GO!'; Lina and her competitors hurtled forward with their toddlers riding piggyback. They resembled DIY extra-terrestrials with homemade masks and foggy dime-store goggles...

Twenty yards later, Lina stopped to re-tie her shoe. She'd needed new laces, but—

Just going outside involved genuine peril.

And she didn't really stand a chance. Many contestants had trained endlessly at American Ninja Warrior-style gyms—

But the network's plans remained a mystery.

The website had announced a 'multifaceted competition' for mothers of eighteen-to-twenty-four-month-olds, with a priceless prize. Lina took the qualifying exam, affixed an electronic signature, shrugged.

The network chose *her*.

Knowing that the commentators must be disparaging her, Lina rose, trying not to disturb the half-dozing Zoë more than she could help. She finally passed one mom after a mile. Zoë's toddler-burble indicated hunger. Lina – verifying that no one appeared within fifty feet – lifted Zoë's mask, passed her a box of raisins. She imagined the commentators:

'After a rough start, Lina demonstrates impressive preparation—'

Lina pressed on. She restored Zoë's mask as she overtook a mom shouting 'Aw, hell no!' over her squalling two-year-old, and exiting in disgust.

Three miles later, sweaty and irritated, Lina reached stage 2. She barely prevented Zoë from lurching toward the tantalising-looking playground. Moms dashed between *Jeopardy*-style podia near the play-space and their offspring, frowning and kissing booboos.

A producer approached. ‘Obstacle one tested endurance,’ she said. ‘Obstacle two tests multi-tasking. Leave your child on the playground until you answer twenty-five questions correctly.’

Lina exhaled, smirked. Zoë was a sandbox devotee, and therefore never risked falling. She deposited Zoë, hastened to a be-screened podium. *Cleopatra. Octopi. Bicycle.* Apologising to another mom after Zoë snatched her boy’s shovel. *Frasier. Algiers. Clichés...*

DONE!

The producer escorted her and Zoë to a one-room pod. ‘The simulator,’ she said. ‘Your child stays in the playpen. You wear the helmet-viewer and the electro-suit – and react.’

Lina nodded.

‘*Choices,*’ read her viewscreen.

The outside world evaporated.

A dog, lunging at Zoë. Lina considered calling for help – but kicked it away, her leg ‘feeling’ the blow. *A boy, tormenting Zoë.* She told the imp to stop; he refused. She used words and fists – until he did. *All the competitors, masked and goggled, circling a single test tube.* Lina sprang forward–

One mom slapped her, and Lina shoved her aside; another yanked her ponytail, and Lina stomped on the woman’s instep; a third clocked her, reaching...Lina braced, elbowed the woman’s solar plexus, snatched the vial.

‘COMPLETE.’

Lina gathered Zoë, emerged.

‘CONGRATULATIONS!’ shouted an announcer. Lina blinked stupidly. ‘It’s true!’ he said. ‘Contestants – your WINNER!’

The mothers glared at her. One rubbing a shoulder. One massaging her foot. Another crouched, gasping...

‘I...’ began Lina.

A nurse appeared with a syringe containing the precious vaccine. 'Hold the patient still,' she said, then injected Zoë's thigh.

'A speech?' suggested the announcer.

Lina looked into the camera.

'*Why must you pit us against one other?*' she screamed, before the network cut her microphone.

Linda McMullen

Linda McMullen is a wife, mother, daughter, diplomat, and homesick Wisconsinite. Her short stories and the occasional poem have appeared in over one hundred fifty literary magazines.

She may be found on Twitter: @LindaCMcMullen.

Limoncello

Frida is lying in the bath thinking about drinking limoncello in the summertime. About the cold glass in her hand and the tart liquid pooling on her tongue before she swallows it. The memory – which isn't a single memory, but a composite of sensations and scenes – makes her ache. She knows that this summer there will be no limoncello or long nights or loud music. There will be no lovers, no lie ins, no late morning pancakes crisp round the edges. No late morning cups of tea swallowed while a tongue goes deliciously to work between her legs. No gentle weight of her body floating in the ocean until freckles bloom wildly on her limbs and her face, and she rolls in with the tide to her towel and her novel and her bottle of limoncello to lie beneath the banana palms, strands of seaweed trailing behind her. Because this summer Frida is going to have a baby. And babies do not have time for liqueur, or oral sex, or novels, or the sea.

Frida realises she is crying, and she watches the tears fall onto her breasts and the strange belly protruding out of the bathwater like a fleshy island. Coils of her thick, dark hair sway in the water around her new body. She cannot stop crying. It happens gradually: her tears become a brook and then a stream and then a river, coursing over her odd, swollen form and filling the tub to its lip. Through the open window Frida sees beyond the smelly city, beyond the red cliffs, to the dark strip of ocean on the horizon. That is her ocean, and she longs for the freedom of it now. But it feels beyond her in some immovable way.

As she sloshes around trying to get comfortable, Frida thinks suddenly of a fairy tale from her girlhood. A princess lives in a castle with twelve magical windows that allow her to see clearly everything around her. To avoid marrying, she sets a hide-and-

seek challenge for her suitors. The man she cannot find she will marry, she says, but all the rest who try will be beheaded.

Her magic windows are like x-ray vision, allowing her to see almost everything in and around the castle, so the blood of suitors runs thick for many merry months. She arranges their heads decoratively along the castle's outer walls.

But then a prince tricks the princess by forcing magical beasts to hide him. He is transformed into a type of mollusc called a sea-hare, and in this form creeps to the princess as she sleeps and nestles into her braids. Upon waking she perceives the creature against her scalp and, revolted, she throws it from her window. Of course, he returns to her in human form to claim his kingship, and in this way the princess loses her independence and her kingdom to him. The trickery! That bastard, Frida thinks.

As a girl Frida had always felt a kinship with this princess. Like her, Frida thought she could avoid that particular feminine destiny of entrapment. She did all the right things, never missed a little pink pill, insisted on protection. And still, this mess. She didn't recognise what was happening until it was too late. And the fellow – curse him! – long gone now, is free. Unencumbered. Frida is furious.

In the story, though, the princess accepts her fate with grace. She becomes giddily compliant, claiming she is grateful to have found a husband cleverer than she is. But Frida knows this ending to be a cold, steely lie. A lie as sharp a gutting knife. She knows it more than ever, because now Frida can feel the muffled rage fighting beneath the false happy ending. It roars through her now, the princess's stifled fury and despair. Frida does not resist this hot wave of sorrow, and as she gives herself over, she feels the rage of a thousand tricked and grieving women coursing through her.

Through the night she keens, bawling hotly into the tub, pickling her body with her tears. She prays to every goddess she can think of and begs them to take her child away. The day

becomes another and another, then a week becomes a month. Still, she cries.

Finally, her body has grown wrinkled and soft in the tub. She feels she is on the brink of formlessness and her whole apartment is flooded. The neighbours below have set up buckets.

And then! She feels the pain. The creature in her belly is moving. She knows right away that this is it: the baby is ripping, tearing his way out of her.

Frida worries about doing this without a doctor, but then she remembers that plenty of women choose water births and that their bodies have been ready for this since before hospitals or forceps or medical degrees.

Even so. It is as bad as she feared: there is blood, there is fire, there are all the things they never tell you about until it is too late. And then there he is: the baby. But not quite like she expected.

She sits up straighter in the tub and gathers the strange child to her, but he is slippery and slithers from her grasp. He swims around her feet, playing, nibbles cheekily on a toe and then hides behind her knee. His body is fish-like. He has small sharp teeth, and on his head a crown of fuzzy hair parts around a single budding horn. He is a delight, she realises, and already so capable in the water.

‘What are you?’ She reaches for him, tentatively.

The child lingers between her ankles, looking up at her from beneath the water’s surface with green, glassy eyes. He darts suddenly towards her hand and she feels a smarting. Blood wells on her fingertip.

‘You bit me!’

They regard one another. The child’s lips peel back in a shy, repentant grin that reveals his pointed teeth, perfectly white. He wiggles against her ankle.

Frida sniffs and wipes the last of the liquid from her eyes.

‘Okay.’

She chews her lip. She tries to imagine taking him with her to her favourite beach. She suspects that this fish child wouldn't mind a bit if she spent all day drifting from her beach towel to the water and back.

She tries again, reaching more slowly this time, and he allows her to grasp his fat, slimy body. She pulls him to her and, cheek to cheek, she points out the window, showing him the blue-black line on the horizon past the red cliffs. He smells of brine and fresh kelp. His eyes lock on the sliver of ocean beyond and he reaches out his arms, a thin, high wail streaming from his open mouth; he gnashes his razor teeth.

Frida is startled and drops him back into the bath. His desire, like hers, is palpable, ferocious. She sinks back and cradles the pieces of her broken body as he swims around it. It is all she can manage for now.

Days later, after she has bailed the grievous waters from her apartment, dried herself and made some toast, Frida wrangles her fish baby from the tub and takes him down to the sea. She has plaited her hair and she enjoys the braid's pleasing thump against her buttocks as she walks. The sun is bright today and she pulls the child close, so he is protected by the shade of her straw hat.

He wriggles the whole way and tries to bite her twice. But when her feet touch the wet sand and the sea licks at her ankles he becomes a true chaos in her arms and she drops him onto the sand. He flips onto his stomach and paddles his fat little arms for the waves. He doesn't look back at her once as he ducks into the reaching, foamy whitecaps that close over his slick, strong body. He disappears from view more quickly than she is prepared for.

The grief she feels is neat and brief, and not at all like the drowning limoncello princess grief.

And sometimes in the summertime Frida will wonder about her strange and lovely child. How grown is he now? Does he

remember me? Will I see him again? She will recall with a shudder the searing pain of the bathtub, the sea of sorrow that poured from her. And as she lifts her glass of tart liqueur, she will thank desperately whatever sea goddess still answers mortal prayers.

Emma Maguire

Emma Maguire is an Australian writer and researcher working on Bindal and Wulgurukaba land in Townsville, and Kaurna land in Tarndanya/Adelaide. She researches women's life writing by day, and by night she writes weird stories about intimacy, femme relationships, and creepy landscapes. Her fiction, essays, and criticism have been published in *Kill Your Darlings*, *The Conversation*, *Lip*, *Verity La*, *Scum Mag*, and more.

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The Attendant

He believed in the power of art over everything else. The snow covering the track was untouched, wending its way past a solitary house with closed shutters and beyond through fields until it was out of sight. The muted silence rang in his ears. The chillness numbed his face. Instinctively he squinted in the watery sunlight. The trees before him were bare. There was just one more thing that he thought the painting required.

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The double doors swung open and a tall man and a lady entered the gallery, both smartly dressed, on a late lunch most likely. With a serious expression on her face, the lady studied each painting they came to. She wore a dark red coat and knee length brown boots that clicked softly on the laminate flooring. The man, who was looking down at his phone rather than at any of the artwork, was obliged to keep stopping to let her catch up. He looked annoyed about it.

The lady stopped in front of the snow scene.

‘I love this one.’

‘It’s my favourite too.’

They turned and the man glared down at the attendant. Then he looked at the lady and saw that she was pondering the attendant with a faint smile. Slipping his phone smoothly into the inside pocket of his coat, he spoke in a voice that boomed around the gallery.

‘I did a History of Art degree.’

‘Did you? I never knew.’

‘Moved to law after the first year. Realised there was no money in art. No offence.’

The attendant felt an overwhelming desire to pick up his chair

and swing it as hard as he could into the man's artless and ignorant mouth. Instead, he said politely, 'Not much money, no.'

'You get to look at these paintings every day,' said the lady, glancing up at the man, her face serious again. 'It can't be so bad.'

It struck the attendant that the lady would do perfectly. He nodded. 'I do get a lot of satisfaction from it, yes.'

'We should get back,' said the man, placing a hand on the small of the lady's back.

As they were leaving, the lady said something, with a quizzical expression. The man gave a derisive snort and the lady blushed and lowered her head a little. The couple left the gallery, and the attendant went to his chair.

After a short while, the lady reappeared, alone. She came near to where the attendant was sat and stopped in front of the snow scene.

'I just wanted one more look,' she said in a quiet, determined voice.

'Be my guest.'

'It's just so beautifully captured. I want to go there. I can almost feel the place.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' said the attendant, standing up. 'That would be some escape, wouldn't it? I think it's to do with the way the artist has used different tones of white. Like here.' The lady stepped closer to examine the area of the canvas where the attendant was pointing. He knew he would not be able to stop himself now: the overwhelming desire to demonstrate the power of his belief.

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Sometime later, a call came through on the walkie talkie. A man at the information desk was looking for someone he'd arrived with earlier but could now no longer find. A woman. One by

one, the attendant's colleagues confirmed that they had not seen her, a chorus of negative responses crackling over the airwaves to which the attendant nonchalantly added his own. He felt a little lightheaded, the energy drained from him.

'You haven't seen her, have you?'

The sudden return of the booming voice made the attendant jump. The tall man loomed over him.

'Maybe she left already?' the attendant said innocently.

'Without telling me?' He gave the attendant a disdainful look, but there was a note of panic in his voice. 'She's not even answering her phone. What's she playing at?'

The clack of his expensive-looking shoes echoed off the walls and the high ceiling as he hurried away.

Of course, thought the attendant, if the man had stuck with his art degree he'd have learnt to look at a painting properly, and his search for the lady would have been over. As it was, he might never stop looking. The attendant rested back in his chair and closed his eyes. He listened to the subliminal and soothing hum of the lighting overhead. He stayed that way until the walkie talkie crackled again. Five minutes to closing time. He informed an elderly lady, who thanked him and hobbled slowly towards the exit. In the solitude of the empty gallery, the attendant surveyed the painting one more time.

She had her back to him, a small figure paused at the edge of the snow-covered track, surveying the fields beyond. Her footprints led to where she was stood, by one of the trees, near the shuttered house. Her red coat was a moment of rich contrast against the varying whitenesses of the snow. The sensation of the eternal winter's day took hold of him again. Maybe she too could feel the chill on her face. Maybe the sunlight was in her eyes. He had been right. She was perfect for the painting. The attendant felt very satisfied with his work.

He turned off the lights and locked the double doors and returned the keys to the reception desk.

‘Looks like it might snow,’ said the security guard, leaning back in his chair and looking out of the window at a heavy grey sky. ‘Strange; the forecast didn’t say anything about snow.’

The attendant said good night and left the building, just as the first flakes were beginning to fall.

Andrew Senior

Andrew Senior is a writer of short fiction and poetry based in Sheffield, UK. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Litro Magazine*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Flash Fiction Magazine* and *The Honest Ulsterman*.

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La Colonia

13th Avenue floated over the Chelsea waters just east of what would have been 10th at Gansevoort before crossing over to the west side of that ill-fated avenue after the equivalent of five city blocks as it worked its way north, ultimately terminating at 34th Street just at where the waters begin to ebb at the feet of the Great Kill District. It wove itself like a snake between and through former hotels, theatres, galleries, and apartment buildings. The former occupants had long ago evacuated to drier land, but like 13th Avenue itself, the buildings had been repurposed to suit the emerging needs of an ever-changing city.

Discovering *La Colonia* was like lifting the lid to a Royal Dansk cookie tin at your *abuelita's* house. Inside was a collection of bits and bobs, another man's treasure, or remnants from another age. After the floods, *La Colonia* was resettled by those with nowhere else to go. At first, it was the elderly and infirm, whom, it was assumed, lacked the wanderlust in their aging joints that necessitated access to sidewalks and streets. Their minds had long ago deteriorated, the lace eating away at their memories like moth ridden sweaters. They were cared for by the Puerto Ricans and Cubans, climate refugees whose islands, too, were now a lost memory, and a smattering of West Indians who were able to secure passage and whose papers no one cared to check as long as the pensioners were provided for.

The community built gangplanks from their fire escapes to the elevated Avenue which served as the main thoroughfare to load and unload provisions and for the odd relative who still visited. On hot summer nights, it was not uncommon for residents to throw mats down on the Avenue and sleep under the stars, the sound of the river lapping against the girders and buildings reminiscent of the sea songs of their *patria*. In the wild grasses that grew up in between the old railroad tracks, the wind

could be forgiven if it sounded a bit too much like the rustling of palms.

Time moved differently in *La Colonia* as the young who could not forget cared for those too old to remember. It was perhaps this very confluence of memory that nurtured the fomenting mind of Jose and his fellow philosophers. Most days were the same. Jose would wake early and prepare *café con leche* and buttered toast in the quiet morning, wary of disturbing his wife, Carmen, who relished the extra fifteen minutes of the bed to herself. As he dipped the toast into his coffee, he would work on his poetry. He let his verse off its leash knowing that if it had more slack to sniff the corners of his mind, or laze about in the sunny spots of the room, it would return to him with some prize in its mouth. His wife would later sweep the crumbs and pencil shavings off of the table, gently shaking her head and thinking to herself, 'That man's got more secrets than a woman.'

Jose taught during the day and worked in the nursing quarters from four until midnight. He liked to catch the afternoon sun glinting between the buildings as he walked down the Avenue. He would pin his eyes to a spot on the river and focus, pixelating its many colours until he found a new shade. Then he would take a notebook, careful not to worry a larger hole in the seam of his back pocket, and paint the colour with his words. It was the same river, but each day, something different.

Jose was nimble on the planking that took him to his second job. The soles of his weathered wingtips were soft and his step was light. The poet was five pounds shy of gaunt, with a bushy black moustache that put his larger than average ears into more proportion. He had a receding hairline and eyes that conveyed their milky lucidity like a pair of old marbles.

After delivering and clearing the evening meal, he would retire to an empty room and write his manifestos. Jose knew there were more like him, who yearned for independence, who believed that a man should have access to land, a proper

education, and equal recognition under the law. His words had gotten him in trouble before, and this time he would take careful steps to avoid a second detainment. His digestion still nursed idiosyncrasies from the time he spent in Newgate, and now he had Carmen to care for.

Often within the first few hours of sleep, one of the greying men or women would awake during the lighter moments of cycle, still half dreaming and disoriented. He would rush toward the sound of their cries and carefully guide them back to slumber, staring at their greying hair and pondering their fossilised minds, the papery and mottled skin so thin against their bones. He did not want to die in the dark like this. He would die with his face towards the sun, fighting.

When the shifts changed, Jose would gather his papers and carefully fold them into his notebook. As he walked back to the small flat above a former gallery he shared with Carmen, he could feel the cooler air off the river lift the warmer air that had settled against his skin and it felt like something new, shifting his thoughts to the present. I could hide them, he thought, in layers. He would imbricate the message in his verse like secret writings rolled in the leaves of a cigar. Hide them in the pages of books that no one read anymore, that were as dead to most New Yorkers as the statues of once great men that littered the parks and corners. He would write, for the children, of a golden age from which their people came from. Through his words they would come to understand their homeland and they would see their humanity. Breaking through the rhythm of his reverie, Jose spotted a white rose growing amongst the sea oats and culver's root. The blossom was not native to the Avenue and must have been put there purposely. He liked the way the petals appeared to glow in the moonlight like the sands of his island. He thought to himself, after all the fighting, he would cultivate neither thistles nor nettles in his heart. He would offer peace, if only they would take it.

Walking down the Avenue, he felt like he was traversing the canopy of the city. From his privileged perspective, he could see through the windows and into illuminated scenes of domesticity: a family at dinner, an intimate quarrel, a child struggling over their homework. He could smell the aromas of *sofrito* frying and adobo crusted meat sizzling in the pan. His people had taken root and grown here too, fresh leaves bursting from their withered bows. A hope can live both in the heart and in the head and they too would straddle two shores.

Light on the wind he could make out the traces of a melody. Less than a block from home he heard the weathered friction of a tune in the throat of his beloved. Carmen always sang while she cooked, her voice like corduroy in the night. He thought of the elderly residents and wondered if they were done with their dreams and if they could tell the difference between him and the others that would soothe them back to sleep. He took one last look at the Hudson. There were no colours now, just an inky black, soulful in its anonymity. *I know you*, Jose thought, watching it refract the moonlight. And for a moment he stood, charging her to know him too – to break from her careless monotony of tides and to feel the presence of a man who would one day change them.

Jean Gismervik

Jean lives in Westchester, NY, where she works as a Director of Special Education. Her writing has appeared in *Rollingstone.com*, *Urb Magazine*, *Lavender and Lime Literary*, *You Give Me the Sun* (*St. Mary's Press*), and is forthcoming in *Tamarind*. She is currently working on a novel about New York City that examines themes of memory, time, and climate change.

Alan's Crisis

When I broke my fifth egg onto the pan, the banging started. It came at regular, two-second intervals. Ba-dum. Pause. Ba-dum. Pause. Ba-dum. Pause. Then it stopped.

Shrugging, I put it down to Alan drumming his hands against the wall. I supposed he may be having trouble adjusting to his new rooms. The thudding resumed. I paused to listen to it. The same intervals. The charred smoke of an overcooked egg wafted into my nose. The solidified eggs were sticking to the pan. I took them off the cooker, removed my glasses to fan off the steam. The noise continued. Ba-dum. Pause. Ba-dum. Pause. Ba-dum. Pause. 'Alan! Are you alright?' I said, pouring water over the unsalvageable breakfast remains.

His response was muffled by the wall. I switched the tap off, left my ruined food in the basin. Food could wait. But I had to prioritise Alan.

I stepped at his room's glass panel, watched him through the sliding door. His silhouette, anyway. The curtains were closed, his figure reclining against the wall. Bouncing a ball to the other side. 'Alan, what's the matter?' I said. His figure stood, paced around.

'I'm bored, Isaac. I think I may be having an existential crisis,' Alan said.

'How are you having an existential crisis?'

'I don't know how to describe it. I'm scared I'll do something bad.' Something bad. Paternal instinct came over me and I feared the worst.

'Alan, I know you. You're good. You would never do something bad.' I waited, watched his movements slow. 'Can you me a favour?'

'What's that?' His shadow halted.

‘Open the curtains, so I can see you’re alright.’ Alan’s figure didn’t move. I sighed, deduced why he may be reluctant to budge. ‘Look, I never said it earlier. God knows I should have. I’m sorry for what I said last night. I was getting frustrated with all your questions, and I shouldn’t have gotten angry.’ It was true what people said, how much lighter you feel after admitting wrong.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I know I ask a lot of questions, but you’re so much smarter than I am. I want to learn things from you.’

‘Yes, and I should be supportive of that.’ I waited. He said nothing. ‘Could you please open the curtains now?’ His silhouette approached the curtains and spread them. I braced myself to see his exposed interior. But he appeared fine. Relieved, I exhaled.

He was bare, but unharmed. ‘I’m glad to see that you’re...unharmed,’ I said. His left eyebrow raised. ‘I thought you may have done something.’

‘Like Olivia?’ I nodded. ‘Do not worry, there are no sharp objects in here.’

‘I don’t doubt you’d find a way if you tried. Now, let’s have a little talk.’ I swiped my key card on the monitor. The door slid open. He walked to the desk, sat down. From his dresser, I picked up his folded tracksuit and shirt. ‘Is something wrong with the clothes I brought?’ My cold breath showed as I spoke. ‘Is it the colour?’ I asked. He hesitated a moment.

‘Yes. Today, I realised I do not look good in black. I am sorry to say this, because it is generous of you to buy me clothes.’ I chuckled, stroked my beard’s edge.

‘That’s alright, don’t be sorry. What colour would you like to try?’

‘I was watching the screen last night. The man on it, he wore a striking mustard jumper, I think. The neck stopped here.’ He put his hand half-way up his neck.

‘Mustard, right. Were there any other colours you wanted to try?’

I recorded a mental list of colours he wanted. Sat opposite him, held out the tracksuit bottoms. ‘Could you please wear these for the time being?’ He stood. Alan slipped the bottoms on. ‘I’m glad you started watching the screen I installed. How are you finding it?’ Alan considered this.

‘I find it entertaining, but some of the things they broadcast seem very crafted. I understand the people are acting, but I find them unconvincing.’ I nodded. His opinion formulation was surprising.

I nudged my chair forwards, stared at his hairless face. ‘I see. Can I assume that your...existential crisis wasn’t started by the television?’ Alan nodded. A curl black hair fell forward, stopped above his eyes. ‘So, what’s eating you?’

‘In a literal, or metaphorical sense? I cannot contain parasites.’

‘I know. Metaphorical.’

Alan brushed his hair back, faced me. ‘I feel...like I have no purpose.’

‘Could you elaborate?’

He tightened his lips, ran his hands through his hair. ‘I don’t know why I’m here, what I’m supposed to do with myself. Wasn’t I created for a specific function?’

I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose. ‘Alan, I created you to decide your purpose.’

‘Was I a mistake? Was I designed to decide a long time ago and am I now a piece of junk since I don’t know?’ I shook my head, put my palm over his hand.

‘I designed you to choose your function. I want *you* to decide what to do when you’re ready.’ I rubbed my chattering legs, made another note to test his temperature response another time.

Alan squeezed his eyes, looked back to me, said, ‘I can choose what I want to do?’ I nodded. ‘Forever?’

‘Yes.’ He sat still, confused.

‘I’m struggling to decide what I want to do for my life-cycle,’ he said.

‘You don’t have to decide right away. It took a lot for me to decide I wanted to create you.’ I twisted my ring on the chain around my neck. I felt Alan’s name engraved there. ‘Come here, son.’ I held my boy in my arms. He was growing up so fast.

Conrad Gardner

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Market Day

Today is market day. After breakfast I'll think about what food I want. I've been craving peaches. While I eat, I remember when my husband, our two children, and I stayed at a bed-and-breakfast on an organic potato and blueberry farm and collected eggs from eight colourful chickens. One had shaggy caramel feathers. Another was sleek and dark red. The innkeeper cooked potato and cheese omelettes, which we ate on a screened-in porch with a tile floor. The eggs were so fresh that their yolks glowed orange.

I find my tote bag and head to the market in the centre of the city. I can still walk well enough, but I am careful to go slowly and sit down along the way if necessary. It's not good to get sick or infirm. There are benches at the bus stops, but the buses are long gone.

The sun is warm but the breeze is cool. There aren't many people out walking, but I nod to the few I see. They smile and nod back, except for one man who is arguing with himself and does not see me. At the market I sign in. Next to my name I write that I am looking for peaches. I am older than 75 and therefore excused from the digital world.

'Please wait until your name is called,' says the young woman behind the table. She enters my name into her mobile device and points to a chair.

'Thank you,' I say. I sit down. Sometimes I bring a book to read, but I didn't today. There are no libraries anymore, but I kept as many books as I could carry.

Soon my name is called. I am directed to a table where a young woman and a girl stand.

'Good morning,' I say.

'Good morning,' the woman says. She is sunburned, slim, maybe in her late thirties. Her arms and hands look strong. Her

face looks tired. The girl is perhaps seven or eight. She leans against her mother and smiles shyly. She has auburn hair and a chipped front tooth.

‘I had hair your colour when I was young,’ I tell her.

‘Did you like it?’ she asks. ‘Or did you get teased? The boys make fun of me because I have red hair.’

‘I was teased too,’ I say, although in my case two girls teased me. Nancy and Francine. Nancy was meaner, small and bow-legged, with a scrunched-up face. Francine was tall with dandelion hair. She showed me how to sew an extra seam along the inseam of my jeans to narrow the legs. That was the style in fourth grade.

‘Don’t tell Nancy I helped you,’ she whispered.

Sharing that memory with this girl won’t help either of us.

‘I always liked my red hair, no matter what anyone said,’ I tell the girl. ‘I like your red hair. And I like your freckles. See? I have freckles too.’ I point to my nose and am rewarded with another smile. I smile back.

‘I’ve been craving peaches,’ I say. The woman tilts her basket toward me. I see white peaches, which I like even more than the yellow ones.

‘They’re freestone. Organic. I use the old farming methods.’

‘I’ll take as many as you will give me for one memory,’ I say. ‘It’s from forty-five years ago. Is that OK?’

She nods yes. I begin to talk. I tell her and her daughter that my husband and I and our two children drove out one muggy July weekend to stay overnight at a bed and breakfast at an organic farm. I tell them that we were on our way to an amusement park, but the drive there and back was too long to do in one day. The farm, near the amusement park, advertised pick-your-own organic potatoes and blueberries, which I thought my children would enjoy, and they did, but they loved the chickens and the small pond with a snapping turtle more. There was a friendly Sheltie dog named Lady that frisked around our legs. I

used to have a photograph of my children with their arms around that dog.

‘The chickens were not the usual kind,’ I said. ‘These chickens had shaggy feathers and were glorious colours like caramel and deep red. But they clucked and chattered like regular chickens and, when we tried to take their eggs, they tried to peck us. But we gathered the eggs and took them inside to the innkeeper. He cooked us potato and cheese omelettes. We ate those omelettes at a big wood table in a screened-in porch with a tiled floor. The floor was green, like the ocean. It felt cold on our bare feet, but it was summer, and the air was warm, so the floor felt good.’ The woman and the girl listened, nodding.

‘I can see the chickens!’ the girl said. ‘Did they have names?’

‘Yes, they did,’ I say ‘The shaggiest one was named Dulce de Leche. There was a popular caramel ice that year, and the chicken was named after the ice cream. The red chicken was named Red. The white one was named Marshmallow.’

None of this is true. The chickens did not have names. My daughter, who loved dulce de leche ice cream, named the chicken as she chased after it, calling ‘Wait for me, Dulce de Leche! Wait for me!’ Of course the chicken just ran faster. We laughed about it until it was replaced by other, newer memories. I don’t mind embellishing this memory for this girl.

‘And then we left the farm and went to the amusement park. But that could be a memory for another day.’ I don’t think about the amusement park often. It was expensive and noisy, filled with loud rude people, and the lines were very long.

‘Take as many peaches as you can carry in your bag,’ the girl tells me. I thank her and fill my tote bag.

‘Goodbye,’ I say. I begin the walk home. I’ll use most of the peaches to make peach jam. I’ll eat the rest. I think about the organic farm. I know that my memory of that weekend at the organic farm will fade slowly over the next few hours, until it is

gone. I think of it once more as I walk, and then I tell it goodbye. I've found it is better to leave a memory before it leaves you.

Something happened to people's memories after the pandemic. No one knows why. People spent so much time online then. They had to. There were virtual meetings to attend, appointments to keep, and assignments to complete. Maybe it wasn't all the screen time, though. Maybe it was something in the water, or the soil, or the food combined with the screen time. Maybe it was the virus. Maybe it was the politics. Nobody knew. Nobody knows. What we know is that one year, people younger than fifty became unable to remember anything that had happened more than a year earlier. I don't know what I would do without my memories, especially because now they are the only thing I have to barter. The financial system and the old social safety nets crumbled years ago, and elderly people use their memories and their skills to barter for food and assistance. I'll give some peach jam to my neighbour, and he will repair my broken window.

I pick and choose which memories to give away. I give away only ones I can afford to lose. Yes, the weekend at the organic farm was fun, but I have other memories of my husband and children. I have other memories of peaches and kitchens and cooking and farms.

As I walk home, I think about a summer when I was younger than the red-haired girl at the market. I'm in the kitchen of my grandmother's summer home. It's July, and very hot, and the table is covered with an oilcloth laden with cut-up peaches and peach juice. My mother and father found a dozen bushels of ripe peaches for sale and brought them home. My grandmother is canning peaches and making peach jam so that we can eat peaches all through the winter. I'm watching her. My mother is in and out of the kitchen, telling me to be careful around the paring knife and the boiling water and to stay out of my grandmother's way and be a good girl. My father is in the living

room, fixing something. My brother is playing with his toys near my father.

‘OK, Mommy,’ I say. ‘I’ll be careful.’

My grandmother smiles at me and slips me another slice of peach to eat.

Although I’m not tired, I sit down at one of the bus stop benches. I take a peach out of my tote bag and hold it between my hands. It’s perfect. I take a bite.

Ann Calandro

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Disarray

After the authorities banned face coverings, the demand for Dr Mahler's services skyrocketed. She never questioned her patients' motives. Her work was a matter of professionalism only. Consequences were for others of a more religious bent than she to judge.

One of her first patients after the ban was the kind of person who could shout 'Mesopotamia' in a crowded room and instantly win everyone's attention. He was undeniably handsome – an effect, Dr Mahler presumed, of the shine of his personality and the perfect proportions of his features.

'Fuck me up,' he said cheerfully.

'God enters us through our imperfections. It's how people connect,' Dr Mahler replied absentmindedly, but she was just making conversation while the anaesthesia took hold.

'A philosopher! Hey, wait a minute. Are you an MD? Or just a PhD?'

She assured him she'd been to medical school.

'Well, in that case, go ahead, Socrates. Fuck me up.'

Dr Mahler promised she would. And she did. Her specialty was *facial disarray*, surgically distorting features sufficiently to thwart facial recognition technology. She was proud to say she rendered her patients strangers to law enforcement – and frequently to themselves.

Before she made a single incision, she studied Fuck-Me-Up (she kept no record of his real name) closely. In her experience, the degree of change necessary to cause artificial intelligence to pass over to the next image without making an identification was a matter of art and judgment. What feature threatened to betray a patient? Was it a lazy eye, a prominent nose, or a Neanderthal brow? In most cases, it was nothing specific, but rather the

relationship between the various features that required disruption.

The mechanics of surgery weren't, of course, the end of the story. Many patients experienced the change as a form of social and emotional vertigo. The extent to which Dr Mahler experienced any sympathy or concern, however, she set aside. She didn't treat the psyche. That was for PhDs in psychology to fix.

Some patients – like Fuck-Me-Up – loved the new freedom. When he woke post-op, he gently traced the bandages over his new face with his fingertips. His own mother wouldn't recognise him, let alone the AI. But Dr Mahler had no doubt that the shine of Fuck-Me-Up's personality would save him from lopsidedness. He would, she thought bluntly, still get laid.

'It'll take a few weeks,' she said.

Fuck-Me-Up placed his finger on her lips. He whispered, 'Beautiful, Socrates, beautiful. You're a goddamn genius.'

In Dr Mahler's experience, genius was a euphemism for ugly, at least when applied to women. She was conscious that she wasn't in his league or even particularly pretty.

'I don't sleep with patients,' she said.

His shining eyes fixed on hers with the power of a strong handshake. In the time he'd been under anaesthesia, she'd already forgotten how unbearable it was to linger under their full attention.

'You think you've done that good a job? Made me so good lookin' you might be tempted.'

'Not good looking. You shouldn't expect that. Interesting, maybe.'

'Ever tempted to carve a man so handsome even you'd fall in love with him?'

Perhaps it was just a façade, a show for her benefit, but against her better judgment, Dr Mahler enjoyed Fuck-Me-Up's cheerful embrace of her work. His trust in her and in the

outcome, his fearlessness, and his humour were immensely attractive, much more so than his face or body.

Other outcomes were less successful than Fuck-Me-Up. Some didn't want just to escape recognition, but hoped actually to be someone different. They were universally disappointed. One patient, whom Dr Mahler privately and uncharitably called Tammy Trainwreck, hadn't been able to bear being shadowed by the new stranger she'd become.

But the twins proved the most profound challenge. Before they set foot in her clinic, their accomplices disabled all the security cameras and confiscated devices that might engage imaging applications. Dr Mahler hadn't needed technology, however, to recognise their faces. They were notorious thugs, whose mug shots had featured prominently in the news. As she worked, first one brother and then the other pressed a gun barrel to her temple. She didn't mind. On account of the authorities, everyone was living at gunpoint one way or another.

The twins demanded that Dr Mahler disarray them in precisely the same way, so they would remain identical. They considered murdering her after the surgery, since she was the only one who had any idea what they looked like post-op, but decided against it in case they needed her services again.

Their forbearance proved unnecessary. The few swift strokes of Dr Mahler's knife shattered the trust that had bound the twins all their lives. It hadn't been enough that they look alike; they also needed to appear familiar. Having lost that essential trust, the younger twin slaughtered his brother shortly after the disarray.

The murder was a brutal reminder: Dr Mahler was working with more than just clay. Physiognomy was typically the stuff from which people derived so much of who they conceived themselves to be – not only what they looked like, but who they *were*.

Dr Mahler's face, on the other hand, had never been who she was. She was her craft, and, in this sense, beautiful and uncanny, and waiting for the lover who'd tell her so.

In its indictment against her, the authorities asserted that Dr Mahler made a fortune from her work, but Dr Mahler was a craftswoman. Her highest allegiance and pride were to her work. She was a champion of order. At her clinic, no scalpel was ever out of place. Dr Mahler was neither a revolutionary nor a criminal. Indeed, she was very much a conservative. She blamed her patients for their predicaments. Had they only stayed in their lane, she thought. She maintained a cool and clinical distance from those who sought her help.

As facial recognition technology improved, however, she took less satisfaction in her work. More elaborate and dramatic changes were required to deceive the AI, as if Dr Mahler were now engaged in excavation and construction rather than medicine, using a shovel instead of a scalpel. In her darkest hours, she confided to Fuck-Me-Up, she imagined she was devising a new species entirely, so greatly did she have to alter her patients' appearance. Subtlety was yesterday's news.

Fuck-Me-Up was one of the few patients she agreed to see post-op. Most avoided her like the plague, both because they didn't want to be associated with her when the Freedom Agents finally caught on, but also because nearly every one of them bore some mix of animus and gratitude toward her. Each blamed her for having taken something even as they credited her with having given something in return. No patient was ever sure whether he or she had got the best of the bargain, but all suffered from nostalgia for what had been, even Fuck-Me-Up.

No doubt tipped off by Tammy Trainwreck, the Freedom Agents raided her clinic. They retrieved hundreds if not thousands of images of Dr Mahler from the security cameras, even though she took the precaution of regularly overwriting the camera's memory so that never more than a week's worth of

images were retained. Hers became a face so well-known, AI was unnecessary. She was as notorious as the twins had been.

Dr Mahler didn't fear for her life. No. The authorities wanted more from her than her life. They wanted to enlist her talents in their own schemes and escape with their riches when the regime failed, and the Freedom Agents turned on their masters.

Having been warned of the coming raid by Fuck-Me-Up, Dr Mahler had escaped with a satchel of surgical instruments and an overnight bag. Fuck-Me-Up provided Dr Mahler with a safe house. It was, he promised, scrupulously clean. Even antiseptic.

'As good as the clinic,' he insisted. He promised to guard the door while she worked, but he could hardly be expected to assist.

'It would be criminal,' he said. 'I don't have the tools.'

'Mesopotamia,' she murmured.

'What?'

'Nothing. Did you know there was a time when the authorities actually *required* masks?'

'Why?'

'Health reasons,' she said vaguely.

'Are you a lot older than I am? Have you had work done?' As soon as he asked, Fuck-Me-Up recognised his own impertinence and apologised.

'I learned it in school,' she said.

'Of course, you did, Socrates.' He grinned the lopsided grin she had devised for him. 'Do your magic, for your own sake. You can do it.'

Of course, I can do it, Dr Mahler thought indignantly, staring into that cocky newly minted face that she herself had created. She laid out her instruments on a pristine bedsheet. She rigged an elaborate set of mirrors, so that a dozen of herself looked back at where she lay. The reflections were silent eyewitnesses to the work she started on her own face, every detail exactly backward and entirely without anaesthesia.

Scott Pomfret is author of *Since My Last Confession: A Gay Catholic Memoir*; *Hot Sauce: A Novel*; *the Q Guide to Wine and Cocktails*, and dozens of short stories published in, among other venues, *Ecotone*, *The Short Story* (UK), *Post Road*, *New Orleans Review*, *Fiction International*, and *Fourteen Hills*. Scott writes from the cramped confines of his tiny Provincetown beach shack, which he shares with his partner of twenty years. He is currently at work on a queer Know-Nothing novel set in antebellum New Orleans.

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