

23

Neon

A Literary Magazine

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Chairman Mao, In Retirement

Arijit Sen



Image by Kellina

To fill the day Chairman Mao goes on long walks. He buys a gold-tipped cane from a vendor stand, walks leaning heavily on it. He kicks at errant pieces of gravel, imagining the stones are the stars of the universe. He reads *The Collected Works of Charles Dickens* till he falls asleep in the study each night, head drooping on fleshy chest.

Chairman Mao is diagnosed with the diseases of old age. The doctor says he should take care of himself, informs him that youthful poverty plays havoc on the system. To assuage worries about diabetes and blood pressure and weight gain, Mao begins to take thirty blue pills a day to blot out the memories of having been useful. "Better off dead," he tells his wife. "Better off dead."

When his wife dies, Mao is invited to an office party. "It will cheer him up," the new manager tells the staff. To celebrate Mao's return they prepare his favourite dish--*hong shao rou*--and decorate the office with banners saying, 'Welcome Back Chairman Mao'. But Mao appears disgruntled, dissatisfied. He castigates the new manager on changes under his tenure. He lectures on bookkeeping techniques, on cost benefit analyses, on labour reconciliation methods. He suggests promotions and censures, then sulks away home in the company car when he is gently rebuffed. "What use are my years of accumulated wisdom?" he asks the chauffeur wistfully, as the car rumbles over the city's potholed roads. The chauffeur smiles indulgently. The elderly are difficult to answer.

Living alone, Chairman Mao begins to cultivate chrysanthemums in a quiet garden set away from the road. He tells his wife about the red flowers, and carefully weeds away the yellow and white ones. When she suggests that it is time he grows soursweet plum, he agrees bitterly.

The morticians arrive to take Mao away. He is aware of their granite faces, their unchanging expressions. But he complains that he is not quite ready, that he is grown thinner from having been forgotten, has stopped eating on the doctor's orders, has much left to offer the world. But the morticians do not listen. They follow their orders, they wheel him away, Chairman Mao, old and forgotten, now soaking in a tub of brine.

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Two Stories

Matthew Dexter



Image by Winston A-H

Maintenance

Rented one of those little one-bedroom apartments that make you wonder whether your luck will ever change. You know the type. Wake up the first morning and you're lying in bed, running your fingernails across the wall. You do this every morning, thinking about what went wrong and whether your ex-boyfriend really loves you as much as he says he does. He calls four times a day, leaves messages on your voicemail every night. He wants to know where you live. You're afraid to answer your cell.

Weeks go by before you realize those bumps in the wall are dried-up boogers. They're yellow, green and black. They must have been there for months, maybe years, left over by the last tenant. Boys can be disgusting. You think of your brother eating his boogers. Every time you blow your nose you think of the wall.

You had to cut your fingernails because you knew some of those boogers were underneath your nails, lodged inside your cuticles. Now your hands look like a boy's. You call the rental office and ask maintenance to come paint the wall. They do, but even though the boogers disappeared you still know they're there. You find them in

the bathroom, on the wall between the sink and the shower. Even in the kitchen. You start biting your nails. You get used to it and change your phone number.

Years go by. Your luck gets better. You meet a new man. Get married. Have a beautiful family. You keep your queen-size bed centred in the middle of the room. Your fingernails are always manicured perfect. You haven't touched a wall since.

Border Of My Mind

I warned her to stop using crystal meth. "Glass," she called it. She didn't stop till she forgot to use her brakes and crashed into a Coca-Cola truck at dawn. I slept as the phone rang. Didn't realize it was somebody calling to say she was in the hospital, badly broken foot. Nothing left to do but inch out of bed and head to the hospital--healthy, hopeful.

Can you hear me? I'm outside. Your father speaks no English. Nobody in your family does, except your younger brother. We watch a DVD of *Traffic* in my car on a laptop, until the battery dies. "Why does it hibernate?" he asks. "Is it a bear?" I laugh.

Apparently some hospitals in Mexico do not offer pain pills. I wait by the bed, while your family sleeps outside on the stone benches in front of the entrance. There is interminable magic in their love. The moon shines for days, as they wait for word. Boxes of pizzas, Styrofoam containers of food and drinks collect the reflections from the glint of the moon.

Your father showers in my tiny apartment; his pocket is bulging with a fat wad of pink five-hundred pesos bills wrapped in a rubber band. Teenage guards make me purchase socks from the grocery store across the street in order to enter the wing with the patients. Your mother cries. If I was a bird I would fly; an owl senseless into the night. Warm wind my only language, dark dense open sky my only barrier.

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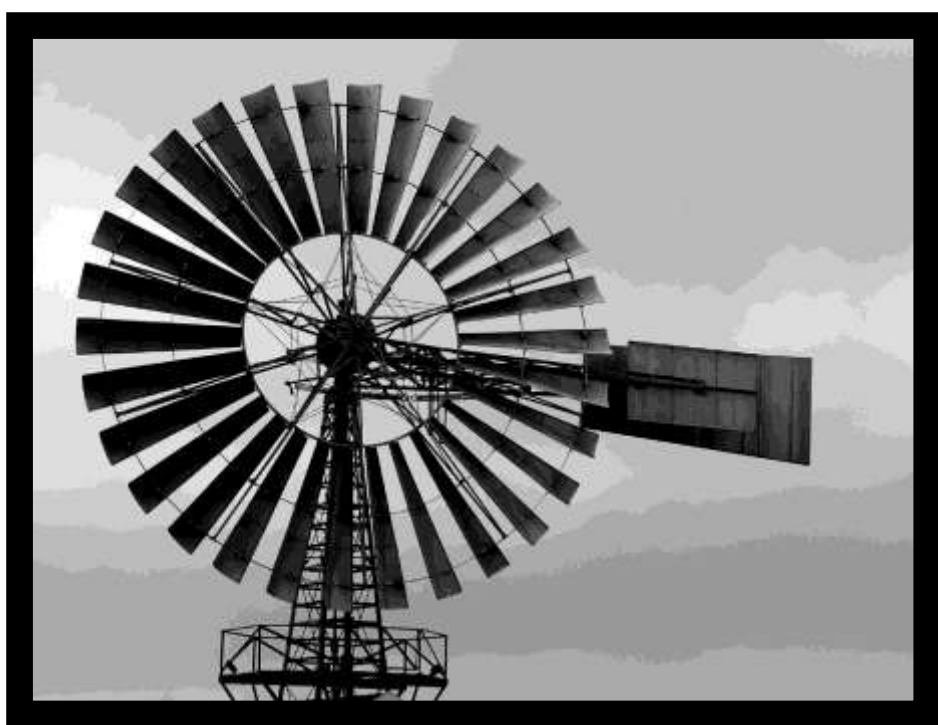


Image by G Schouten De Jel

Calling Home From A Phone Booth Outside A Pub In North Dublin

Bob Thurber

*"Calling Home From A Phone Booth Outside
A Pub In North Dublin" first appeared in Geist.*

Despite an icy northeast wind huffing across the bay I sneak out after dark, after my mother falls asleep clutching her leather Bible, and hike the rutted road to the frosted meadow to stand in mist, my shoes in muck, and toss my echo against the moss-covered fieldstone corners of the burned-out church where Sunday nights in summer for years Father Thomas, that mad handsome priest, would gather us girls in the basement to dye the rose cotton linen cut-outs that the deacon's daughter, a thin beauty with short white hair and long trim nails, would stitch by hand each folded edge then steam-iron flat so full of starch, stiffening fabric petals, which we silly Sunday school girls curled with quick sharp pulls of a scissor blade, forming clusters of curved petals the younger children assembled with Krazy Glue and fuzzy green wire, sometimes adding tissue paper leaves, all of us gladly labouring like factory workers rather than have to colour with crayon stubs the robe of Christ again, Christ with his empty hands inviting us to dine, Christ with a shepherd's staff signalling to another flock of puffy lambs, or naked Christ with a drooping head crowned with blackened thorns, and Lord how we laughed later when we went door to door in groups, visiting the old parishioners, the sick and bittersweet, all the near dead, and we dropped our bikes on the perfect lawns of dull neighbours, agnostics we suspected, hawking our handmade linen roses for a donation, bragging how each petal was hand-cut from a pattern drawn by Father Thomas himself, that mad handsome priest, who personally

told the Monsignor to go fornicate himself, saying he was a disgruntled altar boy calling home from a phone booth outside a pub in North Dublin, while I sat half-dressed, sniffing incense, giddy and drunk with sacrament wine stains on my panties, whispering my oath of unholy love while wiggling uncomfortably on the mad priest's lap, but God he was beautiful with a fine chiselled chin and perfect teeth and a smile that would melt the Madonna, and God he was kind with a slow gentle touch, never harsh or too quick, and Christ how that crafty devil could draw, imitate a rose petal in perfect outline, his sharp pencil slanted just so, the tip barely touching so that he could sketch and drink, and cough without jerking, without ruining the work, or tearing the tissue paper, thin as a membrane, which like a clean skin arrived fresh each Saturday delivered by the dry cleaners, tucked into the crisp black vestment, wrapped around shirt cardboard, pinned to protect the high collar.

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Image by Lars Sundstrom

Two Poems

Matthew Burnside

Be A Minecatcher

i'm not one to summon snakes
or dance upon the edge of knives
or bombard the earth with apocalyptic
hymn, skull full of dynamite

no, i'm a quiet, writerly type
i like sonnets. books where not
much happens. the sensible things.
i detest Jack Kerouac and rain
trampling tin roofs

but every once in a while,
the demon of that damned Kerouac
fellow finds me, and i find myself
playing catch with mines, shooting
thunder in the back alleys, swimming
through sewers, yelling at strangers on
the bus, slurping lizards through a
mouthful of mud



Image by R Stewart

in the dead quiet corridors of midnight,
cats appear at my window two by
two, gin-drip tails scratching glass
"time to spit out your teeth and dance,"
they say. i'm ashamed to admit i hear
these voices, but i know i'm not the only
one with blood on my hands

Meditations Of The Nameless Infinite

∞ tragedy of the fly
in the mud, a tiny fly writhing
crushed by the rain, wet wings go nowhere

∞ humility hymn
pelted crow on the roadside
wait for the night to obscure thy shame

∞ ode to fungi
mushroom mashed up against the shadowy edge
umbrella head bursting brilliant; the light is implied

∞ a shit rose
on the bathroom wall, a diamond-shaped shit stain
dreams itself abloom, for it knows not where it grows

∞ black rainbow

dark puddle on the rooftop, reflecting rainbows

could be gasoline?

∞ sprinklers

uptown, there are sprinklers to preserve the greenness of the grass & the whiteness of lilies

here, bouquets of scorched earth, broken heads like polished snake skulls

∞ icarus

don't you know it's a sin to give your son wax wings to sail to the sun?

..it's not the fall that'll kill him but the death leap from the floor

∞ the improbability of an airplane

somewhere in a cloudless sky, an airplane weaves oblique

nothing more improbable of flight, yet there it goes

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Projectile Sounds

Daniel Powell



Image by Isaac Bowen

That year, I learned about the Doppler effect in physics class. What makes the noise of a speeding car seem a pitch lower after it's sped by you. It was fall. My pimples were mostly gone but I was still fainting. I had not yet learned how to take the new refrigerator for granted--the choice of shaved or cubed was still exciting to me.

The second week we had the machine, it would not stop making ice. It was shooting and spewing it all day and night. The churning made the kitchen floor vibrate and we had to put buckets below the machine to catch everything that came out. I still remember the sound of the hollow plastic ricochets. The thing persisted. It howled when we tried to unplug it. The company serviceman took a week to come and when he did, an hour of expensive fiddling did not stop the problem, it just crippled it. The man installed an alternator switch that would allow us to slow down the ice-shooting motor to a barely-recognisable pace when we didn't need to use it. But it would always be running. A few cubes would still escape at night. Sometimes during an unpleasant silence at dinner, its faint whir would be heard in the background, a barely noticeable growl, the angriest plumbing and air condition gurgles you ever heard.

I had a party at my house one night, when all our problems seemed like manageable things to keep track of. I tried to be a passable master-of-ceremonies and patrol some critical order point around the kitchen and living room, but as usual, I got cocky. I gave in and went upstairs with someone. We were somewhere on the road to sweaty friction when she had to vomit and ran over to the toilet. Each retch-noise was inverted-sounding, a tape of someone's agony played backwards. She cried and asked me if I hated her. But I wasn't answering. Because a floor down, I could hear the refrigerator cranking and rumbling. The enormous whir and shake was in perfect sync with her spew. It shook the walls and rippled the posters of the bad bands. I heard a glass break and some guys yell out in a way that sounded amused or scared. But I could not be of anyone's service by then, because I had fainted.

I dreamt of a taller, prettier girl I did not know, holding the refrigerator's hair while it vomited ice into a bucket. I dreamt of someone I hated flicking his tongue over the alternator switch and making the refrigerator moan--it sounded like a hybrid of its own mechanical groan and the girly retch and a whistle noise I had heard once in a cartoon. In the dream, I blew my nose and salt and dandruff came out in huge chunks, like rock salt. The tissue I used was made of foam and hair and disgusted me out of sleep, the thought of which I laughed hard at in bed till I had calmed myself back to unconsciousness. In the morning, someone had slipped in the house's endless puddles and was bleeding on the floor. I called 911.

I was in the second weekend of being grounded when it started up again, this time yielding to no one. Eventually, the refrigerator was taken away and when that happened it screamed the whole way down the stairs. It screamed into the ears of the moving men and it screamed outside where the sound echoed off of the neighbours' houses. It did not stop, even when strapped into the truck. When it was driven away, the howl continued, except now reduced to a waning half-step lower, the Doppler effect concluding the experience with a diminishing, tapered defeat.

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Toro

Ian Gammie



Image by Jascha Hoste

To set the record straight, it's nothing like a can-do attitude. Sometimes I have a hard time just tying my shoes in the morning. Julie tells me to get Velcro, I tell her that Velcro is for monkeys in space. She says those monkeys are going to take over the world in a few years. Yeah, well, what can you do?

You know what else is out there, she asks me.

Yeah, I know.

I have no idea what else is out there. Odds are the space monkeys in those Russian satellites have evolved by now. I'm sure we'll find out about them a few years down the road. I, for one, am not worried. We'll have evolved by the time they accumulate the numbers necessary to launch an effective military strike. No more hangnails, acne or lockjaw; completely invulnerable to torn fingernails, clogged pores, and biting things that are too hard to chew. This is especially important if they put

buck shots in our food. Unlikely, but even monkeys have heard that there are no rules in war by now.

Sometimes Julie reads me the paper. I tell her I don't care. I like the old wars better anyway, the ones with swords and cannons. The ones that were dignified and chivalrous. She asks me if I would want to fight in a trench. I wouldn't.

We fight civilized wars now, she says.

Maybe, I tell her, but I'm not the right person to ask.

She adjusts my bandages. They're damp and smell like sweat. I feel guilty every time she has to touch them, but she says it's her job. Why did you get into this line of work, I ask. For the adventure. So did I. Was it worth it? Not if I have to wear Velcro shoes.

I didn't know what I was getting into.

Now do you?

She says I am a hero. I blush and she kisses my cheek until it goes away.

Does it hurt?

It does, and she looks like she believes me, so I give her a pat on the head. It's nice when someone believes common sense. Belief reassures that you have control over the immediate, even in the midst of a tailspin. I can hear the stewardess on the intercom, oxygen masks on please.

Julie kisses my upper lip and I consider returning the favour, but it's too nice a gesture to reciprocate without a sense of unoriginality.

What are you going to do when this is all over, she asks me.

Go home.

That sounds nice.

Depends if we win or not.

I think we will, I just don't know what.

She pretends to cry, but I know she just wants to get me wet. I try to brush the tears off her cheek. It's a tricky manoeuvre when your hands are in bandages. Get a tissue, I say, you don't want to spread germs in a hospital. That's not going to make anything better, like cooking a porterhouse for a vegan.

She smiles and kisses my upper lip again. I kiss back to make her feel better. It's the same goddamn story, always fighting goddamn Russian space monkeys.

Julie asks me if I saw who threw it.

Yeah, I tell her.

What did he look like?

Like a seven year old.

She cries again and this time I can't break her of it. I tell her how bad airplane food is and how innately-evil dentists are and how hippos are the rednecks of the animal kingdom, but she keeps sniffing and wiping at her face until her nose turns red.

I ask her to take the bandages off.

She tells me she can't, that there's too great a risk of infection.

Are any fingers still there?

I'm not supposed to say.

Wouldn't you want to know in my position?

I suppose so.

Honestly, I don't want to know. Doesn't matter that much if you've got one finger or none, point is it's fucked. Julie reads my mind and leaves the bandages on.

Can I get a smoke?

No.

Why not?

That stuff will kill you.

Anything will kill you, at least this way I know who's the culprit.

She opens the drawer next to my bed and steals my cigarettes. I tell her I need them for the articles, she laughs, but I'm not getting them back.

Julie asks me if I'm angry.

No.

I'm angry at the kid for pulling the pin. I'm angry at myself for having slow reflexes. I'm angry at Julie for taking my cigarettes. I'm angry at the Russian space monkeys for being so fucking foreign. But that's not all. I'm bitter, confused, self-conscious, terrified, demoralized, disheartened, disillusioned, dismembered, and displaced. I'm underappreciated, feared, forgotten, and I'm in a foreign place where everyone says hate and I don't even know the language. I'm an activist of a different kind in a hospital bed that shouldn't be mine, and I claim that I'm me, but I'm all these things, and not one of them sounds right.

All I needed to say was no to make her understand.

I tell Julie I've made a time machine in my mind and she looks at me like I'm some sort of gimp, which is ridiculous because the world is spinning and I haven't had a drop to drink.

Now I'm reading poetry in the street from a full magazine. Every syllable is a call that doesn't wait for the response and reverberates in free verse, begging for more. The colours are annoyed because any colour will suffice, but all I see is red and all I hear is toro, toro. My voice trembles at the inhale then explodes at the exhale, and I can tell by the thunderous applause that the audience is hanging on my every word.

The boy approaches the stage when my magazine is empty. He tells me he's my biggest fan and asks for my autograph.

Julie isn't impressed by my time machine, it makes her nervous. She thinks I'm going to get lost back there. I tell her that's ridiculous and she takes off my bandages.

The boy tosses me a pen and I pick it up off the ground. I can't give him my autograph. He is my biggest fan.

An odour is slipping out of the left bandage before it is completely unravelled and Julie looks worried. Did you know Velcro was invented for the space shuttle, I ask her. No. It was, not for the monkeys, but I bet they use it too. They are going to base all their technology on Velcro when they evolve. Can you imagine, I ask, an entire civilization based on Velcro?

The boy is frightened and is standing too close. I'm a poet and I'm an activist and all I hear is toro, toro. He is my biggest fan.

They pass over us every hour and a half. I wave to the Russian space monkeys sixteen times a day. Julie asks why I bother. I don't know what else is out there. She doesn't know what I'm talking about, but I don't expect her to.

I hear an inhale from my hand, and I can't throw it back. The boy is standing too close. Move, I say, but all he hears is toro, toro. He is my biggest fan.

The bandages on my right hand are being unwound now. The left is rancid and I don't expect the right to be any better. Julie stops before the final twist. She says she doesn't want me to look for awhile.

The grenade is a dull lump resting against my palm.

My watch beeps an hour and a half later and I wave again. For the first time I take a good look at my hands. Julie cried at first, she is such a crybaby. She can't even tie my shoes without crying.

I remember the exact moment when the grenade exhaled.

Julie kisses me again and again and says how sorry she is. Sorry for what, I ask. She gives me a cigarette.

The boy is standing too close. I can't let go. He is my biggest fan.

I ask her why she changed her mind.

You need the articles.

Please don't let me die.

She is quiet, and for the first time in a long time she doesn't cry. Just read the papers, she says, all the other heroes did.

I can't let go.

Julie's lips whisk the sweat away from the dimple just below my nose.

I can't let go.

You know what else is out there, she asks me.

Yeah, I know. He is my biggest fan.

Now I'm reading poetry in the street from a full magazine and I can't let go, I
can't let go, I can't let go

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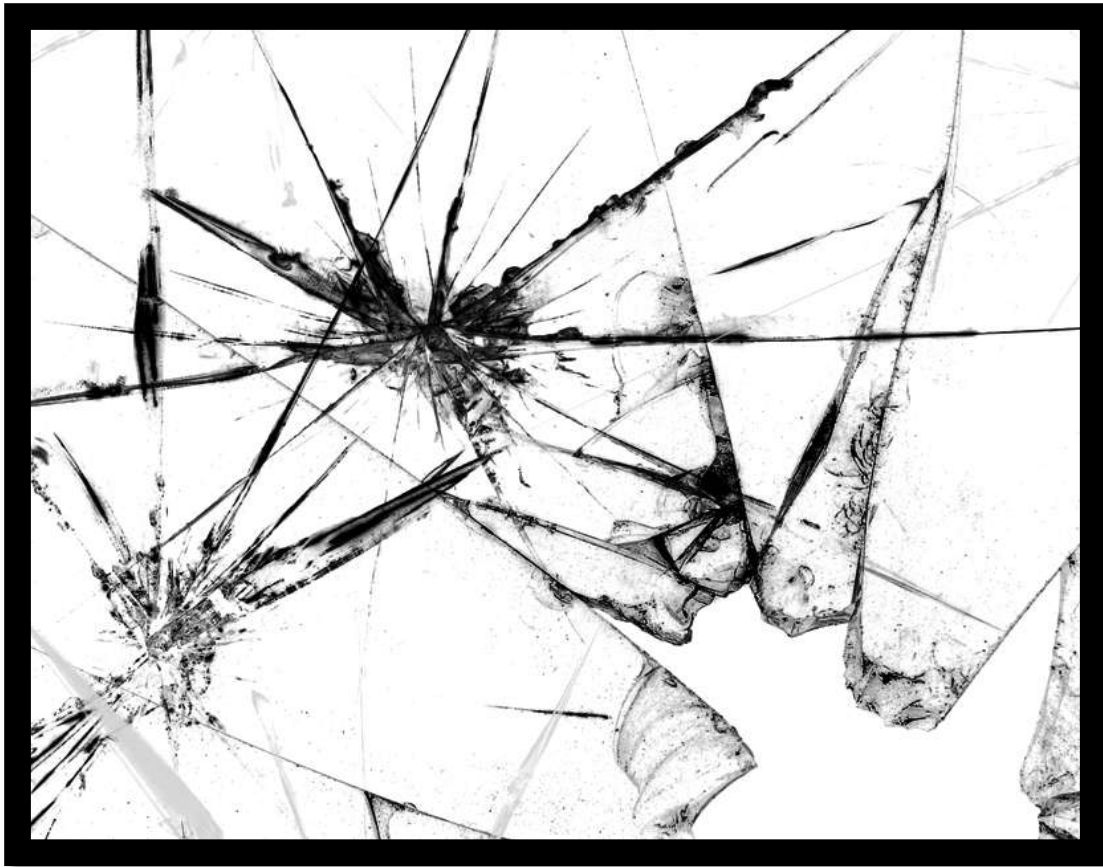


Image by Brandtner

Two Poems

Patrick McGinty

Recurring Dreams Of Socialite Weekdays

Her hands were strong and calloused from climbing

out of windows and strangers' beds;

her voice lowered from a shrill falsetto

into a gruff whisper after days without sleep.

We stayed in the apartment, counting walls and comparing answers

for seven days and, when we emerged,

our fingernails, which had become stained yellow and sharp,

dug into each other's arms at the sight of neon signs.

Some nights we slept on rooftops,

enjoying the moonlight's uncanny ability

to make our skin softly glow, momentarily erasing

the scars and blemishes that made us blush in sunlight.

Maybe it was the thinness of the air above the city,

but we spoke like servants bow

and force laughter at their master's slightest quip;

even in silence the conversation continued

with sideways glances and electric energy

singing static songs of white noise,

the noise of creation, between our withered bodies.

I ripped away calendar pages, folded them into paper planes,

and watched my days float over factories before crashing

to the asphalt below.



Image by Balazs Czitrovsky

Bright Young Things

We spoke sullen drama

in a cheap hotel room five miles from the city.

It was:

cigarette smoke, cheap wine,

and a mahogany coffee table

with an old

clay ashtray,

overflowing.

You said:

I've never felt so cliché.

Like an image clipped from a magazine

you sat with a curious plastic smile,

then hopped up to your feet,

fingers moving along the ivory keys of

an invisible piano,

hair tied up in a tight knot,

You said:

Watch me dance,

swallowed a pill

and smashed another wine glass

on the hardwood floor.

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Two Stories

Sara Crowley

In memory of Matt Kinnison



Image by Kat Jackson

Grief Triptych

Unnamed, unknown

I am telling an unnamed, unknown someone, that I dreamt Ed was still alive. But I am telling the unnamed, unknown person this in a dream. Even as I sleep, I know that it's complicated.

I see Ed twisting in pain on the floor. Thin as a greyhound, he writhes, agony screwed tight onto his pale features. I am glad that he is alive. I know he's suffering, but I feel relief. I exhale. Then I realise that he is dead, and I am dreaming. I tell the unnamed, unknown.

"I dreamt that Ed was alive."

They do not reply.

I am dreaming that too. It starts over. I don't know what it means. I wonder if it has to mean anything.

He comes shawling from the earth; brown, mauve, mud and clots. He is like a creature rising in Buffy.

"Ed?"

He does not answer.

In my dream I tell myself that I will figure it out when I am awake.

I am awake.

Imperial grief

Louise was cold despite her coat and mittens, and the scarf around her mouth. She exhaled into the wool; felt the warmth spread a little across her face, a ripple of heat, dissipating rapidly. Next to her stood three young boys, legs apart, feet planted on the clumping land, braced against the wind's pull. The littlest one wept and sniffed, wiping snot and tears onto his coat sleeve. A fat woman stood alone, lips clamped.

The mayor wore gold chains over a white shirt that gaped at the buttonholes. Louise's mouth filled with a metallic tang that she tried to swallow.

The hat he presented to her was tall and slender, something Dr Seuss would have drawn atop a gangly creation. It was palest green, soft felt. Louise placed it on her head and the others performed a brief, sparse clap.

The boys were given long baby-blue hats. The fat woman received a tall white hat, white being the colour for a child.

They held on to their unfamiliar hats as the wind tugged, not wanting to lose them.

Tiptoe creep

I hear it in deep night as I tumble into sleep. I jerk awake, heart banging, adrenaline whooshing.

I sleep in coffin dark, rehearsing, until the creak on the stair, the hum of the earth. I put on the TV, blare it away. You went first. Left me with this. I want it, I don't. Sometimes I think about not breathing. I hold my breath, count, inhale, exhale despite myself.

I try not to think about the lives feasting on you. I wish I'd eaten you myself.

Inside Vs. Out

It is another evening of ordinary sand. The moon worms, all mellow and white, glow shine over the laminated floor. Shay's bladder is full, and protesting with a thump of ache. Shay holds on nervously.

Last time she pissed tiny silver fish that roiled in the froth of her urine. She felt them slip from her as if greased, hundreds teeming, thish thish, into the toilet pan.

Before the fish were the iron filings, heavy and thuddish. They dragged her down to the seat and weighted her there until she was empty.

The rope that uncoiled itself in one thick plait had taken her hours to pass. Thousands of tiny gold bells had prettily jingled on the ceramic sides. Who knew what was inside now, along with the mucous and muck, the blood and the nightmares?

Bronze coins. Jelly tots. Small, milky teeth. Black stitches, safety scissors, a long, thin needle. Shay is afraid but she always looks.

The moon worms jiggle gleam as she fairy steps across to the bathroom. She sits, she releases, feels fur and sharp bite. She passes out.

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Image by Matthew Basham

Contributors

Arijit Sen is a third-year MFA student at Arizona State University where he has served as Prose Editor of *Hayden's Ferry Review* and Darts Champion of the program. In his spare time he pretends to work on an epic novel. He has been published or has work forthcoming in *Prick of the Spindle* and *Cantaraville*.

Matthew Dexter lives and writes in Mexico. He will also probably die in Mexico. This lunatic gringo has been known to eat tacos and drink beer. He belongs in an insane asylum.

Bob Thurber is an old, unschooled writer living in Massachusetts. Over the last decade his work has received dozens of awards, including The Barry Hannah Fiction Prize, and numerous citations, most recently a finalist for the Donald Barthelme Prize. His debut novel *Paperboy* will be released in the spring of 2011. Visit his website at www.bobthurber.net.

Matthew Burnside is a working writer in Texas, finishing up his Masters in Education. His fiction has appeared in *Concho River Review*.

Daniel Powell is a student at Syracuse University, where he studies English and hosts Hungry Matron Radio, a weekly webcast show featuring readings, music and audio plays. Visit his blog at ambiguitron.blogspot.com.

Ian Gammie is currently studying at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has had flash fiction appear in the *Catalonian Review* and authored a play performed at the

2009 Denver Thespian Conference. Next year he plans to study at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England.

Patrick McGinty is a young writer, currently pursuing a degree at the University of Maryland. Many of the poems he creates deal with the grittier (though not regretful) aspects of life. His literary influences include Richard Siken, Ezra Pound, Charles Bukowski, and Leonard Cohen.

Sara Crowley's novel in progress--*Salted*--was shortlisted for the Faber/Booktokens Not Yet Published Award and she is the winner of Waterstone's 2009 Bookseller's Bursary. Her short stories have been published in many lovely places including *Pulp.Net*, *Litro*, *Frigg*, *3:A.M* and *Dogmatika*. She blogs at **A Salted** and appreciates you taking the time to read this.