



Neon

18

A Literary Magazine

Issue #18

www.neonmagazine.co.uk
[neonmagazine \(at\) ymail \(dot\) com](mailto:neonmagazine@ymail.com)
www.myspace.com/neonlitmag

This compilation copyright © Neon Magazine (2008).
Do not copy or redistribute without permission.

All content copyright © respective authors.

Authors may be contacted through the publisher.

Cover image by Jack Horst.

ISSN 1758-1427

Edited by Krishan Coupland.

Published Quarterly.

Contents

The Derelict

Sarah Hilary

Two Poems

Colin James

The Axeman

JC Miller

A Memory

Cathal O' Connell

Three Poems

Nick Orf

Mata Hormigas

Elizabeth Eslami

Interview: Elizabeth Eslami

Elizabeth Eslami

Three Poems

Lida Broadhurst

Amory

Rhian Waller

Biographical Notes

The Derelict

Sarah Hilary



From under the bridge she watched the patrol boat scud upstream, leaving on the river a long scar.

She loathed these boats, sly in the water and always talking, loud-speakers squawking. She gathered spit and slugged it into the mud. It sat on top of the scummy layer of ice, glistening.

Winter was a fist in the face, cold punching its way through the layers she wore. She shivered, and so did the Thames. Winter was in the river – and something more.

Ruining the water, a big blister building fit to burst.

She sucked her teeth and muttered a litany of dislike for anything that altered the pattern of the tide, its ebb and flow as subtle and needful as her pulse.

Something was in the Thames, something more and worse than Winter.

A monster. Beast.

It split the river's skin, a mountain rising up.

She saw a long beak and round back gleaming grey before it went back down with a thump that reached right out to the shore, dredging sludge from the riverbed so the Thames smelled rotten, of dirt and decay.

She heard feet thudding on the bridge above her head. People lamenting: "Wail! Wail!"

She shoved her heels into the sodden bank and come upright to look. The mountain was moving in the water, the wide roll of it like oily waves riding in. It rose again, spewing spray. So big – bigger than the Sphinx – big as a house.

She saw its eye, hot and cloudy, rolling in its socket; blood gouting from its grey underbelly. Rocks from the riverbed studded its broad body.

Wail! Wail!

She shook her fist and cursed. Grabbed a handful of her treasures and threw them. Dead batteries bounced from its nose as it went under, the impact of its body drenching the derelict as she stood, sinking and stinking, at the shore.

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

Two Poems

Colin James



Attack Of The Insular Theologies

The only witness
to the tripping
was on his hands and knees.
He described the victim's body
as being in a state of distress,
all arms and revolutions.
He claimed no affiliation
with a suspect seen fleeing
and considered it a coincidence
that they both resembled old men.
Their hair disappointed,
and they retained few skills
to transform habitable areas
into neighborhoods.

A Mime Trained In Elephant

You know the story
a young man shows promise,
white gloves never worn too arbitrarily,
and then something goes terribly wrong.
Nineteen months of incarceration
for repeated loitering.
The mistake, standing too still
on one leg.
Nights wandering the waterfront,
even the fog is in denial.
The long look down into what was water,
now a thick, breathing Carthaginian skin.

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

The Axeman

JC Miller



Image by Geoffry Woodley

At night, the Axeman comes. He enters her apartment silently, and stands over her bed, watching her sleep. He listens to her snores, her whimpers and her sighs. When she gets up in the middle of the night to pee, he follows behind her and from the darkened hallway watches as she pulls her lacy white panties down around her ankles. Her head rests against the wall, her eyes closed. He hears the stream of pee hit the toilet water. She finishes and pulls up her panties, flashing a patch of curly brown hair. She retreats to her room, leaving behind the smell of her skin.

The girl has certain habits the Axeman can depend on. For instance, she picks her nose when she's on the phone. She smells her socks after she takes them off. She prefers her toast burnt and her coffee lukewarm. And she doesn't think too much of the cat she calls Nasty. In the morning, when Nasty is finished licking his privates, he circles the girl's ankles, meowing to indicate hunger. His girl looks down at the cat, gives it a shove with her toe, and continues drinking her coffee.

To combat boredom while she's at work, the Axeman rifles through her drawers and cabinets and closets. He finds: a stash of condoms, two missing from the box of twelve and thong underwear with the store tags still attached. Buried under a mountain of novelty socks are bottles and bottles of medications with name like Lexapro, Zoloft, Effexor and Xanax. He takes the time to smell her clothing. There is no trace of her, only the sweetness of fabric softener.

*

At six in the evening, the girl returns home from work as the twilight fades. The jagged, skinny limbs of the trees sway in the evening breeze.

The Axeman from the closet as the girl eats dinner in her room – a chicken enchilada and a Coors Light. Her throat moves with each gulp of beer and her jaw works non-stop until the plate is clean. She eats on the edge of her bed. Crumbs drop down her shirt and land on the carpet. Her toes curl around the tufts of bluish yarn.

After the girl finishes her dinner, she cries. His girl sobs on the bed, grabbing fistfuls of the bedspread. When she is finished, she wipes at her face with the back of her hand and lies back on the bed. They both fall asleep soon after, the Axeman snoozing with his head tilted back and his mouth open, a shirtsleeve tickling his nose.

*

The next day his girl doesn't go to work. He hears her in the hallway as she leaves a message for her colleagues citing a "stomach bug." A few minutes later the toilet flushes, and she dives back into bed. She lies around in her underwear for the rest of the day.

To keep himself occupied, the Axeman explores his surroundings, sniffs her clothes and checks the pockets for change. He comes up with \$5.73. He finds two dented cigarettes at the bottom of an old leather purse and puts them in his pocket.

The bed springs pop and through a crack in the door, the Axeman sees that the girl is now awake. She sits up in bed, her dark hair sliding forward to cover the right side of her face. The sobbing starts. She goes on sniffing and sucking air and making pitiful little hiccupping sounds for about twenty minutes. His knees ache with the weight of kneeling among her shoes. The Axeman slides off his boot, gropes for one of her high heels. He stuffs his foot inside, and fumbles with the strap, tightens the strap until it pinches his skin.

*

In the afternoon, she takes a bath and stands in front of the mirror soaking wet, inspecting her body. Her eyes get red and her face breaks out into hives; he expects her to cry again, but instead she puts on her clothes and falls back into bed. For the rest of the afternoon it's boring soap operas and female talk shows. He watches glimpses of the drama through a sliver in the closet door.

He wakes up before she does. The room is dark. The sounds of his girl's snores tell him she's not going to wake up any time soon. The Axeman decides to stretch his legs.

The Axeman tiptoes down the hallway to his girl's living room. It's small and surprisingly tidy, decorated in reds and blacks. Several pictures are on display. On top of her TV is one of her with a pretty girl wearing a Happy Birthday tiara. There's another on the end table of his girl with an older lady – her mother perhaps – they have similar noses and share the same prominent jaw line. On the fridge, there are more pictures of his girl with various people in bathing suits and dresses and men wearing shirts and ties. Any of these men could be responsible for making his girl cry. Women cry over men all the time. The Axeman has made many woman cry, but for a very different reason.

A roach is flipped on its back near the front door. It twitches, the tiny legs working overtime. The Axeman steps on it to put it out of his misery, and moves down the hall to return to his place.

*

In the morning, the Axeman hears his girl on the phone. She's calling out of work again, telling her colleagues that she has not yet recovered from her stomach bug and that she was up all last night vomiting. He heard no vomiting, only sounds of his girl crying several times in the middle of the night. The Axeman saw her restless legs pounding the mattress, sliding back and forth as if carving out a hole in the fabric for her limbs to lie indefinitely.

The girl doesn't get out of bed for the rest of the morning. Around noon, she makes herself a sandwich. He hears her bare feet slap against the hardwood floor.

As the girl shoves food into her mouth, crumbs and saliva fly everywhere. Next, she eats an entire pint of ice cream, a few dozen cookies and some chocolate from a dented heart-shaped box.

*

The next day is exactly like the day before: his girl calls out of work a third time, saying that her stomach virus has turned into an appendix "thing" and that the doctors are advising her to steer clear of all human contact. This time after she hangs up, she hurls the phone against the wall where it explodes into three large chunks of plastic. She does not move from her bed until the sky grows dark.

The Axeman has to do something about his girl. She's on her way down the fucking black hole of despair. She's going to ruin her entire life. While she's in the bathroom, he paces her room with his axe over his shoulder. Should he do what he has to do? Should he finish her off once and for all? She's pretty much given up on life. What's the harm in chopping her into little pieces? What can he possibly do for her anyway? It's not like he can help her get her life back on track. It's not like he can sweep her off her feet and marry her and have babies with her and love her until they both die of cancer or old age or both.

Maybe if he chopped her up into pieces, she'd thank him for it. Maybe she'd look up at him with tears of joy and say to him thank you, kind sir, I think I love you and he would say I've loved you for some time now, sweet young lady and this was the only thing I could think to do to ease your pain. He would bury pieces of her in a marked grave, made especially for her, and he would carry her picture with him always. He would be her axe-wielding savior.

The Axeman kicks open the bathroom door. She's been in there for quite a while, and now he knows why. His girl lies in the bathtub, her wrists split wide open, blood draining from her body, the bathwater tinted a devastating red. The Axeman touches her soft skin for the first time. She's cold and damp. He kisses her wounds, says his final goodnight, and raises his axe above his head. His first strike gets her in the shoulder, right above her heart.

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

A Memory

Cathal O' Connell



Image by Roger Fischlin

I saw a car-wreck while crossing the Mojave Desert one oven-summer twilight before I was old. It shut down a four-lane highway, eastbound and west; twisted metal sank into sand between black shrubs and the Wile-E-Coyote orange rock backdrop. I was touring with a testosterone punk-band back then; tattooed Californians who only surfed at night. We drank to kill time in the jam, made jokes about death to avoid scary thoughts. One of the guys – they called him Stickhead – ate three trips of mushrooms in the corner.

We crawled past the accident scene eventually; a junkyard, familial MPVs knifed by an articulated truck. There were still bodies littered about, some in bags and some not. Medics in bright jackets ran like kids at recess.

Stickhead stared. I watched him and called his name but he just stared and his face was grey. We passed an empty stretcher and I slapped his cheek to make the others laugh.

We moved on a couple of miles and it was only then that he screamed, when the horror was behind us and no longer real. Perhaps it was only dangerous in the past, when it had fallen into memory, been infected by imagination.

Five of us wrestled him but the screaming wouldn't stop. His eyes were squishy and his face was taut, skin tried to peel back, cheekbones to tear free, forehead veins bulged to split. His

fist hit my mouth and as the others held him I drove my elbow down and collapsed his two front teeth. He didn't flinch. We tied his arms and legs but couldn't gag him in case he puked. He screamed and screamed and I thought of boiling water blistering babies' skin.

It was two a.m. and starry when he stopped. I'd been trying to tune him out to sleep and the sudden silence shocked me; stillness like a wall.

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

Three Poems

Nick Orf



The Ants Go Marching

*The ants go marching one by one, hurrah, hurrah
The ants go marching one by one, hurrah, hurrah
The ants go marching one by one
The little one stops to suck his thumb
And they all go marching
Down, to the ground, to get out, of the rain*

I suck my thumb while I sleep. I am dreaming.
My plane crashed in the mountains
of Antarctica, a place that has no ants,
and I had to eat frozen co-pilot.
Passed time thinking warm thoughts.

*The ants go marching two by two
When you eat someone you start from their shoes*

Crickets are cannibalistic. But no, not ants.
They are always marching in procession.
They respectfully carrying their dead,

each of their careful legs a pall bearer.

*The ants go marching three
Father, son, and ghost holy*

I wonder where they take them after they die.
I imagine the ant priest giving tiny eulogies
and caskets of hollowed out apple seeds,
or thimble sized piles of lifeless thorax.

*The ants go marching four by four
You smell the gas and bang the doors*

Before my co-pilot died, he told me, shivering,
of Auschwitz, how, still, it smells of burnt flesh.
I remembered pictures of mountains of bodies
waiting to be burned, and I vomited.

*The ants go marching five by five
The engines shut down and the plane took a dive*

Ants mate in the air like exploding missiles
The male dies shortly thereafter—
Ejection from the cockpit, a spiraling fireball
toward the ground. There are no survivors.

The ants go marching six by six by six, seven by seven

The female lands and tears off her wings.
I've always thought it curious
that Satan was a fallen angel.
But then again, I've found curious the whole thing.
If there is a God then why God why the Holocaust
If I thought that when I died I'd have eternal paradise
I wouldn't have eaten my fucking co-pilot.

The ants go marching eight by eight

It's raining. The ants are throwing fits.
Despite their swarming battalions,
the bombing ruins them.
If they were people-sized,
They would take over the world.
I've seen them rip off the limbs
of other ants that didn't look like them.

The ants go marching nine by nazi nine

They have planted themselves deep in the trenches—
exoskeleton helmets, pincers instead of panzers,
the charismatic queen screaming passionate orders
to all the workers wearing swastikas,
while drones do nothing until it's too late.

They'd like to have you think they'd just hide beneath umbrellas,
dodging puddles two by two
and cursing their wet socks in unison.
I will not be surprised if I awaken underneath a pile of corpses
and before I freeze to death or they burn me,
I will do my damndest to eat my way out.

*The ants go marching ten by ten, the little one stops to say, the end
And they all go marching down to the ground to get out of the rain.*

She Left A One Cent Tip

We tend to swallow all sorts of strange things—
hallucinogens, semen, anaconda cantaloupe,
weird shit.

When I was five I lie on my dinosaurs bed sheets
and threw pennies up in the air to catch them
in my mouth.

Stupid idea, but I was five. Back off. No teeth
were lost, the worst that occurred was that
I swallowed one.

I've heard since I was a tot, we swallow four spiders a year
while we're asleep. I'm a skeptic,
but daffier has happened,

so, I'd believe if told a daddy long legs crawled in
between one's lips while I they lie open,
unconscious in the sheets.

I was a waiter. Once a customer told me she found a fly
in her soup. *Are you kidding me?* This only happened
inside television sets.

*There was an old woman who swallowed a spider
that wiggled and wriggled and jiggled inside her—
she swallowed the spider to catch the fly.*

My dad sung this to me on the way to the hospital.
Didn't make sense. What did she swallow
to get the penny?

They x-rayed my belly and found the cent but no spiders.
I knew they were in there, invisible since their skeletons
are on the outside.

Doctor Euphemism told me I needn't swallow anything else,
nature would take its course, his way to say
I'd poop the penny out.

She looked politely up at me and held they fly in the air
by a wing as proof, dangling sickly and dripping
with clam chowder.

I imagined the reticular silk work spun in her esophagus,
the arachnid perched on the uvula, waiting for the prey
to drop from her spoon.

*Close your eyes, pinch your nose, just swallow it down,
the spiders will get it.* She was petrified.
I fetched her another bowl.

There's A Clown Out There With An M40A3 Rifle

Our bunker is a room full of balloons,
come in, relax, make yourself at home,
but try and stay away from the windows.
We speak in high-pitched helium whispers.
The temperature isn't the problem
it's that goddamned latex humidity.
Our lungs are burning, our heads are light,
and we wear rainbow camouflage.
Have a seat if you can find one,
and good luck retrieving your shoes.
We have some books, if you'd like them
and a couple hard core nudie magazines.
Your concentration might be broken
by an unexpected pop or was that the sniper's shot?

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

"Okay," the mother, who was also the wife, answered.

At the drug store, the mother strode quickly to the back, her wet shoes making a slight screeching sound against the floor. She knew exactly where the ant poison was. She knew exactly where every item was. She could have been on one of those game shows where she had to race through the store blindfolded and complete her shopping list.

At the cash register, the mother handed the ant poison and some money to a young Indian girl with shiny rings. "When it rains," the girl sighed, "the ants come out." She handed the mother her change and a little plastic bag full of the ant poison and smiled. "Have a nice day."

"I know the ants come out," the mother said, putting the change in a secret pocket in her purse. "I've lived here thirty years."

As she was leaving, the mother walked past a man, who was also known as Bert Bentley, whose job it was to polish the floors with a large buffing machine. Bert Bentley had also once been known as the mother's high school boyfriend, as the man who took off her panties in his truck after eating pizza. The mother, who also used to go by the name girlfriend, nodded at the man who was now a floor buffer, and the man looked down at the floor to avoid her eyes.

When the mother got home, she struggled with the keys in the rain and darkness. The large drops of water streaked down her glasses, obscuring her vision, until she had to take them off. Through the window, she noticed the daughter, who was occasionally dubbed that little bitch, sitting in front of the television, mere feet away from the door, not bothering to help. When the door finally opened, the mother came in and stood for a full twenty seconds for a dramatic effect, the rivulets of water running from her plastered-down grayish hair to her chin.

"Thanks for your help," the mother said. The daughter held a *Sassy* magazine over her face, the cover girl teen star smiling maniacally where the daughter's head had previously been.

The mother went into the kitchen and opened the box of ant poison, pausing for a second to read the instructions. On the box, there was a picture of a giant, exaggerated ant, belly-up.

The father, also known as the husband, came out of the bedroom when he heard the door open. He scratched his head until a tuft of hair stuck up, and entered the kitchen, where he stood behind his wife as she placed tiny, clear drops of ant poison on little square cubes of cardboard, each of which read in microscopic print: MATA HORMIGAS.

"What kindja get?" the husband asked. He pulled his pants up as a sign of concentration.

"Does it matter?" the wife said, pushing the cubes of cardboard into the corners of the kitchen counter top. The ants ignored the cardboard and wandered around the counter and up toward the cabinets in wide, exploratory lines.

"Mata hormigas?" the husband said, incredulously. "What, you can't get 'em with directions that aren't in Chinese?"

"That's Spanish, asshole," the daughter mumbled from beneath the Autumn Lipgloss section of *Sassy*. "It means 'Kills Ants.'"

"Hey, smart mouth," the father said. "You want me to come over there?"

The daughter didn't say anything and kept her face hidden behind the magazine. Like her father, she had tufts of hair sticking up, only her hair was considered a style, and she had many more tufts.

The husband looked into the empty plastic bag. "Where's my chips?" he asked, with a smile, one side of his face drooping.

"Goddamn it," the wife said, slapping her forehead, which made no sound. "I forgot."

"That's okay," the husband laughed. "I knew you would."

Late that night, the wife let the husband climb on her and bounce around. She felt guilty about forgetting his chips. As she lay there fighting the tickle of his chest hair curling up into her nostril, the woman thought about Bert Bentley buffing the floor and climaxed.

*

The next night, the wife accompanied her husband to a party for his co-workers. Like the drug store, the wife knew exactly what the house would look like, and exactly which people would be there, and exactly how long it would be before everybody got drunk and went to various bedrooms to fuck or else got bored and hid some pretzels in their pockets and drove home. The wife and the husband had known these people for years, and were used to running into them at restaurants, where they had to stop eating their baked potatoes and turn their heads and crane their necks, and shout "Well, hello! What are you doing here?"

"Do you think Eden is responsible enough to watch Evan?" the mother asked, as they pulled onto the street. "Last time he almost lost a finger, remember? Who ever heard of a teenager letting a seven year old play with a damn *shovel*."

"Oh she'll be fine. She better be," the father said. "Besides, we won't stay long."

Dead leaves and acorns crunched under the wheels of the car.

The husband looked at his wife's shapely legs, the flesh bouncing as they went over a bump. He kind of wished she would go back to dyeing her hair, but she had become convinced the dye was making her hair fall out.

"You look nice," he said.

The wife pulled her skirt down as far as she could. "Do you think this dress is too short?" she asked, even though it was a dress she had worn hundreds of times to hundreds of these parties. Before he could answer, the mother wondered, "Maybe I should call them right now, just to check in."

"Naw," the husband said, noticing the little indentations of cellulite in the side of his wife's thigh. "Hey, did I tell you I bought a coffee shop today?"

He was talking about his cyber self, who was himself but also a guy named Rick Jenner.

It was a computer program, or something like that. Alternate identities or simulated lives. The wife didn't really understand. It started with the daughter playing it, and then the mother read something in a magazine which warned parents against the dangers of it, something about possible Internet predators, or molestation. Or something. The mother had asked the father if he would supervise. When the wife said, "You can at least handle the high-tech stuff," the husband decided to check it out.

"Oh, honey. It's nothing," the husband said. "She's just got an avatar named Phoenix who runs a commune."

"An avatar?" the mother asked. "A commune? Like the Manson family?"

"No. Like they recycle everything and grow potatoes and restore the ozone layer," the father said. "It's pretty neat."

It was pretty neat until the father, who was also the husband, became avatar Rick Jenner, and started riding a motorcycle and purchasing real estate. It was pretty neat until he got a girlfriend, who was also known as *Star 620*, but who wasn't known as his wife. It wasn't neat at all when *Star 620* began to ride behind Rick Jenner on his motorcycle, clinging to Rick's waist, and making out with him on the beach.

It certainly was the opposite of neat when the wife came in one afternoon with a sandwich and the husband was fucking *Star 620*. A redhead with black, lifeless eyes moaned and bucked under Rick Jenner, grabbing his pixelated pony-tail with her cyber hand.

"Jesus. What are you doing?" the wife asked, trembling such that the slices of bread vibrated with a soft, doughy frequency.

"Nothing," the husband said. "It's just my computer girlfriend."

"You're screwing a girl robot?" the wife asked. "You can do that?"

"Oh yeah, but it's nothing. I mean, come here. You can do her too."

"No thanks," said the wife.

"You sure?" the husband asked. "You want me to create an avatar for you?"

"No thanks," the wife repeated, leaving the sandwich on the top of the desk, just above the computer, where it would grow stiff and hard.

*

At the party, the wife and husband moved around, flapping their lips, drinking wine out of plastic cups, as they watched other people flap their lips and smelled the old wine on their teeth. These people, who were also called co-workers and, who, with some lenience, could also be called friends, screamed and laughed and threw back their heads. They moved in large circles, absorbing other people into their circles, and creating new ones.

The husband worked at a shipping company where he was responsible for sending and receiving items in large boxes. In some sense, the party was a lot like work, because people moved into and out of different rooms, only here they were carrying lighter loads. The husband and wife knew almost everyone there, but when some stranger stood in front of them with an arm around one of the familiar co-workers, the husband shot out his arm and shook the unfamiliar hand briskly, and introduced the person to his wife, whom he called "M'wife."

They talked about the weather. They talked about work. A woman admitted to a bikini wax and breathed the words into the small of the wife's neck. The husband took a drunk co-worker's keys and was cursed at. Two people got drunk and threw up in the bathroom, and everyone else ate more cookies and pretended it didn't happen.

Everybody asked about Eden and Evan, and the mother and father did their best to be evasive. "Eden was just shy of straight A's this term," the mother said, not telling them that Eden was a

little slut who introduced her father to *Star 620*. "Evan's trying out for Little League," the father announced, wondering whether his son would ever seem like more than a meathead. Other people told the wife and husband about their kids, and the wife smiled and the husband made sounds of interest.

On the drive home, the husband laughed. He put his hand on his wife's knee.

"That sure was fun."

"Sure was," the wife answered, imagining what it would be like to be taken by Bert Bentley in the co-worker's bathroom, and whether or not he would buff her entire body until it shined.

When they got home, the daughter and the son were standing in the kitchen, staring at the ants. The ants had begun to notice the drops of poison and stopped occasionally to drink. Sometimes five ants would form a circle around a drop like at a dinner table. However, once they finished drinking, they went on their way, seemingly unharmed. There were more than before, and they formed organized lines, marching with determination from the cabinets to the counter.

"That stuff you got doesn't work for shit," the daughter said.

"Hey, smart mouth," said the father. "Watch it."

"Yeah, watch it," the brother teased Eden.

"Just give it time," the mother said. "They'll start to disappear."

*

The next morning, the husband mowed the lawn. He walked back and forth over grass that was one inch high, pushing the lawnmower with its unceasing silver blades, until what remained was grass that was one-half of an inch high. The wife had talked to him about this.

"You're obsessed with cutting the grass," she would say. "It doesn't need to be cut for at least another few weeks."

"What, you want to draw bugs? Mosquitoes? You let it get too high, and that's what you get," the husband said.

"I know, but you are cutting it too much. You go down to the roots sometimes. You're gonna kill the whole damn lawn. That's probably what's driving the ants inside."

The husband would not listen, and he cranked up the lawnmower to drown out the wife's voice. The wife walked away toward the house, her middle finger raised behind her. She didn't care if the neighbors, also known as busybodies, saw it or not.

Inside the kitchen, the daughter stood staring at the counter top. The mother came up behind her.

"What are you doing?" she asked her daughter. From behind, with her hair newly dyed pink, the daughter looked to the mother like a large exclamation point.

"Watching the ants eat the poison. You know, there are already only half as many."

It was true. The remaining ants had grown lethargic, and though they continued to drink from the poison, they no longer maintained their determined lines and often left themselves out in the open, near the sink, alone and vulnerable. Sometimes they drank drops of water from the sink, as if to dilute the poison.

"Good," the mother said. "That means it's working." Outside, the husband pushed the lawnmower past the kitchen window and little flecks of grass sprayed the glass and stuck there.

"Mom, will you help me with my math?" the meathead son called out from his bedroom, which was decorated with footballs and basketballs.

"In a minute!" the mother shouted. She stood for several minutes behind the daughter, wondering if she should try and touch her, put her hand on her shoulder. Or something. Ask her about her boyfriend.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the daughter suddenly asked, turning her head again like an angry smear.

The mother sighed and disappeared to help the son, who was also called Little Leaguer and Champ.

The daughter stayed and watched the ants. One ant was already dead. She blew on it to see if it would come back to life. A second ant, known as the helper ant, came and nudged the first ant. After a minute, the helper ant lifted the first ant and carried it a half an inch, the same distance as the ground from the blades of grass outside.

The father buzzed past the window outside and waved down at the daughter, who ignored him.

Finally the helper ant abandoned the body of the other ant, and crawled back towards one of the little drops of poison. Eden's eyes filled with another kind of clear moisture, which was sometimes referred to as tears, and she grabbed the cardboard square – and all the other squares – and began to lick the drops off, one by one.

*

Nick, the daughter's boyfriend, arrived late to the hospital. He didn't know or understand what was going on, and he got lost finding the waiting area where Eden's parents were, even though he was given directions by the desk nurse.

"Is she okay?" he asked, after he came around a corner and found the parents and brother sitting, reading magazines.

The family looked up at Nick, who was also known as the guy wearing a tee-shirt which read *Crotch Parachute*.

"Oh great," said the father. "Who called the no good asswipe?"

"No good asswipe," the son echoed. Though it pleased the father to have his opinions supported, he slapped the son on the back of the skull for propriety. There was no sound.

"I did," the mother answered. "He had a right to know." Then, looking at Nick, the boyfriend who fondled her daughter's breasts after eating pizza, she said, "Eden ate ant poison."

"What? Why would she do that?" Nick asked, placing his hands in his pockets and making a soft jingling sound.

No one knew the answer to his question, so the parents and meathead son collectively shrugged in dismay and went back to their magazines. Nick sat down on a plastic chair next to them and played with his rings.

After some time, the family was called in to see the daughter.

"I think I better wait here," Nick said.

"Suit yourself," the father mumbled.

The family gathered around the bed in which the daughter lay. They looked at the tubes and the beeping machines, and they stared at the daughter's white face which was framed and exaggerated by her pink hair, as if by a punk halo. The mother finally took the opportunity to pat the daughter's foot through the thin, patchy hospital blanket covering her foot.

"We love you, sweetie," the mother said. Instantly the daughter awoke and drew her foot away.

"Why would you do this?" the father asked, his eyes pink with concern. Secretly, in his fat, 50 year old heart, he longed to go home to something he understood. To the lawnmower, to his wife's aging but familiar body. To his chips.

The daughter turned her head like a sad, leaking boat towards the machines and watched the recorded rhythm of her heart, and imagined what it would take to navigate those waves.

"Nick is here," the mother said. "He came to see if you were okay."

"Like I care," the daughter said.

"Hey" – smart mouth, the father started to say, but thought better of it. Suddenly the doctor, who was also known as a Type A risk junkie and a weekend golfer, came in the room and stood at the foot of the bed. He cleared his throat and silently flipped through Eden's chart.

"What does ant poison taste like?" the brother asked, breaking the silence, but was ignored by everyone.

"Looks like your daughter's going to be fine," the doctor said. "We pumped her stomach, and there should be no residual damage. There might, however, be some problems down the road with the baby."

The parents' mouths opened a half an inch in shock. Then the father ran as fast as his 50 year old legs could take him out into the waiting room. The mother and son listened to the sound of the boyfriend's tennis shoes squeaking on the shiny hospital floor as he fled from the father.

"Oh, Eden, how could you be so incredibly stupid?" the mother asked. She felt the sadness soak her like rain, and she wondered at the same time if it was possible that *Star 620* was carrying her husband's cyber baby, and whether it would be born with a pony-tail of tiny pixels.

Eden stared at the machine with her heart beats, and didn't answer. The girl, who was also now a mother, closed her eyes.

*

The daughter was discharged from the hospital after three days of observation. She brought home a sheet of instructions which indicated she should rest and drink lots of fluid. She perched upon the couch in the living room, with a *Sassy* in front of her face.

The mother placed a glass of water with a straw on the table next to her, even though the daughter was perfectly capable of using her lips, as the boyfriend Nick could attest. (Though it

would have been difficult for that no good asswipe to attest to anything, as his own mouth was swollen and purple after making contact with the father's 50 year old fist.) The father placed a bowl of chips next to the water. "These are my favorite," he said.

Sometimes, the brother came into the living room and sat in the chair next to his sister. He watched television, and said nothing when his sister looked up from her magazine to smile at some show. Truthfully, the brother felt somewhat guilty for teasing his sister so much. Sometimes he added one or two of his cookies to the table with the water, the straw, and the chips.

One day the brother and sister were sitting in the living room with the television on. The brother flipped through the channels, but the screen suddenly went gray.

THIS IS THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM. The letters ran across the middle of the screen in red.

The meathead brother began to change the channels, going up and down, but the channels were all the same.

"Look, Eden," the brother said.

"It's nothing, it's a test," the sister said, turning the page of her magazine.

"But it always says when it's a test," the brother said, and he had a point.

THIS IS THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM, ALERTING THE VIEWING AREA OF LIFETHREATENING SITUATIONS, FLASH FLOODS—

The letters stopped. The boy pressed the buttons on the remote, but he could not change the picture.

"Do you think we're having a flash flood?" the brother said, his voice panicked and high.

"Don't be a dumbass," the sister said, though she had put down her magazine. Outside, it was pouring.

"Mom?" the son shouted. Both the parents came in from the bedroom where they had been discussing whether or not the daughter should abort her baby. The mother's eyes were red, and the father's doughy face was creased with worry.

"Why don't you let Rick and *Star 620* make the decision, if you don't want to," the wife had been saying when they were interrupted by the cry of their son.

"What is it?" the father asked. They all stood, staring at the television.

THIS TEST IS ONLY USED IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, the television read.

"They said something about a flash flood," the daughter said. She looked nervously out the window. People were starting to come out of their houses.

"Now hold on," the father said. Since he was late coming in, he insisted on fruitlessly flipping through all the channels.

"Everyone's outside," the daughter said, getting up.

"Maybe they know something," said the mother.

The entire family got up and opened the door. Outside, the rain was falling in huge, clear drops, soundlessly striking the heads of the people and dripping down onto the streets.

"But if there's a flood, isn't that the last place we should be? Shouldn't we find higher ground?" the daughter asked.

"I don't know," the mother said, "but maybe somebody else knows something."

The mother began waving at some of the other women. The neighbors saw the wife, whom they knew as the woman who flipped off her husband, and the daughter, whom they knew to be knocked up. One of the women waved at her and shrugged, refusing to budge from under the awning of her house. The husband braved the rain, which instantly plastered down his tuft of hair, and walked over to some men he had once borrowed tools from and shook their hands, trying to act casual. The meathead son ran over to three other boys and kicked water out of the puddles and wondered aloud if everyone was going to die.

Eden stood in the middle of the street, talking to no one, watching the rain fall.

The mother looked around at all the people, whom she thought of as neighbors and busybodies, people whose houses she knew, whose cars and children she knew, and wondered how it was that none of them, not one, knew anything at all.

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

Interview: Elizabeth Eslami

Elizabeth Eslami

The theme of computer worlds and alternate computerised identities is interesting. Have you ever participated in an online world? What do you think of them?

I haven't participated in an online world like Second Life, or some of the other current simulated reality environments out there. Frankly, they scare me! I feel like I'm doing well to navigate this world. However, I can see the motivation for assuming an alternate identity. Who doesn't want to escape their personality from time to time, or re-invent themselves? I suppose I find the idea behind these computer identities more interesting than the practice itself. Recently I attended a lecture by an MIT professor, Sherry Turkle, and she discussed the ways that these simulated life programs - and robots - have come not only to fill the roles of humans in society, but even perhaps improve upon them. This is a controversial issue, certainly, and something I find fascinating to explore via short fiction.

Do you think that actions taken in a computer world "matter"? In what way?

Simulated reality actions might not have the same impact as, say, cyber stalking or identity theft, but they matter in the sense that one's participation in such a world - and the particular identity chosen - probably reveals something psychologically important about them. Does having a cyber-girlfriend constitute cheating? Maybe, maybe not, but I sure wouldn't like it if my husband had one! It's certainly a murky issue, though. An alternate identity could be simple escapism, or it could be an outlet for more dangerous, self-destructive impulses, and it's hard to draw the line between those two. Can you purge a negative impulse by creating a second self, or do you ultimately end up feeding the impulse each time you adopt the identity? What I liked doing in *Mata Hormigas* was having an adult and a teenager both explore cyber-identities, and showing their different responses. The teenager makes a stupid decision in real life, but her avatar is socially conscious. The father is a decent man in reality, but he lives out a permanent mid-life crisis in the cyber universe.

The ending of Mata Hormigas seems to come from nowhere, and yet is oddly fitting. What is your take on it? How did you decide on this ending?

The story begins with the mother going out to purchase ant poison, and much of the narrative revolves around this action. There is the sense that something has invaded this home, and the characters think, falsely, that they can control the situation. They try, and yet everything unravels. I wanted the end to mirror the scene in which Eden and her mother stand in the kitchen and watch the helpless ants eating the poison. There is something quite tragic about it, with the helper ant, and the trails the ants try to establish, all the ants acting on an impulse of

self-preservation – outside, it’s raining, and when we escape inside, there’s food and survival. Of course, that’s not the case, and ultimately, there’s confusion and death. For the humans at the end, when the torrents of rain begin to fall, there is similar confusion. Everyone leaves their houses and looks to others to tell them what to do. I wanted readers to acknowledge the thin line separating the two worlds.

The use of several different names and identifiers for each of the characters is, in a way, humorous, but also quite challenging. What kind of effect did you hope to achieve by this?

I was trying to appeal to the theme of duality. Two worlds, real and simulated, ant and human. Each of these characters looks at himself/herself as a complete, multi-faceted person, but at others one-dimensionally. Eden sees her father as a slob and a simpleton, not as a man who fantasizes about riding a motorcycle and banging a redhead. The husband looks at his wife as merely a sanitized wife, not someone who made out with a floor buffer and left her panties in his truck. The truth is, they are all of these things: mother, wife, slut. Daughter, sister, punk, future teenaged mom. I wanted to give a nod to that through the narrator’s voice.

"Eden", given the theme of identity, is an intriguing choice for a name. How important do you think names are, both in fiction and in determining a person's identity?

Well, I chose Eden because, in some ways, she is the most hopeful character in the story. Though at the end, she is a pregnant teenager, she is the only person with empathy, and the only person who can really step back and see what’s happening in the world around her. So she has the opportunity to re-create herself, to save herself even. Hence the Biblical notion of Eden. Also, truthfully, I chose it because it’s become a rather hip name lately, and I think there’s something weirdly ironic in the way that parents seem to choose ever more original and/or odd sounding names for their children, and yet they become trendsetting names, so that you suddenly have a million Montanas and Jetts running around, and it’s impossible that they could all grow up to be such “original” individuals. It’s a high bar to reach. What if you’re named Apple, but you lead a completely ordinary life? Is that a disappointment to your parents, or to yourself?

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

Three Poems

Lida Broadhurst

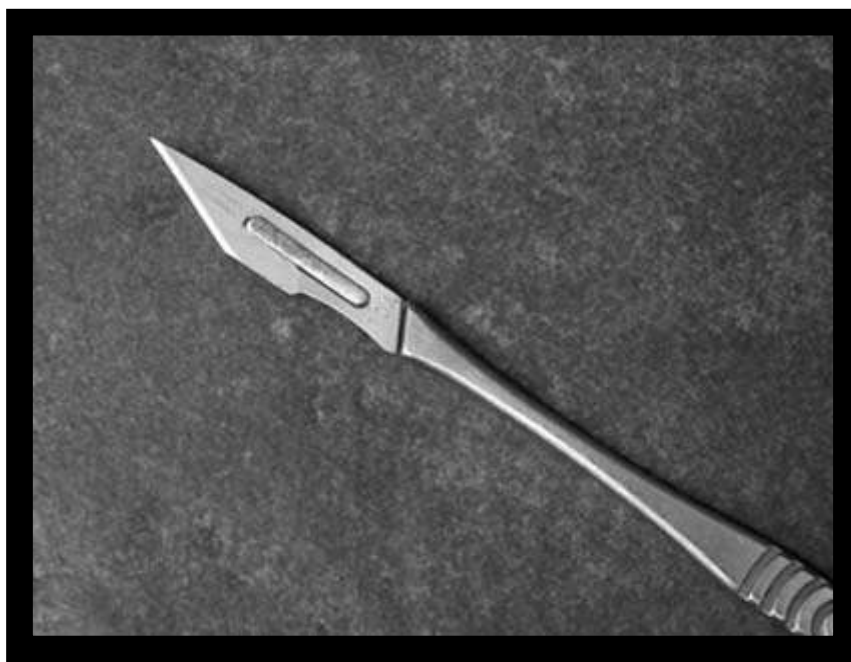


Image by Chris Gander

Op Techs

Even our shoes muffled, we drift
in herds down their streets,
bodies flapping cloths
of liquid blues and greens.

We sink to feeding. Our voices
slice the air above slabbed
bread or meat,
accustomed sights.

We rejoice like gardeners
in pride of pruning,
in snips and rearranging,
success and failure fenced
by useless bones and blood.

At hour's end, shuffling,
we disappear, like
their foreshadowed ghosts.

Serial Killers Still Are Things

Serial killers still are things
creating Aztec climbs to earn
the greedy gobble of our eyes and ears

Later, earnest teams like leaking oil
boiling in their wake,
hope to translate the eternal
riddle of their desires.

Journey

down the road cars
slowly drag, lights pulsing
blood droplets from small wound.

further down one sees the whole tail
leaking clots, blended into one
fatality.

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

Amory

Rhian Waller



Image by Athewma Athewma

Her friend persuaded her to try it, just for a laugh. So she snipped the last half-millimetre from her fringe and glued it sparingly to her upper lip. Then she pinioned her scalp with strict hairpins, until she could fit a beret on. She didn't have big breasts in any case, so a sports bra and a generous shirt with ruffles disguised them effectively enough. To finish, she stuck a pair of socks down her trousers, sighed, took one last slurp of cheap merlot, and walked out.

*

The night blurred past in a tangle of limbs, lights and cocktails. She fooled a few people, which made her feel better. Someone she'd never met before dragged her into the blue-hued loo and scribbled sideburns onto her with eyeliner. A woman left a pink leech-suck of lipstick on her collar. She swam through dry ice and found a piece of taxi-flotsam to float home on.

As she staggered through her front door after stabbing ineffectually at the keyhole for five minutes, she caught a flicker in her peripheral vision. Fuzzy-brained, she thought it was a face at a window; then she realised that it was the mirror over her dressing table. She waded toward it. Arms resting on the edge of the table, she leaned down and pushed out her tongue.

In the glass, she saw a drink-ravaged young man raspberry back at her.

She wheeled around and fell into bed.

*

He was still there the next morning, scruffle-haired and bleary. She nodded to him as she pottered around the room, head bowed under the heavy hangover. Politely, he nodded back. By the time she went into the bathroom, stripped off and had a shower, he'd disappeared. With care, she inspected the blue sagging under her eyes and the pebble texture of her tongue.

*

Once the hangover left, she half-remembered him as a series of impressions; soft skin, wide eyes and fur. She couldn't quite remember where she'd met him; was it at the bar or the club? A feeling of loss, like winter fog, whispered through her belly. As the week wore on, she daydreamed at the office, twiddling a pencil between finger and thumb. She wanted to remember his name. She searched her phone for new numbers, but there were none. She decided to re-create the night in order to jog her booze-saturated memory.

This is silly, she told herself, but she wouldn't listen.

To see just how silly it was, she hid in her bathroom and reassembled her travesty.

There he was again, smiling faintly at her through the glass. The mist went away.

Hi, she said, all shy. His lips moved too, but she couldn't hear him for the ice. Still, she had the feeling that he understood. She said: what is your name? He replied before she finished the sentence, and she lip-read: my name is Amory.

They talked silently for hours.

*

The next day she dressed up again and didn't go in to work. Sometimes they talked, and she told him about her boyfriends (all hairy and sexually insensitive) and he nodded and smiled. Other times she just studied him. He looked sweet and young, and his oakbrown eyes understood. The phone rang a few times, but she ignored it.

*

The following morning she couldn't stand the jag in her stomach when she saw herself in the mirror. She was dressed before she cleaned her teeth, kneeling before breakfast. The dressing table was shoved out of the way so she could reveal the full length of the glass. He smiled at her, joy shining from every pore. She unplugged the phone.

This is my life so far, she said.

*

When she leaned in to kiss him, (desire driven by swooping angles, the flash of carved flesh at the clavicle) her lips met cold. Still she pressed her tongue against it, pleased to see him reciprocate. His hand met hers, pawing ineffectually like a puzzled pet at the barrier between them.

*

She sat alongside so that she could study his quarter-profile, long bones, shapely nostrils and the fine brown filigree of his eyebrow hair. Fingers slid down her pants, pinching and rubbing

at bits of moist flesh. She couldn't see his hands beneath the wooden frame of the glass. She winked and he winked back, co-conspirators. He was as hungry for her as she was for him.

*

When she kissed him standing up, her bound breasts pushing against the glass (but really boring into his chest, press, press) she pulled away and was gratified to see the outline of an erection tenting his trousers.

*

Light flickered through the translucent blinds, thin dawn blue, midday yellow, the occasional thin white of a clouded day, then dusk and twilight and orange streetlamps and car headlamps. Fascinated, she studied the play of rays over his sculpted temples, the strands of hair that glimmered colour-change like wire, the shadow of his nose as it stretched, circling from eight to one o'clock.

*

Amory wasn't eating. She worried about him savagely, fear stretching tight over her just as his skin stretched tight over his skeleton. He just sat and stared at her with mute, starving need. He was running grey and ragged.

*

Stay there, she said, and went over to the dressing table. Her knees cracked painfully and her muscles were agonising, but she didn't notice the nothing in her stomach anymore. She could barely lift the flower pot, but the weight of soil and ceramic might be enough shatter the prison barrier and save him. The dead orchid wobbled, root-loose.

She hefted it overarm, but just before she released, she paused and thought: what if this destroys him? Cracks him with the glass? Her arm sagged and she let the pot fall. It scattered dirt.

No? she asked.

He shook his head in a movement that was barely perceptible.

No.

*

I love you, she said. He mouthed back: I love you.

[Contents](#) / [Author](#) / [Comment](#)

Biographical Notes

Sarah Hilary won the Fish Historical-Crime Contest with *Fall River, August 1892*, and has two stories in the *Fish* anthology 2008. She was a runner-up in the Biscuit Short Story Contest 2008. *MO: Crimes of Practice*, the Crime Writers' Association anthology, features Sarah's story, *One Last Pick-Up*. Her work appears in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Literary Fever*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Ranfurly Review* and *Zygote in my Coffee*. Sarah blogs [here](#)

Colin James has poems forthcoming in *Stirring* and *Sage Trail*. He works in energy conservation and is a member of the philosophic order *Brothers Of The Endemic*.

Jen Miller lives in Philadelphia, PA and is currently an MFA Fiction writing student at Rosemont College. Her fiction has appeared online in *Void Magazine*, *Pens on Fire* and is forthcoming in *The Written Word*. She loves Philadelphia, but nothing exciting ever happens here.

Cathal O' Connell is a recent materials science graduate from Dublin, Ireland. His fiction has appeared in various publications including *A Fly in Amber* and *Skive Magazine*.

Nick Orf has a lot of scars. The most recent is one on his thumb knuckle, which he received from a rock that was shaped like an iguana. His work has appeared in *Mad Swirl*, *Juked*, *Word Riot*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Death Metal Poetry*, and others.

Elizabeth Eslami received her B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Warren Wilson College. Her work has appeared in *Apostrophe*, *Thin Air*, *The Steel City Review*, *The G.W. Review*, *Bat City Review*, *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *Coe Review* and *Beeswax Magazine*. Her first novel, *Bone Worship*, will be published by Pegasus Books in Winter 2010.

From the visions of cats, vampires, insane trees, and family antics jumbled in her head, **Lida Broadhurst** shapes her prose and poetry. When it is too hot, too cold, or too rainy in Oakland, CA, the visions are weirder than usual. She has studied writing with Dr. Lawrence Perrine and Beverly Lauderdale. Her work has appeared in *Mythic Delirium*, *Nemonymous #1*, *GUD*, and many other publications. One of her poems was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhyssling Award.

Rhian Waller is a graduate of an English Literature and Creative Writing BA, and is about to begin a Postgrad doctorate in Creative and Critical writing. She has been producing stories of various quality since she was five, and has managed to publish a handful of poems. She would very much like to publish some more.