

# Neon

A Journal of Brilliant Things  
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# Birth of Rat

E.V. Noeche1

*For a long time people went about their business* the same way they always had, getting hurt and putting on another band aid. First aid kits stashed in cars and houses, in cubicles and under restaurant counters. Another faux flesh plastic strip over another to protect insides from the outside.

Because the outside had deteriorated. Years of angles, explosions, sharp corners and bandage retreads littering the air and water and dirt and skin. Patches of gauze and sterility left gashes, trails of raised keloid white and vulnerable underbellies. Hairline fractures and rusty nail tears. Inhaled anxiety drifted from mouth to mouth like lovers' saliva, once a transparent gift.

The bandages grew with precaution, like setting an unbroken leg against the promise of metal bats. Thick synthetics with the gentility of burlap, foggy face guards, the snap of medical gloves like gunshots in a puff of white powder.

Some days it was hard to remember what your own skin felt like, it so seldom touched itself. Insular, a smell like metal, like the acrid burn of motors. No warm animal musk in the plastic whiskers and wires grounding into filter packs protecting one organism from another. Germs, fungus, fear, and parasites. We are warm sticky petri dishes. Better than agar.

Their bandagesuits looked the same. Ventilators made the same sound, an insistent hum like halos. Plastic masks reflect the same bleached tile room. The traffic in the halls were hundreds of the same suits, discernable only by gait, slight differences in the tinny voices that escaped, or if you got close enough, the dark circles of empty orbits visible in shadow through tinted plastic.

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And things started feeling missing. The lost brush of fingertips as documents pass from hand to hand. The catch of eyes unshielded. The sound of unfiltered voices, the color of flesh where sternum meets clavicle or the soft sound of hair being smoothed behind an ear when noses get tickled. The sound of the breath of another human when conversation dies. Variable. Ventilators don't sigh. Gasp.

And the suits got heavy. Like the crush of humidity and the prickle of potential electricity before a summer storm. Like clumsy brick walls instead of sleek viral spores. Claustrophobic rooms with tiny gas-chamber windows, solitary without parole. Guilty.

There was fear, a billion scintillating bacteria. Prions, viruses, spores and fungi. All manner of contaminants, dark choking clouds and sticky unknown. Wedge shapes and scythe arms painted in yellow and red. There was rot. There were bodies.

And there were gloves removed. The dry touch of unfamiliar skin. Atmospheric incompatibility, and perfect, irrevocable fusion.

There was blood between clenched fingers and the smell of another person. The slick toxic fluids and the drizzle of red escaping to the floor, and movement, a St. Therese growth on Clorox toxicity. A rounded ball of fur and then breath, a slick pink tail like naked skin, the exposed blue of asphyxiated blood in fragile ears, and then the sound of skittering claws, disappearance, a blood smear on sterile glass. The sound of a heart surviving

Under stainless steel, they will endure. A million pink ears listening, living beside us on things unbandaged: instinct-closed eyes, a twitch of uneven breath, the clench of teeth, and the inevitable contamination of touch.

# Two Poems

Kyle Hemmings

## Inspiration

Night is black cat. Rain splatters splash.  
Thoughts purr.  
Dart from the rain. Window Models Mock Smirk.  
Sidewalks bleed.  
Neon lights flash. Solicit my Solace. This bar.  
Chance it.  
Inside, a Drowsy Diva next to me. Say, baby.  
Say, say baby.  
Switch and turn off. This dive a thinkdown  
for your thoughts.  
Barmaid. Sir? "Shotta Schnawpps." Dizzy Diva snorts/snickers  
Pontificates.  
"Honey, honey, my man called me a bitch.  
Think I care?"  
Customers crunching in. Rain slow stoppering. Tomorrow. the  
sun, a sovereign,  
*Bitch?*  
She fabricates fulsome faux smile. Miss decked-out Diva  
yawns...  
passes out.

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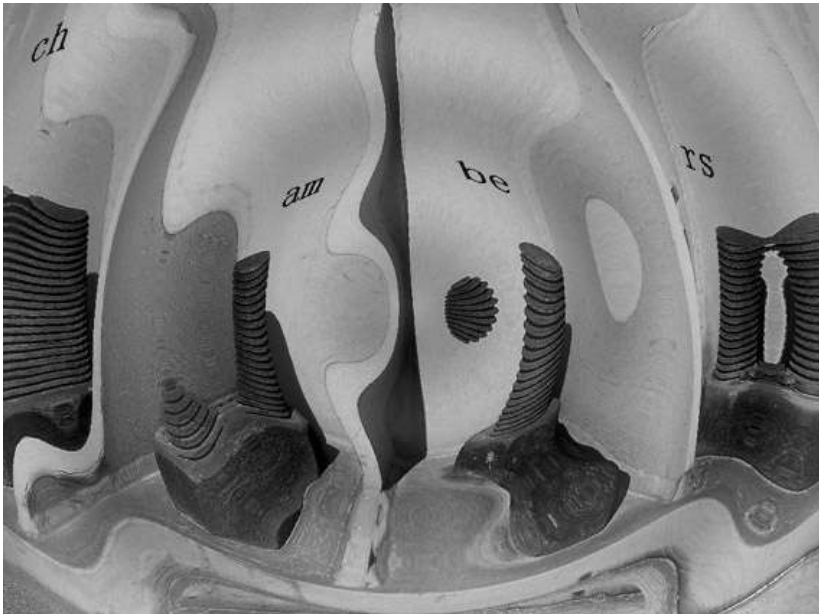
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### Giving Up Isaac

God once said to me,  
Give me your Isaac  
or whatever most precious:  
your mother's amethyst,  
a pot of plastic peonies  
from your first winter lover,  
or your one functioning kidney  
with overworked nephrons,  
I defied Him.  
And for that  
I live in a no-frill no-hot water flat  
on East Houston and Third  
among drug peddlers  
and dirty pigeons,  
who squander sidewalk space.  
Share quarters with a drag queen  
who does too many pills and  
shakes down too many boyfriends,  
with a switchblade and a toot-toot.

And at night, I sit at Shangri-la Lounge  
next to an old woman  
with one eye half-shut  
an affliction from her youth  
or too many beers? I ask her:  
Did God ever ask you for your Isaac?  
She lifts her highboy and gulps the dregs,  
then, limping out the bar,  
she drags that stiff leg  
like pulling a bad child  
mesmerized by an arsonist's fire.





*Old Heart*  
**Joe Balaz**

# Replay

Carmelo Rafala

*Scene: scroll image 333-453321-33a. Camera quickly pans to a wide shot of a far wall. Image shifts back and forth, tilts fifteen degrees, shoots up toward the high ceiling. Halo fuzz around the distant white light, then down to look at a pair of hands, palms open.*

**Enhance.**



He sits on the hard floor of this prison cell because he's been denied a chair, a table, a bed, anything of any comfort at all. A dim light burns in the centre of the room, suspended from a high ceiling. Morning has long since broken, and they've denied him a meal for the third time. He picks at pieces of leftover food, trying to make it last.

He knows he should be frightened as he sits in their prison, terrified, for in a few hours they are going to execute him – again. But oddly enough he feels a strange calm, like cool waters upon a placid lake. He sits, expectantly, as shuffling sounds crawl behind that steel door. . .

*Scene: scroll image 333-443320-12a. **Replay.** Camera pans back and focuses on a riverside, water at low tide. Audio picks up*



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*voices. Camera moves in to get a shot. A woman moves into the frame. Enhance.*

Karyn's yellow, sun-bleached hair wraps around her neck in the wind like a scarf. A baggy uniform does little to mask the curves and softness he knows are under there, had felt the night before, wants to feel again.

"Parliament has broken up," she says, forcing a small smile.

He nods gravely and looks at the deep well of sky, at the stars coming out now against the fading blue. They point at him, as if accusing him of some dark tragedy. He winces.

"I see," he says flatly, not so much to her as to the sky.

Off in the distance, by the now sleepy shore, the remnants of London stretch, charred, broken, in ruin, yet still used. He can just make out the thin smoke columns of fires, burning steady against the rising evening wind.

He sucks it in, the wind, lets it caress his face this one last time before he must give it all up to the Dhijad, the wind, water, the asphalt jungle he calls home. He curses his artificial eyes for the clarity of memories.

"I suppose the order comes effective immediately," he says, going through the motions, knowing the answer.

"Yes," Karyn replies. "Navy transports are gearing up for the evacuation." She walks over and places her hands on his shoulders. "There is no other choice, Jon. Can't rebuild properly in a city full of refugees. The authorities need space."

A bird cries overhead. He considers it for a moment.

"There are always choices..."

Karyn continues, unhearing, his words falling off her like leaves. She brushes a hand over his face and meets his eyes with a look of quiet longing. "Thanks to the new Skylight defences, those Dhijad clans are having a hard time of it," she says. "Anyway, I'll be leading the first group away from London at midday tomorrow." She pushes her softness into

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him. "But now your favourite dinner is waiting, and more," she whispers. "Let's make it last."

*Scene: scroll image 333-443320-12b. Shadows and silhouettes of ruins scatter the view of the shore. Moonlight casts doubtful shadows, blankets rustle. Enhance.*

The memory of London is haunted for him, and there is something, something he can't explain that laments the city's broken back, voices echoing into the night where only the spirits of the dead now wander. He can feel it in his heart and in his bones, a swirling band of sadness and peace, as elusive as the evening mist, yet as perceptible as a fever.

Fires twinkle in the city, while the stars shine hard and silent like sentinels in the sky. From inside a burnt out block of flats he can hear the water licking at the shore, the thrum of a vehicle down a dark and narrow street. The air seems pensive. How long now? How long would it be before they come? This time he tries not to remember...

Karyn shovels a fork full of food into her mouth from a plate near their makeshift bed. The candles are still burning and wiggling in the moving air, casting an eerie glow and producing quick shapes his eyes can hardly record properly.

He can hear them, his eyes, the tiny machinery whining and clicking in his sockets.

Karyn lies flat on her stomach, her legs entwined in his, the plate on the floor. "The last time I will see these stars with you," she says, eyes fixed up, her back to him. "And then we'll meet down in Kent. . ."

He smiles inwardly. "Why don't we take the boat out tonight onto the Thames? You and me under these stars?" He'd always secretly wanted to, that night, to let it all slip away, fall behind him as if he'd never been a part of it. The Great Burning.

She carries on as if he hadn't said a word. She sits up, and he sees the smooth skin of her back, reaches out and touches it.

"Karyn. . ." he breaks off.

She turns to him, soft eyes betraying concern. "Why do you do this to yourself?"

"I don't know," he says, wanting to pull the eyes out of his head; the eyes *they* had given him. But his brain remembers as well as his eyes. "I guess I expect to rewrite it all. Or to push delete and wipe it all away."

"Everything must play itself out," she says. "Just as it should."

"Should it?"

She smiles somewhat wickedly. "Just for you, Jon."

Her face resumes the composure it had before the shift in conversation, the way it had been that night. She gets up, the blankets rustle down, exposing her flesh to the moonlight, cold and pale and ghostly. She walks to the window. She glances back over her shoulder, eyes hard, accusing.

"Karyn, I wanted to tell you. . . I wanted to say. . ."

He closes his eyes and keeps them shut. But he can never keep them shut for long.

*Scene interrupt.*

*Scroll image 333-443320-*

*12c. **Replay.***

He hears the boats rocking in the docks, the soft groaning of the hulls in his ears. He opens his eyes. The water glows silver in the pale light of the moon in a remarkably crystal sky.



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He sees her form on the quay, silhouetted and haloed in a ghostly moonlit aura.

And he can feel them out there, hidden behind the velvet of dark, ready to come bursting forth from the quantum bubble and set fire to the night. He shivers.

He had been there, in Birmingham, when they had come, set fire to it, let it burn. And he had seen Manchester reduced to ash and steam from a distance as those clan ships hurtled away from the bloody massacre.

He squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head. (*Scene interrupt. . .*) He opens them, wet, glossy, tired. So very tired. (*Scene continue. . .*)

He suddenly grows cold, shivering. "Karyn," he says. "I want to hear you say it."

"I've got us a place on a navy frigate. They say the Canaries are nice this time of year. War didn't reach them, they say." She winks. "Playas las Americas."

"Karyn." His heart pounds. The moment is fading.

"It would be nice," she says, her smile distant in the moonlight. "To finally stay somewhere together for longer than a few weeks. You. Me."

"I need you to say it."

"I've got a little secret," she said, smiling. "Want to hear it?"

"Oh God, please say it!"

"Before the internet when down, I spied out a little place by the shore for us," she says. There is a crashing in his brain. "Just for us. You like the sea, the boats." She reaches out for him to join her for a walk on the quayside, like she had done that night before they had come, unannounced.

But he was supposed to help stop it all. Wasn't he? That's what they used him for, right? And these islands were to be spared by capitulation. Spared. Left untouched.

The knowledge of his actions came to him the day the Dhijad knocked out those new defences, defences known to them through *his* eyes...

“Say you forgive me,” he whispers to the air.

“A little place for us,” she continues.

“Yeah,” he relents, chest caved in. “Sounds real nice.”

“My gift to you, Jon.”

He quivers slightly and remains where he is, takes a long, deep breath and awaits the inevitable, the lightning crashing to earth. Again.

“Goodbye, Karyn,” he says.

She doesn’t hear. She watches the stars.

But he swears, swears that this time as she looks back, hand still outstretched, before the night becomes day and the water in the Thames boils and the little shanty towns built upon the ruins blows away in the fire wind, that she is smiling at him. Smiling.

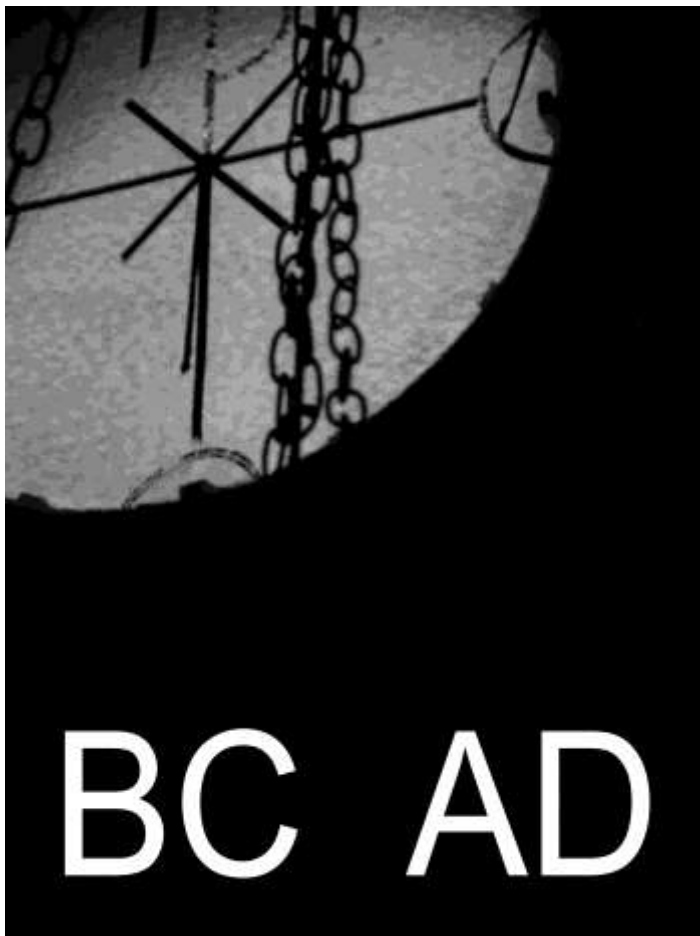
And he waits for the scene to fade, for the vision to smudge and swirl into base colours and finally turn black.

Through the replay he can hear shuffling sounds behind that steel door. . .

And he waits, longingly, in the dim light for that promised peace that seems to never come, that final resting peace where at long last he can relinquish countless hours of replay.

Peace.

The peace of the dead.



*Time Chains*  
**Joe Balaz**

## Two Poems

Josh Jennings

### To Find An Alarm Worth Waking For

His alarm clock used to sit in a box  
on a shelf  
in a department store  
that displayed mannequins  
that looked like high-end hookers.  
That was before he wore the wig.  
And the stilettos.  
And it was long before the lynch mob  
arrived at the department store  
with its scythes  
to beat down the doors,  
rape the mannequins  
and make off with everything.  
Now the alarm is plugged into his bedroom wall,  
and it screams like a trauma patient every morning,  
while empires gleam,  
soldiers surge  
and his teeth rot.

The tumour is terminal.  
His alarm goes at 6am,  
he stretches  
his fat hairy white legs  
out under the bed covers  
and his wife turns off in the other direction,  
waiting for the ordeal to end.

Those mornings are cold.

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A quick one into the wife  
is off the agenda.

The bus is fifteen minutes away,  
there's dirty laundry in the machine  
and the crack in the bedroom blinds  
hints at a barren sky.

He almost smashes the alarm to pieces,  
but doesn't,  
not quite.

Today his paunch is tightly knotted,  
his eyes are wide open,  
the hair on the back of his neck  
is standing  
and he can smell the spiders  
weaving their webs  
in the corner of the room.

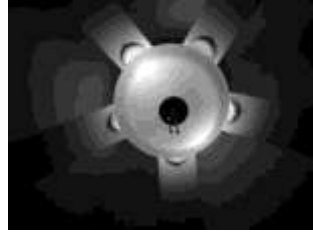
A neighbour suddenly hears him through the wall,  
pushing out piss  
into the toilet bowl,  
aiming it at the water  
rather than the porcelain  
and standing on his toes  
to navigate a tricky erection.

The alarm  
fills his ears  
like a cop siren  
does a bandit's.

It marks the years, days and seconds.  
It's a crude brush stroke.  
Worse than a flash light  
on the bags under his eyes.  
And amidst this confusion,  
distress

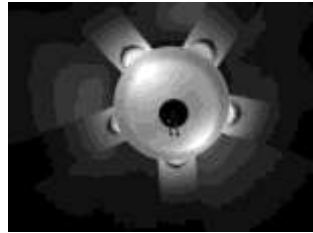


and perpetual state of alarm,  
he'll peep through a woman's blinds,  
vote for the wrong guy  
and crush a bug into paste.  
And how could he abandon the tight rope  
when the alligators are snapping their jaws  
in the pool beneath it?  
"You think it's any easier down here,"  
they say. "Just try it mother fucker!"  
No, the alarm clock stays plugged in.  
The mob beats down another door.  
And his wife  
doesn't dare open her eyes.



### **Empty Bottle Blues**

They ripped the beer bottles open,  
howled at the moon,  
doused the graveyards in petrol,  
tore the coffin lids off their hinges  
and struck the matches,  
and the next day,  
when the bed covers came off  
and the dust filled their nostrils  
and the blowflies circled their rooms,  
it was like the aftermath of a car crash,  
steam still spitting out of the bonnet,  
onlookers slowly rolling by,  
everybody still alive,  
but damaged,  
dazed  
and bemused.



Weeks have vanished,

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but their bottles are still there,  
littering the kitchen bench,  
cluttering the window sill,  
broken in the bath,  
silent,  
yet louder  
than crucifixes  
on walls  
in the homes of Christians.

A politician is being detained  
for handcuffing a rent boy to a wall,  
an 83-year-old woman  
is about to discover another head in her wheelie bin  
and a casual bout of genocide  
is quietly passing  
in a forgotten city.

Those bottles get uglier with each new spot of dust.  
It all gets uglier.  
Looking through a small window,  
into a murky mirror,  
at an ageing sky.  
So tonight their head's are bowed.  
And you can see it in the bottles' reflections.  
And those bottles belong in the trash.

# An Inopportune Moment to Lose the Power of Thought

Sam Jayne

As your tongue enters my mouth I mentally consider  
the issues of the day.

The government is a joke. No surprise there. Good  
politics went astray,

Somewhere down the line, a long time ago. I can never  
help but snub

The actions of those in power, though I doubt I could  
do a better job.

I would be a terrible leader, fussy and  
uncompromising. I would be

A dominatrix, contradicting in my speeches, a tactless  
power freak.

But still I dislike the rulers of this country and the  
company they choose

To appoint. The company I keep has also become  
rather sordid of late. Too

Sexually orientated, some may think, for a married  
woman such as me.

Take last night in bed with Marcus. His soft, moist lips  
caressing my body,

Diving down, then back up for air. Moaning and  
groaning and thrashing like

Demented psychotics protesting about the cleanliness  
of their asylum. Make

A stand, Mr Maniac! Marcus did. But I digress. The  
kiss has lingered, or has it,

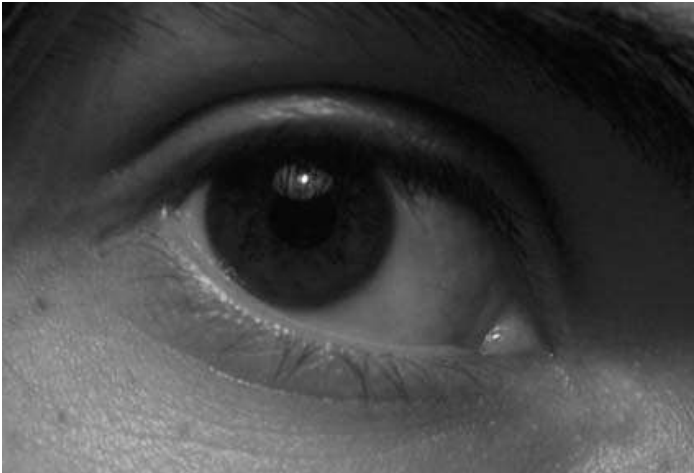
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In fact? Was there ever a kiss at all? I am unsure now.  
Your eyebrows are dipped

Into a frown of disbelief. Your face is numb, your gaze  
an oppressive stare.

How did it happen, I wonder aloud, as I realise you  
have heard every word.

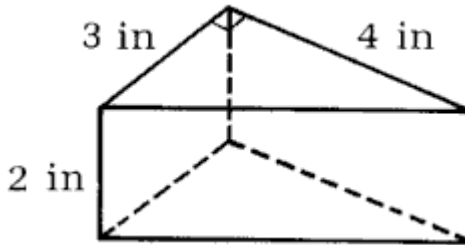


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# Becky & the Slab of Cheese

Paul Kavanagh

This is what Carter served Becky for lunch.



Becky was terribly upset. It wasn't the size of the meal or that the meal was presented on a paper plate. She had been expecting ham with mustard. Well, that's what Carter had made her believe. He had such a flowery imagination. It was these flights of fancy that made her say, "yes, I would love to come to your apartment for lunch."

Carter would see Becky everyday. At the same time at the same spot. Becky was beautiful. She was color in a dull city. The first thing she did when she left the building was smoke. Carter loved seeing Becky pull a cigarette out and place it into her mouth. This was Becky's weak point. She worked for a miserable boss that shouted at her and called her a, "dolt." And so when Carter smiled at her she reciprocated. It was nice to have a human being acknowledging her with affability. Becky never once thought that Carter set his watch by her. She thought he worked in the edifice also. He was

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always dressed in a suit. The suit was because Carter was always looking for a job.

Working in an office was depressing. Becky's cubicle was empty



She never bothered with photographs. There were never flowers on her desktop. Her work colleagues thought she was a strange girl. She never drank with them after work. She never gossiped. At the Christmas party she stood in a tenebrous corner and sipped her pop drink quietly.

How Carter broke the ice. After the smile. He picked up a discarded Starbucks cup and made it levitate between his joined hands, which were opened like angel's wings. It was amazing. The cup was floating in the middle of his hands. Becky was flabbergasted. How? How? How? How? What Becky didn't know was that Carter's two thumbs had punctured holes through the cup and were holding it aloft. It was a grand illusion. Carter was so proud of himself. His smile was cute, thought Becky. How do I know, she told me five years after the event.

"Would you like to come to my apartment for lunch?" asked Carter, discarding the Starbucks cup into a trash can. He made sure Becky didn't see the two holes. A magician never reveals his secrets. "Yes, I would love to come to your

apartment for lunch,” answered Becky still bewildered by the floating cup. “Tomorrow?” asked Carter. “Yes, tomorrow,” answered Becky.

The lunch was a disaster. Becky said she couldn’t eat cheese. She was allergic to dairy products. Carter asked if it was psychosomatic. Becky thought about slapping him, the little. . . “My mother once made me drink milk and it nearly killed me,” said Becky extremely exasperated. “Bloody Hell,” is all that Carter could get out. It did not go down well, Becky being a devout Born-Again-Christian.

After saying goodbye Carter visited a brothel. The brothel was in the industrial part of the city. Whereas the city center was grey the industrial part was red. This redness was because of the bricks. The sex was fine. The prostitute was in her mid-forties. Her breasts sagged. She said to Carter: “what are you doing here, you should be out dating girls your own age.” That’s the truth. She really said that to him. Amazing isn’t it?



*Fallen Leaves*

**Mary Ellen Derwis**



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# Human Being Bag Lady

Bunny Dees

*( A mini-book in twenty two chapters )*

## One. Dead Season.

The little seaside town where I grew up. I was on holiday, returning like I do every year. It was the dead season. The wind was biting and snapping at everything. Empty benches in the park, empty branches, deserted tennis courts. Eva, my wife Eva, was back at the cottage that we were renting for the week. She was ill and spending the day in bed. I walked along the Prom. The sea was crashing against the old granite walls. It was beginning to rain and the pubs were open. I had the whole afternoon, the whole week. I was happy.

## Two. The Dock.

I walked in through the door and up to the bar, there was only one other person in the pub. The Dock. A small pub by the harbour, wooden floors, wooden tables and chairs. A fire was crackling. The other person in the pub was a kind of bag lady. She was standing by the fire.

‘A pint of Blackthorn please,’ I said to the barmaid. The barmaid was very young.

‘Bunny?’

The voice called out my name. I froze.

‘Bunny!’

It was the lady, the bag lady.

## Three. The Bag Lady.

She came over to me and hugged me. She smelled of BO.

'Bunny!' she said again.

Her face was ruddy and withered, weathered, a diseased plum. Her hair hung limply from her head. She had a few brown and snagged teeth, her lips were sunken and hairy. She looked old and sad and tired. I had never seen her before in my life.

'Oh, hello,' I said. I smiled. I put on my mask

'It's been years!' she said.

'It has,' I said, my mind was racing. Clicking, whirring like a computer when it scans for a virus. A gallery of faces, a blur of names and faces. My mind was eliminating them one by one. I was desperate, nodding and smiling. Impossible, a bag lady, I have no idea, it is impossible. The first second of time counted off and boomed like a bell. Then the second. But a few fragments clicked into place. A few facts that I thought I had forgotten, it must be like a giant warehouse in there. A thousand little clerks rifling through files. Sweating and covered in dust. Then one of them waves a piece of paper in the air, he shouts out a name. It is a miracle.

### Four. 'Angie?'

'Angie!' I said. 'It really HAS been years.'

I looked at her and buried everything instantly, like a reflex. Cleared my face, set my smile, buried my thoughts. My thoughts went like this . . . Angie. Oh God. This life! What has happened to you?

But most of all I was thinking . . .What the hell do I do next.

'Can I buy you like a drink?' I said, as if nothing was happening.

'Yes please,' she said. She kept her hands by her sides, not taking her eyes off me.

We sat down, it was very difficult.

'Well well, Angie. How ARE you?'

It was a ridiculous question. And Angie didn't lie to me when she answered it.

'I have tried to kill myself on three different occasions.'

### **Five. Premature Ejaculation.**

Angie's fingers, her two smoking fingers, were tar-black, black on the nails and as yellow as a bruise right up to the place where fingers become hands. Her finger was bleeding a little when she returned from the toilet I noticed.

'I did something bad,' she whispered, leaning forward. 'I had sex with a boy who was too young. He was fourteen. Now I'm on a list, I can never work with children again.' She began to cry.

She cried once or twice, off and on, dry tears. Off and on, a dozen times. Not satisfying, it looked painful. She wore a large aviators jacket, fur lined. Information! A fleece and a long tatty green skirt. She was wearing sandals and her toes looked dirty, almost black. Information, information. She sat motionless, a covering of ash, coughing violently in fits. I felt her spittle on my face and . . .

### **Calm Down, Start from the Beginning. Part Six.**

No, that's not it. The order of it is wrong. I am thrashing around.

'What have you been doing then, it's been years since I saw you.' I asked her that question, to break the ice. The ice looked very thick.

'I don't know,' she said. She looked angry.

'The last time I saw you, you were pushing a pram with a baby in it. A huge baby.'

*Let's start there, put it into some sort of order.*

'That was Harry,' she said. Then she went blank again.

I looked out of the window, at the rain.

'Lets have a baby together,' she said suddenly. 'I want a girl this time!'

## Neon

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I kept my face clear, no shadows. My hands stayed flat on the table.

'I haven't got the sperms for it,' I joked. 'I'm far too old.'

'You're not!' Then she smiled a little snaggle-toothed smile. It evaporated quickly, leaving nothing behind.

There was an alarm going off somewhere, like they do in a storm. My head was full of empty Sunday streets like that, an alarm going off, the wind was playing with the sound of it.

### Seven. Revelations.

'I glassed someone,' she whispered, 'here, in this pub. I was banned for a long time.'

'Well, this is a very relaxing drink,' I joked. 'You're not going to hit me are you?'

She stood up suddenly.

'No Bunny, not you. I'll never hurt you.'

Then she kissed my hair. She held my hand, it felt hot and dry and rough as sand paper.

She went out through the door, to the toilets.

I asked the barmaid if she knew her. I wanted to know how deep the water was. Where the rocks were.

'No,' she said, 'I don't know her but I've seen her in town of course.'

Of course, I thought. A bag lady, a familiar sight. Like a post box. I told her that I hadn't seen Angie for twenty years.

'Fucking hell!' she said, she seemed astonished.

Genuinely astonished. I suppose it was like me saying a thousand years, to somebody that young.

### Eight. Conversation.

When Angie came back from the toilet I noticed that her finger was bleeding.

'They took my children away from me,' she said. 'I am mentally ill I think. They took my children away just after I had my second child. There was an eclipse.'

She drifted away again for a while. I looked at the walls, sepia pictures of old boats. The fire was crackling, the barmaid was doing a crossword and sitting at the bar, smoking.

'There is something wrong with me, mental health problems. Is it . . . is it . . . schizophrenia?'

She talked like that, confused, like her tongue was swollen in her mouth. Like a person dreaming.

'Are you taking medication?' I asked. Like she had just told me about her bad back.

'Chlorpromazine,' she said. 'It's an anti-psychotic.'

'I know,' I said.

'There is something wrong with my head Bunny, I can feel it.'

Deep lines under the eyes. A dark gravitational pull around the mouth, drooping. Years of madness and unhappiness. A lifetime of it. Her eyes were blank and green. She was very fat. Bloated, even the hands.

### **Nine. Children.**

She smoked my cigarettes, she asked every time even though I insisted that she helped herself. She coughed all the time and at first she put her hand over her mouth. But later she forgot, or she became exhausted by that particular social nicety. When she coughed her mouth made the same shapes as a baby's mouth makes. I felt her spittle on my face. I bought her another drink.

'When I had Michael, my second child, I got post-natal depression quite bad. They took my children away. They were adopted, they live somewhere near Bristol I think. I'm allowed to get three letters a year, and photos sometimes.'

## Neon

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She started crying again, and saying sorry. I told her it was all right. But I didn't touch her. I knew that she would grab me and could never let go. That she would start to fall and take me with her.

'Nine years,' she said, 'it's been nine years since I saw them. I don't think I'll ever see them again.'

### Ten. Folk Lore.

Angie stories, over the years. I had heard some of course. Forgotten about them, but those clerks had them all laid out neatly now. Peterson's brother said she used to come into the fish market where he worked. 'She used to pull up her skirt and she wasn't wearing knickers.' Angie stories, it is such a small town after all. Like the time she walked into The Benbow with a pet dog and insisted it was a wild fox. 'I'm going to tame it, I'm going to tame this fox!'

Peterson said that years and years ago she had a habit of knocking on his door and asking to use the toilet but then she wouldn't go away. 'Those were the early days, when she was just beginning to go crazy,' he said.

'She always carried the spare tyre of her car with her into my house, she looked hunted.'

He told me that she had her drink spiked with acid when she was at university in Glasgow.

'That's when it all started, or so I heard, the trip never ended for poor old Angie.'

### Eleven. A Lie.

Conversation was difficult. Angie didn't ask me any questions about myself. I found out that she goes to a day centre for mentally ill people.

'I'm mentally ill I think,' she told me again. 'We do art and play pool and I get a meal. On Sundays I go to church, the Salvation Army, but I don't get a meal anymore because I'm not homeless anymore. I get a piece of toast and a cup of tea.'

I'm very religious. They get angry with me when I go out for a fag though.'

'Fucking hell,' I said, 'they've really got it in for us, haven't they?'

'Who?'

'Smokers!'

'Have they?' Then her mind began to wander again.

'We play pool and do art' she said.

'I was going to see my dad, but now I'm going to stay with you. You don't mind, do you?'

'No, I don't mind.' I told her that. I wasn't sure how true it was. But it wasn't a lie.

### **Twelve. Age of Consent.**

'Harry's father, Harry is my son, my oldest son, I have two sons, Harry and Michael. Harry's father used to bring men home and have sex with them. He made me sleep on the sofa downstairs while he had sex with the men upstairs in our bed. I'm not homophobic though, honestly I'm not. He left me when I got pregnant. He betrayed me, Bunny, do you understand? When Harry was nine he wanted to find his dad so he took me to London and made me get out of the train on the Edgware road. We looked and looked but we couldn't find him. I don't know what part of London he lives in. He might not live in London.'

Then she started to cry again. Dry tears. Her eyes looked sore.

'Harry will be sixteen this week. A person is an adult when they are sixteen aren't they? He'll be allowed to contact me. Or is it eighteen? When is someone an adult?'

'I'm not sure, it might be eighteen,' I told her.

The bar maid looked up from her crossword and suggested it might be sixteen.

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'He can contact me soon. He'll try to find me. He knows where I am. Perhaps I'll have to wait for two more years'

She was crying again.

### Thirteen. Nine Letters.

Then the barmaid said; 'Do you know another word for a sausage dog?'

'Dachshund?'

'How do you spell that?'

'I don't know. D.A.S.C.H.....H.O.U.N.D?'

'No, that's too many letters.'

She carried on doing her crossword. The wind was blowing hard; I could see people being buffeted about by it through the window. The flags on the boats in the harbour. Coats flapping, people almost staggering through the wind.

### Fourteen. Sex.

Angie. My brother slept with her once, but he didn't really want to he said.

'I didn't want to upset her, so I did it.'

I remember him telling me that, on the morning after he had sex with her. I was there that night, sleeping on the sofa downstairs. I didn't hear anything, thank god. That was twenty years ago, or a long time ago. The last time I saw her. She was living in a cottage and my brother was renting a room. She was young, she was sane, she was Angie.

I asked her if she wanted another drink and she said 'yes please'. When I went to the bar the barmaid asked - 'same again?'

'Yes,' I said. It made me feel safe, hearing the barmaid say that.

Then an obese man came in and asked for a house brandy and ginger. I noticed that Angie was glowering at him. But this seemed to be her natural expression, the default



setting of her face. The obese man sat at a little high table instead of a stool. He had his elbow on the bar and he chatted to the barmaid. He had a loud voice, he was from London.

I told Angie that I was 'just going for a pee'. It seemed the sensible thing to do.

As I sat back down again Angie stroked my fingers. She gestured to the fat man at the bar.

'Bunny's going to look after me this afternoon. We're getting pissed and he's going to walk me home.'

'Is he now, is he now?' the fat man laughed. He had a very loud laugh. It made Angie wince.

### **Fifteen. Oh Shit.**

I was beginning to think - 'Oh shit'. But I carried on drinking, I bought Angie another.

'I've got an alcohol problem, I think. And mental health problems. They took my children away from me. They live somewhere near Bristol. Or Exeter.'

Then she cried again, dry and painful tears.

'Harry will be sixteen soon, and he will come and find me. He knows where I am. But is it sixteen when you become an adult?'

'I don't know,' I said. Angie seemed very grateful that I was paying for her drinks.

'Harry found my dope, when he was little, and he threw it away. It makes you bad he told me.'



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'I threw some of my mum's weed in the fire when I was twelve,' the bar maid told us. Angie glowered at her. But it meant nothing.

'Did I hear you say you live in Bristol?' the barmaid asked me.

'That's right,' I said.

'I'm going to live in Bristol one day,' she said. She looked very young, not even twenty.

### Sixteen. Cloisters.

A few more men came in, shaking off the rain. They talked to the big man from London. They laughed, it was all very jolly. He told them a funny story about his wife.

I noticed that their words seemed to cut into Angie like swords.

She leaned forward suddenly and whispered urgently. 'I glassed somebody here once, here in this pub. I was banned for a long time.'

'Are you all right Angie?'

'Too many men,' she whispered, she looked hunted.

'I'm going to do something bad,' she said.

'Shall we move around the corner then, Angie? Where we can't see them.'

'Yes,' she said. So we got up and moved into the next part of the pub, separated by half a wall from the bar area. The fire was crackling away. I made sure that we sat at a table where we couldn't see the men at the bar.

### Seventeen. Confession.

Angie talked about having sex with a boy and being arrested for hitting a nurse and cried some more about her children.

I kept on drinking but I felt very sober.

Then Willy came in.

‘That’s Willy,’ Angie told me. ‘He’s Irish. ....You’re Irish, aren’t you Willy?’

‘Eh?’ said Willy.

‘I said – you’re Irish.’ She glowered at him, he didn’t seem to mind.

Willy was carrying a drum kit. He put it down in the middle of the floor and came over.

‘Can I have one of your cigarettes?’ he asked me.

‘Sure,’ I said. I was glad to have somebody else to talk to.

‘Can you roll it for me?’ he asked. So I rolled it for him and he sat down.

Willy had long hair, frizzy and dry as straw. It seemed to have fallen from a tree and landed on his head. He was old, but how old I couldn’t tell you. He had no teeth. His chin almost touched the tip of his nose. Then he leaned back and his face was obscured by the side-rest of the bench I was sitting on. The bench was like an old pew from a church. He carried on talking to me anyway, through a small hole, a knot-hole in the side of the pew. I could see his eye. When I turned and leaned forward to see his face he seemed to shrink back a little, like he preferred talking through the hole.

I was dressed in black, like a priest. Willy talked to me and then Angie talked to me. They didn’t listen to anything the other was saying, they just took turns.

The loud Londoner was telling funny stories at the bar, Angie winced. I could see that she was wandering, lost on the Edgware Road again.

### **Eighteen. The Summer of ’77.**

Angie. She was the first girl that I ever fell in love with. We were sixteen. That summer of ’77. Her bedroom was the most wonderful place on earth. If I visited in the mornings, she would still be in her pyjamas. Her room smelled of peaches and strawberries. Her mum was very nice. She made me toast.

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They had a very nice house. Sometimes her dad would hand me a bill for the tea and toast as I was leaving. He wasn't joking, either. Me and Angie would listen to music in her bedroom, punk music. The Sex Pistols and the Clash. The Damned, The Adverts, The Cortinas. It was a great summer. Every week one of those groups would play at the local club. The Winter Gardens it was called. I went with Angie. She was very beautiful, but I was covered in spots. We went camping together during that summer too, a whole group of us. One night, as I lay next to her in the crowded tent, I tried to kiss her. She turned away. She was very polite about it. It broke my heart, it was the first time that my heart had been broken.

### Nineteen. Entropy.

Willy got up and began setting up his drums in the corner. I leaned forward and asked Angie a question.

'Angie, how on earth did you recognise me?'

'What do you mean?' she said.

'Nobody recognises me down here anymore. I can walk right past my old friends in the street. I can even ask them for directions!'

It was true, for a long time now. I even enjoy it, in a way. I have changed a lot over the years, not just physically. But physically I have changed a lot. I have drunk 16,000 pints of cider since then. I have smoked 182,000 cigarettes. I have eaten 22,000 meals and more between meals than I should have. Quite a lot more. I have long hair. I have a beard now, a salt and pepper beard. NOBODY from the old days recognises me. And when I walked into the Dock I was wearing a big coat and I was wearing dark glasses.

Angie shrugged. 'Why wouldn't I recognise you?'

I looked at her eyes and tried to imagine all the terrible things that they must have seen.

I couldn't.

But those eyes saw me, didn't they, they saw through the fog of twenty years. I still wonder at the way she did it.

### **Twenty. Missing Time.**

I finished my drink and told Angie that I had to go. I told her that my wife was waiting for me back at the cottage we were renting.

'OK,' she said. 'I'll walk with you as far as my dad's place. We'll have a terrible row, me and my dad. One day I'll take another overdose and this time I'll die.'

She was switching off again, going back into the darkness. The strange thing is, I didn't really want to go. Willy was setting up his drums, the fire was warm. When I'm in a pub in the afternoon I never want to leave it.

We walked along the Prom. It was raining, the wind was biting and snapping at us. Flapping our clothes. Waves were beating against the sea wall and crashing onto the pavement with a fizzing sound.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' I said.

She didn't say anything. She had a tatty summer skirt, and sandals. Her coat was open, her furry coat. She looked like a broken teddy bear. She waddled a little when she walked. A wave caught us, it drenched us. The water was very cold.

Angie held my hand for a little while but she's no fool. Then she followed behind me like an old dog. When I stopped, she stopped. Where I walked, she walked. Slowly, with her head bowed. She didn't reply to any of my foolish small talk.

I started thinking about the last time that I'd seen her. She was leading my reluctant brother up the stairs and I was getting ready to spend the night on the sofa. Twenty years ago. There was a pushchair in that room. And toys. Her son Harry's toys. Twenty years ago. I wondered about the clock in Angie's head, and how long it could stay stuck for. Not ticking.

The silence must be awful.

### **Twenty One. The Bag Man.**

We got to the end of the street that her dad lives on now. We were outside the Winter Gardens where we used to watch those groups, back in 1977. The club is closed down. I think it has been for years. Dusk was falling. Angie's dad always hated me. He said that I was no good, a bad influence. A bum. He was probably right. But he lives alone now, in a flat. His wife left him after she had her breakdown. His son is a minor celebrity in this little town too, like his daughter. A part of its fabric, like the pier and the bandstand and the seagulls and the shadows. Peterson and his brother told me this story about him. They were in a pub, The Pirate, it was noon, the pub had just opened.

'Angie's brother came in. Looking like an AIDs case' they told me.

'Heroin, you know. There were bowls of cheese and crackers and peanuts on the bar. He came in and ate every single one, gobbled them up like this, and then he asked for a glass of tap water. The barman had an open mouth but he gave him the water, Angie's brother gulped it down and walked out.'

Peterson and his brother laughed their heads off when they told me that story. They laughed when I told them about my encounter with Angie in The Dock too. Especially the bit about when she asked me to make her pregnant. I didn't really want to turn it into an anecdote, but we only see each other once a year so that's how we talk. They roared with laughter, and I have to admit, it was pretty funny by then. It's only life, after all. A cloud of starlings and then a hawk comes and the cloud dances and billows all over the sky. The hawk swoops and the starlings, thousands of starlings, billow and twist like smoke. Something has to happen. There's nothing you can do about it.

**Twenty Two. Hollow Words.**

Dusk was falling all over the dreary little seaside town that used to be my home. The lights of the penny arcade, the rows of bulbs strung between the lampposts on the Prom. They didn't do a thing to illuminate the gloom.

We hugged briefly.

'Good luck with everything Angie,' I said. I had every window closed, every door bolted. My words blew away in the wind.

'What do you mean?' She looked angry, but it was nothing.

'I hope it all works out for you,' I said.

'What do you mean?'

'Your children, you know. I hope it all works out. In the end.'

She didn't say anything. Why should she?

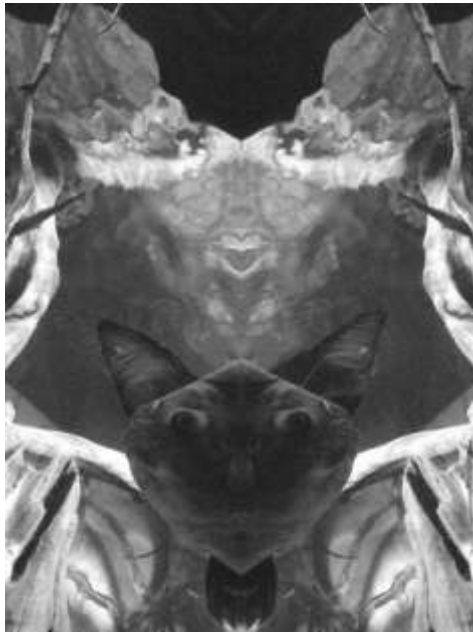
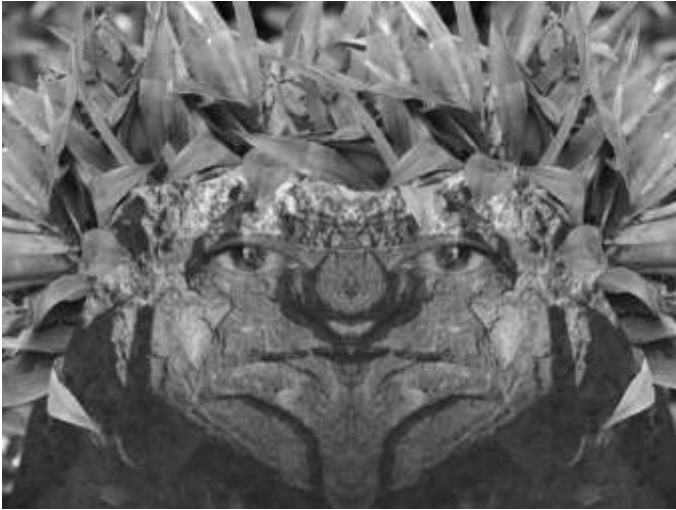
I wasn't fit to lick her shoes. Not in 1977 and not now.

'Goodbye Angie.'

'Goodbye,' she said.

Then she walked away, hunched over and broken, leaning into the angry wind.





*Facially Speaking (top) and Catnipped* **Mary Ellen Derwis**



# Three Poems

Jenifer Wills

## Summer, 1986

The pages of the old Playboy magazines  
we had in stacks  
in my father's cluttered garage  
were flat, muted moth wings  
with wholesome milk-ad faces  
smiling up at me from their covers  
before the days of rampant plastic  
surgery; pointy nipples titties  
small and high or supple  
breasts attached to women arching  
their backs, ringless fingers draped  
across the delicate curves of their  
untucked stomachs.

At age twelve,  
I made my living  
by selling them to boys  
out my parents'  
bathroom window;  
an underage Playboy drive-  
through of sorts.

There were other magazines:  
Hustler, Cherry, some nameless  
without covers stashed  
beneath the bottom drawer  
of the bathroom; battered publications  
found by accident  
when I pulled the drawer  
out too far, smashing my toe

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as it landed on the floor.  
I remember in particular, one  
with a brown haired girl who traded  
a Tootsie Pop  
for the cock  
of a bald old man;  
her mouth and eyes  
as lifeless  
as the blow-up doll  
she resembled.

Even at twelve, I knew  
better than to sell  
those ones  
out the window.  
But I got five bucks  
a copy  
for the Playboys.



## Hidden Village

Bleary eyed to his cries I test  
the bottle on my wrist;  
too hot-  
it should have been thirty  
seconds not sixty. That can  
be forgiven as sixty is the norm  
for two bottles  
which, having twins,  
is the norm  
and I slept for shit  
last night.

It felt good, calling you  
a whiny bitch, felt  
like redemption

even as you came toward me  
with your right hand raised in front  
of your face, index finger  
pointing me back in line.

'It's a joke of a marriage, just  
like everything in my life' you disparage  
in the too-hot bathroom, baby  
foot in your right hand. I knew  
better than to say a word  
when you forgot  
to put down the non-skid mat.

'You don't even like me,' sinks  
down past my ears to float  
limply in the bubbles I watch spiral  
and sink  
down the drain.

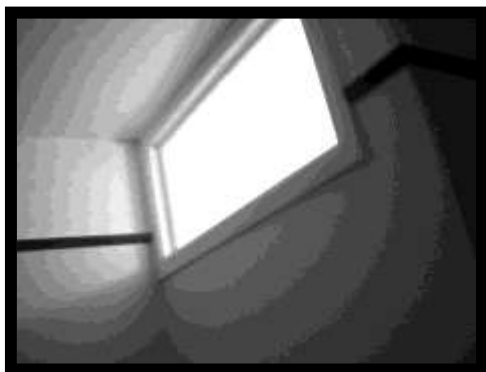
In the kitchen, 33 Xanax  
in my hand, I've counted  
the rations while rationing  
self-pity by wondering  
how it would feel  
to swallow them all, dumping  
them back in the bottle  
as my baby girl rounds  
the corner carrying  
a brand new pink shoe from her  
first pair. She's been moving  
them from room to room  
since we returned home.  
Her older brothers  
call her Miss.

How pitiful it is to cry  
oneself to sleep. How predictable

the nightmares in cycles  
until the baby cries and for once  
you're thankful for stumbling bleary  
eyed from the counter where  
you've made the bottle colder  
to the chubby arms  
you'll always  
be good enough for.

### **Blue Bed Sheets, Beige Room**

I want to be your notebook  
at three a.m., so when you wake  
with something worth writing  
you might scribble it on my skin,  
increasing my value with each letter  
you pen, securing me a position  
on your book shelf.



A poem might arrive fresh  
at sunrise, unfurling  
from my hair spilling over  
the pillow, or stolen  
from murmured confessions  
in sleep, to be imprinted  
on my neck by the sound  
of your voice,  
bewitching  
as accomplished  
acoustic guitar, drifting  
through an open window  
on some innominate breeze.

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# Bullet the Blue Sky

George O'Gorman

*It was the field of tiny yellow flowers* that Chloe first started to remember. Gathering them up in her skirt. Making yellow flower bracelets under a blue sky. *Where in the fuck was that?*

Chloe didn't ever remember seein' no *blue* sky. The sky was sulphurous and orangey, everywhere on Phalanges. Chloe had been to the other continent, shipped over for a few parties when she was twelve. The sky was the same bile-orange over there, too. *But where in the fuck was those yellow flowers and the blue sky?* It was something weird, from out of her soul. But it was starting to feel like a real memory.

Chloe's darkish eyes and pale skin made her exotic, on Phalanges. So she didn't have to turn as many tricks. At sixteen, she still looked childish. She didn't have to work the miner bars. The other thing that turned girls into hags was *base`*. The Paste. Chloe didn't do Paste, so she still looked young. So she didn't have to work as much. The customers paid more. But that meant they sometimes thought they had more rights to her body. Like at the parties on the other continent. Oh Jesus.

Once in a while they wired her up and made sensupornos. She was a star on other worlds, they told her. Other people paid money and played the sensuporn and felt what she felt. Even the fear and pain. The other people played the streams and they felt her fear and her pain, and they got off on it. For some reason, this made Chloe want to kill herself.

Then one night, late, alone in some squat, ripped on gage and booze, Chloe had remembered the tiny yellow flowers and how intensely pretty they'd been. Some quiet

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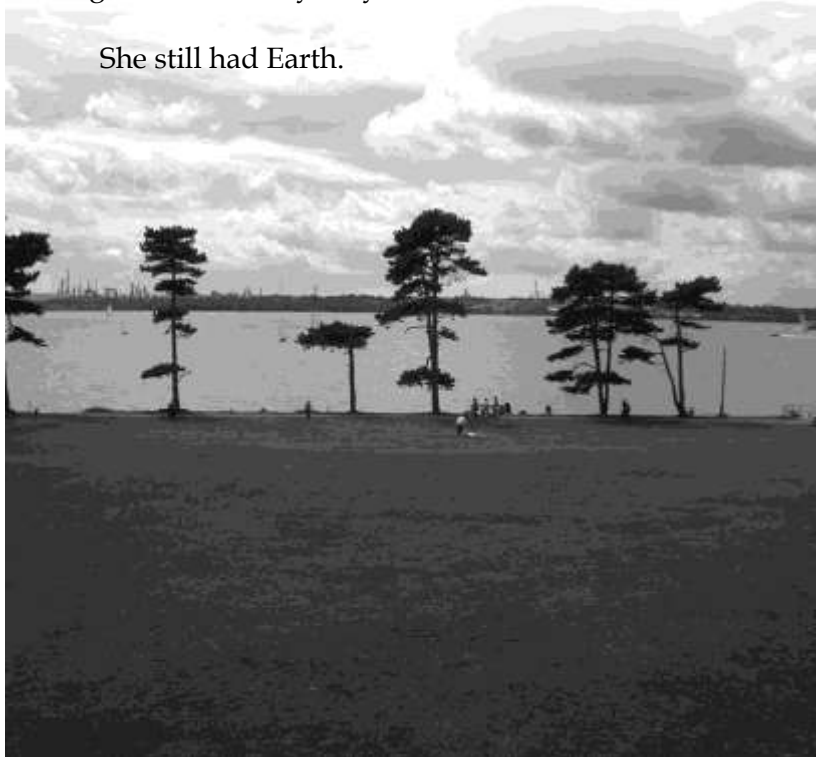
place, without the sky and street traffic racket that never ended on Phalanges. And pretty. A hillside, maybe. Right up in the blue sky.

Chloe was sure it was Earth. Only Earth could have a sky like that. She was starting to remember more. These memories were coming back to her.

She was sure she'd been taken from Earth. But it must have been a long time ago, almost too far back to remember.

Of course it was inevitable that Chloe started doing the Paste. Nothing else can really get rid of the pain and fear. Then, after a while, she wasn't pretty anymore. She had to turn more tricks. She didn't get paid as much. It didn't matter. She didn't give a shit. Everybody dies.

She still had Earth.



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# Laying Out

Bill West



*You're three weeks late*, and there are no undertakers in Ystradfellte.

"I've laid him out", Mrs Llewellyn had said over the telephone, "but you need to come right away."

The room smells bad. In the gloom you see the body on the bed, pebbles, as smooth as old pennies, resting on his eyes. Outside the river mutters like a badly tuned radio. There are voices in that sound and you want to break out, to go to the window and pull open the curtains, let in October sunshine, crack open a window, smell clean mountain air. Better still, leave the stone cottage and climb up beside the beck to walk amongst the moss-covered stones on the mountainside, free as clouds.

Mother wasted no tears.

"He broke your grandmother's heart, him with his wild ways, and when he left her and me to bum around the

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world . . . selfish! He was no father to me. Steer clear of him is my advice.”

You remember when you ran away to stay with him when you were twelve. Together you camped out under the stars, snared and gutted rabbits, cooked them on a stick over an open fire.

The nape of your neck prickles. There is a sound, a dry rustle. One pebble slides down the cheek, like a tear. But the eye doesn't open.

His linen shroud jerks and twists. Grandfather's voice says.

“Toast and kippers, where's that tea?”

At least it sounds like his voice, but strangely muffled. A bandage holds the jaw shut and the sunken mouth shows no sign of movement. Then there is a slow unravelling of cloth, a flash of scarlet, and something stumbles out from the bundled corpse.

Grandfather's macaw staggers clear from the shroud, red yellow and dusty blue against the drab room. He coughs and flaps his wings. His eighty-year-old chest is naked of feathers and as puckered as an old man's scrotum.

Three weeks.

Osiris spreads his wings and hops into the air. He hangs before you, ragged feathers spread, stirring the foul air. Then sharp claws dig into your shoulder. He folds his wings, cocks his head and peers at your right eye with his black one. He whistles and speaks again with grandfather's voice.

“I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. Heave-ho me hearties”

The beak opens and you gag on the smell of rotting meat.



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# Contributor Notes

**E.V. Noechel** oversees Raleigh Rodent Rescue in North Carolina. Her writing is widely published and awarded. She was the recipient of the Kely Award for Outstanding Local Animal Activism, grants and fellowships from the North Carolina Arts Council, the United Arts Council, The Culture and Animals Foundation, Vermont Studio Center, Headlands Center for the Arts, and I-Park. She is a dog trainer, columnist for *Doggie Fun*, *Innerchange*, and *Independent Weekly* magazines, and a phenomenally silly person.

**Kyle Hemmings** has work published on *Verb Sap*, *Rose and Thorn*, *Armchair Aesthete*, *Apollo's Lyre*, *Night Train* and other publications. Besides writing, he likes to cook, bake, draw cartoon art and listen to anything by Neil Young and Crazy Horse.

**Joe Balaz** lives in northeast Ohio. He is the author of *Domino Buzz*, a cd of music-poetry [www.joebalaz.com](http://www.joebalaz.com). He is also coauthor of *JOMA—online*, an online gallery of concrete poetry and photography with photo-artist Mary Ellen Derwis [www.jomaonline.com](http://www.jomaonline.com)

**Carmelo Rafala** is an American born writer living in Great Britain. His work has recently appeared in the British anthology, "The West Pier Gazette and Other Stories," as well as, *Jupiter* and *Forgotten Worlds*. He has also had stories podcast by the award-winning audio fiction company, Variant Frequencies.

**Josh Jennings** is a journalist in Melbourne, Australia. His fiction and poetry has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Sex and Guts Magazine*, *The New England Review* (Australia), *Idiom 23* (Australia), *Beyond the Rainbow* (Australia), *Imago Notion* (Australia) and an Australian anthology called *Shotgun* (Paroxysm Press). He's currently writing a book of poems called *The Shovel, The Grave and Us*.

**Sam Jayne** lives in Yorkshire, England. She has had fiction published in various print and online magazines, including *Skive*, *Delivered* and *Steelcaves*. She produces her own webzine at [www.neonbeam.org](http://www.neonbeam.org).

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**Mary Ellen Derwis** lives in northeast Ohio. She is coauthor of *JOMA—online*, an online gallery of concrete poetry and photography with Joe Balaz [www.jomaonline.com](http://www.jomaonline.com). Her photography has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Oregon Literary Review*, *AdmitTwo*, *Eleventh Transmission*, *Otoliths* and *Subtle Tea*. What interests her in the field of photo-art is the unpredictable and synergistic nature of photography in general. Capturing an image that can be enhanced in different ways to bring about a visual dialogue between viewer and photograph is what drives her work.

**Bunny Dees** writes short stories late at night, while his wife is sleeping and the local cats fight beneath his window. He types with one finger and smokes one cigarette after another. His last story was published. In a book. With pages made out of real paper.

**Jenifer Wills** is a full time student and a mother of four currently living in Portland, Oregon. She is also the owner and administrator of *LiteraryMary.com*.

**George O' Gorman:** "I am a part-time laborer, full-time writer and musical artist living in Seattle. I've just finished writing a SF adventure novel called "*The Tao of the Shapeshifter*" and now I'm in the process of pitching it to the literary agencies. My fiction has appeared in many publications, including *Black Petals*, *Alienskin.com*, *American Drivel Review* and *Kaleidotrope*."

**Bill West** lives in Shropshire, England. He is a member of the Bridgnorth Writers' Group, I\*D Writers' Group and a number of on-line Writers' Communities. His work has appeared in *Four Volts*, *Crimson Highway*, *Thirteen Magazine*, *FlashQuake*, *Mytholog*, *Heavy Glow*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *21 Stars Review*, *Zygote in my coffee*, *U-R Paranormal*, *Bewildering Stories* and other places.