



SILVER APPLES  
MAGAZINE

Creativity Worth Consuming



**VERY SUPERSTITIOUS**

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# Silver Apples Magazine

*Very Superstitious*

Issue Thirteen, May 2020

*Creativity Worth Consuming*

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## Letter from the Editors:

*In which we aren't entirely sure what to say  
(there's a lot going on these days, isn't there?)*

Dearest Readers:

We all know that we're in this together, despite having to keep our distance. But hey, you don't need a preachy lit mag to tell you that—you've been hearing it for months now. Instead, what we want to offer you is this: a moment of escapism.

Whether you've dug up a book you've been meaning to get to, curated a new playlist of funky tunes, or gotten lost in some sort of trashy Netflix binge (re: Tiger King), we are turning to the arts more than ever to help us find a moment of peace in this crazy world.

When you think about it, there's actually no better time to release an issue that celebrates the wonderful (and oftentimes maligned) world of what some call "genre fiction." Gathered between these covers are ten stories and poems—and one one-act play—exploring the weird, the magical, the futuristic, and the uncanny. There are moments of horror and tension, but there's beauty to be found here, too. A perfect metaphor for our times.

So relax, pour yourself your beverage of choice, and peruse *Issue 13: Very Superstitious*. And stay safe and well, dear readers, because that's what matters the most.

Yours,

Gráinne, Alex, and Melissa.

# parvalorica fāerialis

E.L Harrison

Yorkshire-born, and on Friday 13th no less, **Ellen Harrison** predominantly writes poetry and fiction which she describes as 'super-natural.' Heavily inspired by the world around her, but often adding a dash of magic, myth, or mystery, it's nature – but not as you know it. 'parvalorica fāerialis' is faux-Latin for 'Fairy's Petticoat', otherwise known as the foxglove. Already flourishing with superstition, she felt it only appropriate to address the wildness of this pretty-but-poisonous wildflower.

Ellen recently graduated from Coventry University with an MA in Professional Creative Writing, and also holds a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from Lancaster University. She lives in Warwickshire with her husband and two cats. Since the beginning of 2020 she has held an exhibition of her green-themed poetry with *Positive Images Festival* in a collective exhibition on public display and will have poetry appearing in print in a forthcoming issue of *CovWords*.

utterly enchanting are Faeries' Petticoats  
in pink and white and blue  
delighting in the breeze  
intrinsic dancing rhythm  
blooms pointed at the heavens

and the flowers are well-spotted  
so the good-folk must be near  
sound the trumpets!  
ring the bells!  
can you feel the quake of thunder?

but careful not to meddle  
for it's to the dead that they belong  
trade a taste for youth eternal  
and make the soil fertile  
rich with blood and bone

and here darts the whispering bee  
our honeyed messenger  
intoxicated and immune  
passing on the bitter news  
that you've already gone

utterly enchanting are Faeries' Petticoats  
turn you from pink, to white, to blue

## Case #z0mb1-e

Sam Agar

I can feel it crawling under my skin and settling into my bones. Making its home in my blood. Drowning every organ, soaking every muscle. I haven't been able to eat since Monday. Spent last night twisted up in fever dreams, tangled in sweat-soaked sheets. I made myself a coffee this morning, but it was no use. I don't taste anything anymore. Can't tell if these symptoms are usual. There's still so much we don't know. A bad batch of psychosis inducing drugs. A contagious disease. A viral hoax. Radioactive monkeys. All manner of bat-shit theories were thrown at the wall, hoping to stick. At this point, it doesn't even matter. This mode we're in now is pure survival, and nothing more to say about it. All we truly know for sure is that it's not like in the movies. As with most atrocities, the reality is more horrifying than anyone could have ever imagined.

The consciousness remains but the humanity is gone. Whatever scrap we had left. Compassion, empathy; all melted away as the poison takes hold. Snaking its way through the body. Drenching every nerve ending with sheer brutality and ravenous fucking rage. This is all theoretical on my part, of course. I'm only evaluating the evidence as I see it before me. There'll be studies done, I'm sure, if we can survive long

Sam Agar has been writing for many years, enjoying a passion for fiction from a young age. Having recently completed a Master's in Creative Writing at the University of Limerick, a collection of weird and wonderful short stories is currently in the works.

enough to get to that stage. I think we might. Call me an optimist. An optimist with a healthy infection, an open wound and patients to treat.

About a month after it all started, they set up a makeshift base in the local secondary school. Medical, housing, supplies. Packed to the brim by the first week. When I offered my services, I had expected scorn and ridicule. To my surprise, they had gratefully accepted. Sign of the times, I suppose. It seems we have evolved, just in time for our demise. And so every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I take over the tiny storage room of what used to be the music department and declare myself open for business. Over ten years of study, two doctorates, one PhD and here I am, surrounded by mouldy music stands and discarded tin whistles. Mother would be so proud.

She's dead now. Gone a good few years, spared from the chaos of the day. It's for the best. There's no room in this world for a lady of leisure. No amount of flower arranging and book club can salvage humanity, although I'm sure she'd try, God bless her. When she died, I remember thinking it was the worst day of my life. It was the shock of it I think. Our father had been sick for a while. We had time to prepare, though it still hurt when it finally happened. For me, the pain lay in the things left unsaid. I remember watching him take his last breath, wanting to spill out everything I could never say. Scream it at him in one long, furious rant. But I didn't. Instead I held my breath against the sting of tears and swallowed my silence. And our mother grieved.

She had said she couldn't go on but ten months later, she had taken up golf and joined a dance class. She seemed lighter without him. It was as if she was enjoying her life for the first time. And then it was taken away from her. Mowed down by the 15b, en route to George's St. Wouldn't have been caught dead on a peasant wagon and in the end it's what killed her. It would be funny if it weren't so fucking tragic. The front wheel flattened her skull against the tarmac. Made pancakes of her brain and dust of her bones. That's what it looked like to me anyway. I had to identify the body. Steven and Maria left it up to me. The oldest always eats shit, as it goes, but this was a particularly heavy cross to bear. And I did it, no questions, no complaints. Stuck with me though, seeing her on the slab like that.



Had nightmares for years.

A knock on the door tells me it's time for my next appointment. My head's pounding and there's a thickness in my mouth I can't seem to swallow back.

"Come in," I call out, scrambling for my notes. *Who the fuck am I seeing again?* A thick mess of black curls poking through the doorway gives me my answer. Daniel from Clonskeagh. For the first time in 48 hours, my stomach grumbles. I cough to cover up the sound and gesture for him to take the seat opposite me. It's a tight squeeze in here. Our knees are almost touching. I want to shift back but my chair's already against the wall. My bowel chooses this exact moment to announce itself to the room with a loud gurgle. *Well this is fucking awkward.*

"So Daniel, how are you feeling today?" He takes a deep breath and looks at his toes. I can see his eyeballs glistening already.

"Alright, I suppose." He shrugs. He's a tough nut to crack.

"How've you been sleeping?" The question hangs in the air for a minute. He won't meet my eye.

"Not great, to be honest. I keep having this dream about..." he tries, but his voice crackles and he has to stop. I twirl my pen through my fingers. Waiting. He sucks the air in.

Has another go. "It's the same one, over and over. She's chasing me. Amy. And I'm trying to get away only I can't really move,

*He shrugs. He's a tough nut to crack.*

you know? Can't run. And she won't stop coming and then she's on top of me and I...I have to...I'm scared, you know, I'm panicking..." He shivers and rolls his shoulders back. Eyes closed, gritted teeth, he continues, "I smash her head in with my bare hands. And there's blood everywhere, all over me, everywhere. And then I look down and I can see...she's...she's..." A tough swallow and I can see his Adam's apple shudder. "She's normal."

"Normal? You mean she's not..."

He opens his eyes and with a whisper—

"I kill her for no reason."

I nod then, getting the gist. Survivor's guilt, at its purest. Daniel's had a tough time of it. Family of four and he's the last one

standing. The youngest was only seven months.

“It’s perfectly natural for you to be having dreams like this. To feel guilt or shame about what happened.” I tell him, trying to ignore the sting in my arm. A quick glance down and I can see the wound is oozing again. Dirty, yellow pus darkening my blue shirt. I cross my arms. “What you need to remember is that you acted in self-defence. As horrific as it was, it was necessary in order for you to survive. You mustn’t blame yourself.”

“But what if I was wrong? What if...”

“You weren’t,” I reply. A firm shake of my head to show him I mean business. “You did what you had to do. Your wife was infected. She was dangerous. She was a...”

“Don’t.” The word comes out sharp and loud. Bounces around the room. Falls against my shoulders. I catch myself. That was a close one. Almost broke the unspoken rule there. Personally, I think the denial of a thing can be just as dangerous as the thing itself, but for now I’ll keep my tongue. I’m sweating and it’s making my clothes stick. Another fucking fever. I can feel every nerve tingling, every pulse in my veins. A pang of hunger rips through my belly. Something in the air fills my nose and waters my mouth. I can’t put my finger on what it is, but it smells delicious.

Daniel’s in a bad way. He’s holding his arms tight against his stomach. Hunched over, rocking back and forth.

“I just wish the dreams would stop.” His voice is tight, the words pushed out with short breaths. “It’s hard enough...” As he turns his head, a fat tear rolls down his cheek. He brushes it away with anger, embarrassed by the emotion staining his skin.

“It’s really important that you try and find a way to forgive yourself over what happened,” I say as I scribble loops on my notebook. “Have you tried journaling, like we talked about? How’s the meditation going?”

“That fucking hippie shit isn’t going to help me,” he spits. I hide my sigh in another cough. The headache’s gone but there’s still a tension in my temples. My muscles feel tight. I’m a coil ready to

spring. He's saying something to me and I have to ask him to repeat himself. "Isn't there a pill or something you can give me?" His eyes are wide with hope as he waits for my answer.

"I'm a psychologist, I can't prescribe medication." *Where do you think you are you prick? Is there a fully stocked pharmacy in the staff room I don't know about?*

"What can you do?"

"Well I have had years of clinical training, and I specialised in PTSD so I think with effective talk therapy and perhaps through CBT we can..."

"Fucking useless," he mutters and it's a strain to keep my expression neutral. *Cheeky fucker. You've got an expert sitting in front of you. And pro bono too. I'd like to see the colour of you if I ever told you my regular rates. You're fucking lucky the world's gone to shit and you've got me here to pick up your pieces.* He's drumming his fingers on

*My voice comes out colder than expected.*

his knee and the sound makes me want to slap him. I watch the veins in his hand pulsate. The smell is getting stronger. I feel like I'm back in my mother's kitchen.

"I can't stop thinking about it," he says, and his leg begins to shake. I can feel the vibration of it climbing up my chair. "I keep going over that night, again and again. If I could just go back..."

"Well, you can't." My voice comes out colder than expected. I clear my throat and try again. "It's important to remember that you can't change the past. You have to try and accept what happened. That's the only way to move forward. And you can't keep reliving the events of that night. Every time you do, you're re-traumatising yourself and-"

It hits me then. That delicious scent filling up my nostrils. It's heavy in the air and it's coming from the sweaty, nervous heap in front of me. Clouding the oxygen between us. Daniel's in panic mode. Fight or flight, as we professionals call it. Adrenaline is climbing up his spine. That pesky pituitary under his dark curls is screaming at his adrenal gland, pumping stress hormones into every fibre and making my stomach rumble. The smell is something else. It reminds

me of Gruyere cheese; that fancy shit you get from Switzerland. Mother used to put it on her gratin potatoes. She'd pop them in the oven and the air would be dripping in flavour. I take a deep breath. Eye him up and down as dark thoughts flood my brain.

"Perhaps we could try a different tack..." I pause as a wave of saliva rushes against my teeth and pools on my tongue. My foot knocks against his. "I'd like you to take me through that night. Step by step." His face is white, all that gorgeous blood draining away from the surface of his skin. I put a hand to my mouth, resisting the urge to lick my lips.

"I can't," he says with a defiant shake of his head. I sigh deeply, as if I'm losing my patience.

"I really think it could help. You say you want the dreams to stop. This could be a way." I leave that hanging in the air as we consider each other. He's a lot bigger than me. Broad shoulders and a

*Three pounds of  
delicious, mushy matter.  
Marinating in trauma.*

solid chest. A lovely thick neck,  
just waiting to be ripped open.

Throbbing veins, ready to be  
chewed up and sucked dry. And  
that brain. Three pounds of

delicious, mushy matter. Marinating in trauma. I think I can take him. This hunger's giving me strength I've never felt before. I could end it right now, if the notion took me. But I'm feeling greedy. I want to savour every second of our time together.

"The only way for me to help you Daniel, is for you to work with me on this." We lock eyes. His glassy and narrow, mine focused and unmoving.

"I've never..." He rubs his face. "I don't know if I can."

"Remember, this is a safe space."

I set my face into an expression of concern as he takes in air. Three sharp inhales, one after another, and he's away.

"It was...she got attacked...bitten...Christ..." He stops. Shakes his head like it's still something he can't quite believe. He's blinking hard and he looks so pathetic I could laugh. Instead I frown. Pat his knee.

"You can do this Daniel. Go on." I nod and his head bobs along with mine. Eyes on mine, using me as his anchor.

“Tom from next door. Grouchy bastard, didn’t have a nice word to say about anyone. Never picked up after his dog. Fucking poodle used to bark all night, drove us up the fucking wall.” *Get to the fucking point, you big bastard.*

“Let’s try and stay on topic,” I say and his cheeks flush red. *Careful now.* He turns his gaze away. A wall of silence building itself up, brick by brick. I dip my head and bridge my fingers, the patron saint of atonement. “I’m sorry, Daniel. In your own time.” He keeps his head turned for a few moments longer, before surrendering with a broken sigh and looking to his knees.

“He got her when she was coming in with the shopping. Halfway in the door she was and...and we didn’t know at that stage, you know? Thought Tom’d just gone mental. Even tried convincing ourselves it was the fucking poodle. Couldn’t make sense of it.

*Got it from an old bint behind the school.*

I wanted to take her to A&E, but she said she was fine. I made her

go lie down. Then I put the girls to bed...” He breaks off. Puts his fist to his mouth and swallows back the tears. As if wanting to announce itself once more, the gash on my arm twinges. Got it from an old bint behind the school. A stray the security patrol must’ve missed. Old bitch latched onto me as I was throwing the rubbish away. Sunk what was left of her teeth into my arm. Took me about ten minutes to crush her skull against the industrial steel of the recycling bin.

Daniel breathes against his fingers, sinks into his seat and continues, “I was watching the news and I hear...heard Jenny scream. She’d been having nightmares all week so I thought...I didn’t go up straight away, I...oh God.” He rocks against the chair.

“You’re ok.” I tell him, tilting forward in my chair. Our knees touch.

“I waited till after they did the sports. Wanted to see the fucking football results. Fuck.” He cries openly now, his face red. *Nice bit of seasoning there, good man.* “She was...dead...by the time I got upstairs. I was too late...and I...I could barely recognise her.” His voice is low, not quite a whisper, but I have to lean closer still. “She was...I couldn’t...her...her face...” A deep, measured breath and he

meets his eyes to mine. The air is so thick I could take a bite out of it. "I called for Amy. She wasn't in bed." It's a whisper now and I'm almost off the chair completely. "I found her in the baby's room. She had Sally in her arms. And she was...she was..." He folds into himself, elbows on knees, head in his hands. The tip of my nose grazes a strand of his hair. I inhale deeply. It's like a drug this, it really is. Mother always told me not to play with my food, but I can't resist.

"And then you killed her," I say and he nods. "Bashed her head in." Another nod. His whole body is shaking. He's making odd noises, like a wounded fox. "You couldn't save any of them." A fresh wave of

*Mother always told me  
not to play with my  
food, but I can't resist.*

sobs erupts from him and my lips curl into a snarl.

"It's all your fault Daniel."  
This stops him cold. A breath catches in his chest, stuck halfway.

"What?" He looks up from his hands. Fear and anguish filling up his lost stare.

"You should've gone up the second you heard Jenny scream." I hold his gaze as I speak. His mouth hangs open, limp with horror. "You could've saved her, if you weren't so selfish. Could've saved them both. What kind of father are you? What kind of man?" He can't speak. Overcome with pain, paralysed by it. And I think he knows. He can sense if from me; see it in my eyes. Just like he saw it in Amy that night. Just like I saw it in Maria after she'd finished off Steven and his wife. Blood dripping from her mouth, our brother's scalp still clutched tightly in her fist. It was my idea to have us all meet up at the old house. Thought I could protect them, keep us safe. I didn't know she'd been infected already. Didn't know what I was getting us into. And I had looked at her in that moment and I'd seen nothing of my sister. Even as she called me by my name and told me it would be over soon. All that was looking back at me was a cold, black stare. An unforgiving hunger in those eyes, and pure unbridled rage. *There's a freedom in this.* Maybe I'll tell them that when they do their studies. If they can make it to that point. If they can survive me.

I pounce. He doesn't even flinch.

# The Message

Frank Roger

Malcolm poured himself a whisky and went outside, enjoying the late evening coolness. He didn't switch on the light on the patio. Enough light spilled through the windows to keep the darkness at bay. He took a sip, felt how the glow of the whisky spread through his body.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds. It was so quiet out here. His wife was inside, and his son was up in his room, no doubt gaming as usual. He cherished these moments of silence and loneliness. It was so peaceful. And the whisky added a very nice touch. He opened his eyes and took another sip.

He looked up at the night sky, admired the stars shining in full splendor. Would there be any life up there? On planets orbiting some of those stars? Could it be that someone out there was also looking up at the night sky, noticed the sun, a tiny star seen from that distance, and wondered if it had any planets that harbored life?

One star in particular seemed to be flickering on and off. He peered at it in concentration. Remarkable, he thought. This wasn't just another twinkling star. There was a pattern to it, as if it was being switched on and off at specific intervals. He studied the phenomenon for a while, his eyes riveted to the night sky.

**Frank Roger** was born in 1957 in Ghent, Belgium. His first story appeared in 1975. Since then his stories appear in an increasing number of languages in all sorts of magazines and anthologies, and since 2000, he's had story collections published in various languages. Apart from fiction, he also produces collages and visual art in a surrealist and satirical tradition. They have appeared in magazines and books. His work is a blend of genres and styles that can best be described as "frankrogerism," an approach of which he is the main representative.

He was right. Someone up there is trying to attract our attention, he thought. He's sending a coded message, for us to decipher. It's a bit like Morse. There's nothing random to it. There must be some form of intelligent life behind it. It was an unmistakable pattern. An alien civilization up there is trying to reach us, he concluded.

Whatever their message means, shouldn't we try to send them a reply? But how could he do that? He didn't have a powerful light source that would carry that far. And he would first have to decipher the coded message.

He took another sip, slowly realizing that, sadly, he would be unable to reply to the message from above. Then another realization dawned on him. Wait a second, he thought. How far away would that

*Would anyone still be  
there to receive it?  
Hardly likely!*

star be? A thousand light years, perhaps? Or more? Didn't that mean that it had taken the message a thousand years or more to reach him?

By now the sender had no doubt given up all hope for a reply. And even if he somehow found a way to send a reply, it would also travel for a thousand years before arriving at its destination. Would anyone still be there to receive it? Hardly likely!

He finished his whisky, went back inside to pour himself another one. As he returned to the patio his wife followed him. She sat down in a chair next to him and said, "It's so peaceful here. Cool and quiet. We really should spend more time here."

She noticed he was staring at the night sky and asked, "What are you looking at?"

He sipped his whisky, almost spilled some of it as he made a gesture with the hand holding the glass.

"That star up there," he said.

She looked up but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He examined the night sky but didn't see the star flickering on and off anymore. He made another vague gesture and sighed.

"I guess they gave up. There was this message, you see."

"A message?" she asked. "Who from?"

"I don't know," he replied. "There was no way to find out. And I must say the message arrived a bit late."



His wife shot him a puzzled look.

“I didn’t bother sending a reply,” he continued. “I guess the guy wasn’t expecting one anymore anyway.”

“The guy?”

“Up there.” He wanted to point to where the star had been but couldn’t muster the effort. It had to be the whisky.

For a few moments they just sat there in silence. He finally broke it by saying: “I guess I’ll never know what he was trying to tell me.”

His wife cast a glance at his glass and produced a short, dry chuckle. “Maybe it was a piece of advice.”

“Advice?”

“To cut down on the whisky.”

He shook his head, let the silence build up again. Women! Typically, they failed to see the big picture and focused on one minor detail that bothered them for one reason or another. There was this distant civilization trying to establish contact, an exchange of communication on a cosmic scale, and all she could think of was those few glasses of whisky he treated himself to.

After a while his wife went back inside. When he had finished his whisky, he followed her—on somewhat wobbly legs. Did she really think an advanced alien life-form lightyears away from here would send him a message about something as trivial as his slight overconsumption of fine single malt whisky? He shook his head. Women sometimes lost their grip on reality.

He went up the stairs to his bedroom, bumped a few times into the wall, but made it safe and sound. No more messages were forthcoming, neither from his wife, nor from his alien correspondent up there.

# What If It's All Just a Dream?

Robert Beveridge

**Robert Beveridge**

(he/him) makes noise  
(xterminal.bandcamp.com)  
and writes poetry in Ak-  
ron, OH. Recent/upcoming  
appearances in *Collective  
Unrest*, *Cough Syrup*, and  
*Blood & Bourbon*, among  
others.

Illusion keeps its pace  
with the outside world, slips  
on rare occasions. We  
somehow let ourselves believe  
we're better off with it.

Charlie the CPA believed  
matter was an illusion. He  
concentrated on disbelief  
until one day his hand  
was able to pass through his desk.  
He was fired the next week  
for being unable  
to answer the phone.

# Brigid and the Bard

Sadbh Kellett

The night drags like an overladen cart and I am its lame mule.

The Fir Bolg cluster together in Tara's heaving hall around tables laden with freshly cooked fish, deer, beer and imported wines from the continent, orange fruits from Galicia, and fresh cheese from the royal cattle.

The sight of familiar faces, now haggard and gaunt, flicker along the shadowed walls, kept away from the burning fire that lights the central hearth. I try not to look at them; most of us do not meet eyes for our burning shame. This hall with its fine woollen tapestries, engraved beams and high seat of immortal kings and queens is ours in name only, and we lost everything for it.

The throne to my left scrapes against the floor. The figure of my husband sinks into the chair of furs and the table is pushed forward inches as he sets his boot against its edge. I turn to stare at him, unsurprised by the brute gesture, but still disgusted. He grins up at me, his goblet of wine sloshing as he sets it too harshly against the arm of his chair. "Wife, you look so happy."

"You are ever so perceptive," I retort and shrug, meeting his sarcasm, "I am so full of sorrow because there is no one to sing your worth."

The beautiful king's mouth falls down

At 24, the Irish writer **Sadbh Kellett** currently lives in Scotland where she is pursuing a Master's in Modern Literature at St. Andrews. Kellett has published poetry and prose in Irish journals such as *The Attic*, *Nemesis*, and *Sonder*. When not writing, she loves to spread her grá for Gaelige and the Earth. Her piece, "Brigid and the Bard" is a short story that retells the tale of the first satire in Ireland from the goddess Brigid's point of view. Previously in Ireland, it was believed that a satire of a figure of power could have a detrimental effect on the subject of the poetry and that this poetic form could even lead to the destruction of a king's rule (something she likes to believe Irish writers still have the power to do).

in a mocking smile. He turns to those at our table busy in their own conversations and says, “Do you hear that? My wife, the lady of poetry, wishes so often for her bards to sing her songs of me.”

The Fir Bolg at the table glance up from their conversations and offer a heartless laugh. They care not for Breas the half-son of Balor. He is only a half-formed thing after all; his heart is tainted with ours.

Dagda had seen Breas as peace-giver; they all believed his intelligence equitable with leadership, his unique position as existing as both Fir Bolg and Tuatha Dé a clear indicator that he was the way to co-existence. They disposed of Nuada the armless on such a light whim as this.

I hate them all for picking this bastard over a good king who lost his arm to bring them home.

At least I am not the only one who suffers for it, at least their stupidity led to their endless, enduring misery.

Breas senses their apathy and his eyes flash between myself and his council, “I have decided to listen to her girlish requests. Perhaps her bards will sing of what I do to her in our marriage bed. Perhaps that will show her what such boasting does.”

*...at least their stupidity  
led to their endless,  
enduring misery.*

Now they laugh; they are always willing to laugh at me for I am not one of them, and Breas, in his desperation, holds me as his favourite playing piece in his bid for acceptance. He stares at me with those goading hazel eyes and all I can do not to dig my knife through them is think of our son. Ruadán would never forgive me and why should he? He knows not what his parents’ truth is, as so many sons do not.

“I believe you know the bard,” Breas eggs on and sits forward. Once, I had thought the slash of his mouth beautiful, the high-boned face and intelligent eyes enticing. Now they are cold and empty wastelands upon which my misery is borne out of. “But what, dear friends, happens, if the bard should woo my wife with his songs? A few pretty words could turn her mind to madness.”

I ignore his jaunt into mockery and pick up a crust of hard

bread which I slather in fresh raspberry jam. He will grow bored; any sort of reaction will only spur him on. In response, Breas slaps his hand onto my shoulder, hooking his fingers under my left collarbone. He digs them deep to hurt.

“You could not produce a bard of any worth,” I sneer, letting him hear my contempt. Artless. His is the basest of cultures. A king without understanding or care for the arts and sciences is no king at all.

“Oh, is that a challenge, wife?”

The talk of the upper table trickles away. I take a bite of my bread and swallow down the sweet jam. Cleaning my mouth, I sit back into my chair, ignoring the pain, and say without eye contact, “Facts are not challenges, they are truths. You cannot challenge a falsity with a truth, it offers no contest.”

He sniggers, which catches my interest. He cares not for the spoken arts; what little poet had bribed him off too much gold? I sit back and lift my hand in gesture for him to carry on with his performance he clearly delights in. My apathy grates off him, he wants reaction, he wants a spectacle of suffering. “Bring them forward so.”

Breas straightens his cuff and collar, climbs to his full height and bangs on the table with his closed fist. The conversations of

*“Sing us a song, my wife  
would test your skills.”*

the hall continue; they all pretend not to hear. He starts again with vicious rocking of the crockery that causes a plate to topple and smash off the floor, food flying. They can no longer pretend; all the startled eyes of the room have turned towards their High King. For a moment, I feel a well of panic that almost fatally ensnares my mind. “Bring forward tonight’s entertainer. We would listen for a story. Sing us a song, my wife would test your skills.”

The crowd mumbles. A hand rises here and there in offer when no apparent sign of entertainment proposes itself. The people of the hall watch Breas and then look down the top table.

I too am beginning to doubt, alongside much of the crowd, when a figure steps forward.

He is so thin. His fingers, once delicate lines, are hard. His hair is long but limp, his instrument is damaged and worn. The figure, gaunt and hollow, trundles towards the centre of the room where the great fire pit looms. He wilts as a rose whose head is now too much a burden for the weakened body.

“Cairbre,” I try to whisper, the sight of Ogma’s son stilling my scream of his name. Cairbre, blessed Cairbre. What have they made of him? He is not recognisable. What light that fell into step with his songs disappeared when Breas had enslaved his father? Where had this son of Étain come from? I try to recall when last I spoke with him, but my memory does not want to look back—there is too much darkness to wade through to the happier beyond.

“Yes, Cairbre,” Breas grins beside me, pleased with himself for finally breaking the wall I’d set between my heart and his taunts. The *The terror festers and curdles like it did in the beginning days of our marriage.* terror festers and curdles like it did in the beginning days of our marriage. My fingers twitch and I feel the sudden desire to leap out of my seat and tear at my hair, tear apart my body so that this sudden explosion of energy can escape. He will hurt Cairbre and I cannot bear to look.

“Cairbre came to us last night thinking we might want poetry.” Breas says this as if he expects us all to catch on to his jest. Some do laugh. “I, being a kind and generous husband, agreed to his request for I know my wife is so keen to hear songs and words once more. We will listen to this bard and hear what he would call art.”

Cairbre bows deeply, his head too close to the floor, his legs shaking under the excessive gesture. He is weak, weak from what? Where did he go? Where did he wander? I hold my breath as he sets his feet apart, firm on the floor, grounded, and he swallows. For a brief moment, his eyes flicker to mine and he offers his lazy, swaggering smile. A strand of his dark hair falls over his long face. He opens his mouth and I can’t breathe.

*“Never again will I go to Tara,  
To sing for the King himself,  
For that would require a king of brain  
Or one who shies from the fence.*

*The Fir Bolg of this turf, they shout at me  
“Send your songs to the Danann Queen”  
But there’s a hint in Balor living on Tory  
There’s always more to the story*

*I’ll take my lot as a begging bard  
In cloth made from stolen wool  
For the King has taken all the silver  
To compensate for lost goods*

*Or perhaps I’ll take to fashioning chairs  
I hear they’re loved in Tara  
Or perhaps I’ll take to cooking food  
I hear it’s loved in Tara*

*I once thought Nuada the best of Kings  
Armless though he now be  
But how could I ever love the King who  
Brought me across the sea?*

*Now I must sing under King Breas’s rule  
The throne may well be empty  
Its court an artless gathering of hens  
A rooster who is unworthy*

*If a King who lost his arm yet won  
Is incapable of rule  
Then surely a king who cannot lead  
Is neither the King in truth?*

*Never again will I go to Tara  
To sing for this King himself  
I'll join my kin in death or enslaved  
Till they find somebody else.*

*Never again will I go to Tara,  
Never will I go,  
Never again will I go to Tara,  
Never though it be my home."*

There is silence, and then there is silence of the loudest kind. The latter rings through the hall as Cairbre sets down his instrument and bows again, this time the gesture plain in its mocking. The fire crackles and ale froths but no sound escapes a courtier's lips. I look to Breas. My hands are shaking. The King sits rigid in his chair, his eyes unmoving from Cairbre, as if they converse through the silence. I can see the violence thrashing in Breas's gaze, I can see the muscles straining to burst under his skin. I have never heard a song as such, I have never heard such poetry, such anger and contempt rolled into a potion of words that tear and cut in ways *moing mhear* wishes she could.

I look again at Breas. Pale, withering Breas. How does he pick up the remains of his self? How could he ever have expected such?

I burst out laughing. It is erratic, bellyful laughter that rolls out into the hall and reaches the shores of the Fir Bolg. They join in until the entire hall is a chorus of laughter that Breas, despite his protests, cannot stop. He grabs me by the cuff of my neck, tearing at the stitching as he yanks me up to his height and lifts his hand to smack my face, his rings glittering with sight of the teeth they will take. "Go on," I hiss to his surprise, "I dare you. Show them all the bard's truth. Do it. Do it, by Danú's name do it!"

His hand hovers. I can feel the hard rock of a clutch on my neck waver, shake even. There are a thousand battles in those wide eyes. Rage. Mortification. Shame. Loss. They rise and fall to the laughter of



the King's hall. When he throws me back into my chair and orders Cairbre chained, I laugh through the pain, laugh because Cairbre has forged my weapon. The King of Tara lets his hands fall to his side as he takes in the inevitable truth of what his court are, of the little strength in his power. No one jumps to his side, no one is willing to protect him. His son is not here to stand for him. Even the guards who take Cairbre away seem rather aggrieved at the act. The world of this court has tilted in ways warriors could never bring about.

Breas will never recover from this.

# The Man Upstairs

Lori M. Myers

## CAST

The Man - worn; beaten; thin

Ed - (os voice) owner of the house

Alice - (os voice) Ed's wife

Katy - (os voice) Ed's daughter - age 7-12

Brian - (os voice + appears on stage at end)

Ed's son - age 9-14

**SET:** An attic containing an old trunk or two, a thin cushion or sleeping bag, a mannequin, some crates/boxes, broken chairs. Several old magazines/books are piled up in a corner. A large calendar is on the wall. The room is dusty; unclean, dim. There is a small window upstage. A door or trapdoor leads from the attic to the unseen downstairs.

**NOTE:** THE MAN has little dialogue, thus the script contains many suggested stage directions which the director may dismiss or add to as per his/her discretion. The suggestions denote the movement and psychology of the character. THE MAN is who the audience will see throughout the play, thus an intriguing visual filled with movement and emotion should be created. Time passes during the play; this is indicated with the crossing off of days on the calendar and with lighting and/or with music of the times.

**Lori M. Myers** is an award-winning writer, Pushcart Prize nominee, and Broadway World Award nominee of creative nonfiction, fiction, and plays. Her writing has been published in various magazines and anthologies such as *American Writers Review* and *Transcendent*, and her plays and musicals have been performed internationally as well as at theaters and schools across the United States. She is the Drama/Nonfiction Editor for the online arts and literary journal *Masque & Spectacle*. Lori resides in New York and is an adjunct professor of writing, literature, and playwriting.

Scene 1: [AT RISE, there is noise outside the window. THE MAN crawls through the window with effort, tumbles beneath the sill, then peeks outside. Slowly, he scans the attic. Handcuffs dangle from one wrist. He wears a dirty t-shirt and jeans/khakis, sandals. He notices the calendar on the wall. Suddenly...]

BRIAN and KATY [os]

[laughter - high-pitched; childlike; loud]

THE MAN

[startled; scurries along the floor to a corner; looks down toward the sound]

[Lights dim]

Scene 2

ALICE [os]

So you promise if I tell you a story that you'd both go to sleep?

BRIAN [os]

Yes, yes!

KATY [os]

We promise! Please read!

ALICE [os]

*(laughs)* Okay. This is a story about Peter Pan. *(pause)* "Late one night, Peter and his fairy friend Tinker Bell flew into the Darlings' house. 'Tink,' Peter said, 'here we are.' Wendy climbed out of bed happily, but she had many questions for Peter." Can you guess what she asked?

THE MAN

[listens to the story and takes delight in it, as if he is right there with them]

KATY [os]

Why he was there?

ALICE [os]

Well, Katy, that's a good question. How about you, Brian? What do you think Wendy asked Peter Pan?

BRIAN [os]

She asked him why he was wearing a sad mask and how his wings worked.

ALICE [os]

*(laughs)* Oh, Brian! Well, Katy was right. Wendy wanted to know why Peter had come to the nursery window. And Peter said, "I've come to the nursery window because I wanted to listen to your stories. I tell them to the Lost Boys."

THE MAN

[listening; lost in thought]

ED [os]

Alice, what are you doing? It's late. The kids have school tomorrow and I have to get up early.

KATY [os]

One more minute. Pleease...

ED [os]

No!

BRIAN [os]

Aw, Dad. We want to hear a little more of the story.

ED [os]

No back talk! Put away the book and get to sleep! Now!

ALICE [os]

Ed, please. They just want to hear a story.

ED [os]  
Shut up!

ALICE [os]  
(*pause*) Your dad's right. Time for bed. Even Tinker Bell gets tired.

[door slams]

[Lights dim]

Scene 3

THE MAN

[crosses off a day on the calendar. We notice several weeks have already been crossed off. The handcuff still dangles from his wrist. NOTE: Most times, when there are voices downstairs, THE MAN will stop and listen. He may not listen as actively if there is mundane conversation. As the play progresses, the audience should get the idea that THE MAN has formed a connection with the family]

ED [os]  
Brian, finish eating.

ALICE [os]  
Ed, if he doesn't want the rest...

ED [os]  
Stop, Alice. There are millions of kids who would do anything to have this food. Just this would make a meal. Brian, you listening?

ALICE [os]  
Ed...

ED [os]  
Look at your sister's plate. She ate every single bite.

BRIAN [os]  
Don't wanna.

ED [os]

What did I tell you about talking back to me? Huh? What did I tell you?

ALICE [os]

Ed...

ED [os]

Three bites and you're done.

BRIAN [os]

Don't wanna.

[We hear a commotion of chairs/dishes]

ED [os]

That's it. Go upstairs. To your room. No TV. Do it now! I'll deal with you later.

[silence]

KATY [os]

Can I have what Brian didn't eat?

[Door slams]

[THE MAN bumps against the trunk; falls; BRIAN's footsteps heard leading to attic. THE MAN runs around trying to hide. BRIAN appears at doorway and take several steps into the attic. BRIAN stares in the direction of THE MAN. The lighting is dim and so audience should question whether BRIAN and THE MAN are looking at each other.]

ALICE

*(crying)* Oh, my God. I can't live like this anymore!

[Lights dim]

Scene 4

THE MAN

[pokes a sharp object at the handcuffs still around his wrist. The wall calendar has more days crossed out; years are also crossed out and another year is in their place; some food is on a napkin next to him.]

ED [os]

The bird looks great, Alice.

ALICE [os]

I think everything looks great, if I do say so myself.

ED [os]

What do you think of your mom, kids?

KATY [os]

Smells so good!

BRIAN [os]

Let's eat. Pass the sweet potatoes.

ED [os]

Not so fast, young man. What do we do before we eat the Thanksgiving meal?

BRIAN [os]

I don't know.

ED [os]

Stop lying, Brian. You do know! What do we do before we eat a big meal?

BRIAN [os]

Uh...burp so we have more room?

KATY [os]

*(giggles loudly)* Burp! Burp!

THE MAN  
[smiles to himself]

ALICE [os]  
(*laughs*) Brian!

ED [os]  
Why the hell are you laughing, Alice?

ALICE [os]  
Ed, he was being cute.

ED [os]  
What do we do, Brian? Tell me. Now.

ALICE [os]  
Ed, he's just eleven. He's a child. He said something funny to lighten  
up the holiday.

KATY [os]  
(*crying*) Daddy, don't get mad again.

ED [os]  
What do we say before we eat a wonderful meal like this, Brian? A  
meal that little hungry children would kill for. Huh?

[silence]

KATY [os]  
Just say it, dummy, so we can eat.

BRIAN  
Fuck it.

[sound of chair; rustling; yelling; THE MAN rubs his head in distress]



ALICE

Brian, no! Ed, sit down!

ED [os]

What do we say before a meal, Brian! You know! Say it! Now!

ALICE [os]

Ed! Please!

KATIE [os]

Daddy, don't!

BRIAN [os]

...Grace! We say grace!

ED [os]

That's right. That's a good boy. We say grace. (pause) Dear Lord, we thank you for this wonderful food that we are about to enjoy this Thanksgiving. We are thankful to you, dear Lord, for watching over us and for the love and peace in our home...

THE MAN

[listens; takes a bite of food, grimaces; looks up]

[Lights dim]

Scene 5

THE MAN

[sleeping. The handcuff is now off and in a corner]

ALICE [os]

Katy, don't forget your books. Brian, here's your lunch.

BRIAN [os]

I'll buy it there.

KATY [os]

Bye, Mom.

ALICE [os]

Brian, I already made it.

BRIAN [os]

I want to buy it there. Bye!

ALICE [os]

Brian, don't forget your jacket! It's cold out.

THE MAN

[slowly awakens, sleepy. He crawls to the window, peeks out, then suddenly ducks beneath the sill. He looks frightened; takes a few deep breaths.]

[Lights dim slightly-Later that same day]

KATY [os]

Mom! Daddy! Anybody home?

BRIAN [os]

I am.

KATY [os]

Have you seen Mom or Dad?

BRIAN [os]

No. Hey, give me that.

KATY [os]

Stoppoooo!

BRIAN [os]

Stoppoooo!

KATY [os]

Don't repeat what I say.

BRIAN [os]

Don't repeat what I say.

KATY [os]

I'm going to my room.

BRIAN [os]

I wouldn't go up there if I were you.

KATY [os]

You're not the boss of me.

BRIAN [os]

There's a boogie man up there.

THE MAN

[listens more intently]

KATY [os]

Is not. You're just trying to scare me.

BRIAN [os]

Go see for yourself. I saw him this morning.

KATY [os]

You're weird and stupid.

BRIAN [os]

Don't say I didn't warn you.

KATY [os]

Weird and stupid.

BRIAN [os]

Big bad boogie man. He's crazy. Really crazy. He's gonna get ya'.

KATY [os]

You're the one who's crazy. Mommy and Daddy say so!  
[screams; KATY is heard running away]

BRIAN [os]

[shouts; running after her]  
Big bad boogie man! Big bad boogie man!

ALICE [os]

Wha?? Katy. Brian. What is going on here?

KATY [os]

Brian is trying to scare me.

ALICE [os]

Listen, you two. I've had a long day and the last thing I want is to  
come home to rowdy kids.

BRIAN [os]

I'm telling the truth. There's a boogie man in the attic.

KATY [os]

See, Mom?

ALICE [os]

Apologize to your sister, Brian. (*pause*) I SAID APOLOGIZE! NOW!

[slapping sound; ALICE shrieks]

ALICE [cont. os]

Oh, God. What's happening to us?

BRIAN [os]

I saw him. A man. He was ugly, with red eyes and horns.

THE MAN

[offended; feels the top of his head]

ALICE [os]

Brian, the only things up there are old and dusty.

THE MAN

[more offended]

ALICE [os] cont.

If you saw anything, and that's a big "if," it was probably a shadow or your over active imagination. And if past history is any indication, I'd lean toward the imagination part.

BRIAN [os]

You're just like Dad. You never believe anything I say.

ALICE [os] cont.

I'm tired. I can't deal with this right now. Both of you, go up and start your homework. I'll try to get some sort of dinner together before your father gets home. And, Brian, you need to tell the truth; always, always. Soon, nobody will believe anything you say.

[Lights dim]

Scene 6

THE MAN

[wearing a different shirt; it is ill-fitting. His feet are against the trunk as he lays on the floor doing stomach crunches. Some food is on a napkin nearby. there are now many x's and years written on the calendar]

ED [os]

(*angry*) Where's Brian?

ALICE [os]  
What's wrong?

ED [os]  
Answer the question. Where's Brian?

ALICE [os]  
At a friend's house.

ED [os]  
*(sarcastically)* Yeah, friend. I've seen some of his friends. Any chance he's been feeding his friends.

THE MAN  
[stops exercising and listens]

ALICE [os]  
*(sighs)* What now, Ed?

ED [os]  
I had a sandwich in the back of the fridge I was saving. That's gone. Yesterday, the ham from Easter dinner had chunks cut out.

THE MAN  
[slides food behind his back]

ALICE [os]  
He's a teenager, Ed. Teenagers have appetites.

ED [os]  
We used to have to force him to finish what was on his plate. Now he's like a garbage disposal.

ALICE [os]  
You're exaggerating.

ED [os]

Stop taking his side. He's the way he is because you let him do whatever he wants. And you believe all the lies he tells you.

ALICE [os]

And what have you done? He's your son, too.

ED [os]

An unfortunate fact.

ALICE [os]

The way you treat him. It's making him sick and nervous. Dr. Hanson wants him on these other pills. To "even him out" he says.

ED [os]

All he needs is some discipline, a hard line. Nothing else. It's what I got, and I'm just fine. And Brian will be too. You'll see.

ALICE [os]

He needs help, Ed. He's not right.

ED [os]

I don't want to hear anything more about it.

[door slam]

ALICE [os]

[crying]

THE MAN

[saddened by the sound]

[Lights dim]

*Silver Apples Magazine*

Scene 7

THE MAN  
[reading a book - "Peter Pan"]

BRIAN [os]  
[on phone] It's the only time I could phone you, dude...Did you talk to Cory?...one gram should do it...Sure, I got cash...Since when haven't I come through?...He's lying...I always mean what I say...Gotta go.  
Wanna smoke this before they come home.

[we hear the sound of chains; a door]

THE MAN  
[listens. Sniffs at the air]

[Lights dim]

Scene 8

THE MAN  
[could be dancing with the mannequin, trying to fix the chair, or doing some mundane task]

ED [os]  
Yeah, your friends. Your so-called friends. Go to your room, Brian!  
We're not discussing this any further.

BRIAN [os]  
Just wait!

ED [os]  
Don't threaten me! Go! I don't want to see your face!

[silence. Steps. Door opens. Slams. Steps]



ED [os] cont.

Now what did I..? Brian. What is that? Put that down, son. Stop, Brian!  
Son...

[sounds of struggle, furniture being knocked into/over]

THE MAN

[listens with concern]

ED [os] cont.

Noooooo...!!!!

[gunshot. Another gunshot. A thud]

THE MAN

[eyes wide; crouches close to the floor]

[front door opens; shuts]

ALICE [os]

Ed, I'm home. I'm starting dinner...Oh, Brian...What is that? What are  
you doing? (*screams*)

[one person running; one walking]

ALICE [os]

Oh, my God! Ed! Ed! Brian. What did you do? What did you do??? No...  
[gunshot. Thud. ALICE moans. Another gunshot]

THE MAN

[distressed. pulls at his hair and rubs his head as if he wants to pull  
out the demons]

BRIAN [os]

There ya' are, Daddio! Mommeeeee!

[front door opens; shuts]

KATY [os]  
Mommy! Where are you?

THE MAN  
[begins to scream; slaps hands over his mouth]

KATY [os]  
Mom! Where are you...? Mom.

[footsteps]

KATY [os] cont.  
What happened? Brian? Mom? Daddy?...Brian, what did you do?

[screams; running; gunshot]

KATY [os]  
Brian?!?! Please!!!

[another gunshot. Thud. Silence]

THE MAN  
[scurries across the floor, spinning/twirling confused, terrified]

[suddenly and simultaneously, THE MAN and BRIAN let out a maniacal laugh. THE MAN, confused and terrified again; several beats. Silence. THE MAN tiptoes to the door, opens it, listens. stays back in attic, unsure]

BRIAN  
What difference does it make? I'll tell ya what difference it makes.  
Voices in my head, screams gone now. Dead. Silent. Ah, relief.  
Freedom. (*pause*) Why, I deserve to be happy. Yeah, that's right. More  
than anyone. More than all of you.

THE MAN and BRIAN

Talking about me. All the time. Planning to do away with me. Call the cops. Going to kill me. Yeah, that's right. I had to do it. Had to. Hate you. All of you. Now look what you made me do. Look!!! The attic is no place for Peter Pan. No place. Shame on you, Mommy, Daddy, Katie! Stained the rug! Wet the floor!

THE MAN

[stares at the door; backs up; frantically searches for a hiding place. Silence. after a beat or two, THE MAN reappears; opens the door and exits the attic]

[after several beats, shuffling sounds get closer and closer; chains; climbing; gun barrel slaps against wood; door opens; THE MAN appears in doorway. he is blood-splattered; in chains as young Brian would be, a gun by his side; lights are dim; THE MAN stares out trance-like at the audience]

THE MAN

Shame Mommy, Daddy, Katie. Stained the rug. Wet the floor. Better now. Much... better.

[END]

# System Update Notification

Paula Dias Garcia

He waved his hands in a vague gesture, and all of the lights turned on.

Along with the lights came the alarm, a short but nerve-wracking siren, yelling at him about what he had forgotten to do. Wes had posted a reminder right up next to his bed a week ago, and still had managed to neglect it.

So now his day would be a never-ending succession of alarms.

The lights in his room blinked thrice dramatically and the siren shut down all of a sudden. *You have been warned.* He made a rude gesture in the overall direction of the ceiling—not really caring which device would be on the receiving end of it—and swung his feet out of bed. Luckily, he had never programmed that specific gesture for anything, so he remained capable of flipping off multiple tech appliances without any side effects.

And since he'd become of age, they'd even stopped notifying his parents.

His uniform was waiting for him in his closet as always, hermetically packed in a vacuum seal, still with a lingering chemical smell from the dry wash. In an attempt to recover the good spirits the alarm had trampled, Wes chose the casual variant of the outfit. It was Friday, after all. The fact that he'd be working during the weekend

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shouldn't be enough to ruin that.

The burgundy jacket on his back almost looked like leather, and the laces on his sneakers almost looked like they were about to start fraying. He'd feel almost grunge, if only he could get his black shirt crumpled. Because it refused his efforts—and because something about a perfectly pressed Nirvana t-shirt felt unholy—Wes zippered the not-leather jacket all the way up to his neck to hide the imperfection.

He left his dorm at a quick pace, bypassing the kitchen on the way from his room to the main hallway. By now, Wes was so used to being late that he'd start rushing before stopping to properly check if he was, in fact, late. As he turned into the hallway, though, he noticed there was only one other person there—a sign he was either on time or *really, really* late.

Wes smiled at the girl walking in his direction, making a point to keep his arms down by his body to avoid activating anything by accident.

'Hey, Julia!'

She stared at him with a blank expression, then turned her head slightly sideways to show recognition. Julia was at least two inches taller than she'd been a week before, which gave her a whole foot on Wes. Her hair also seemed vaguely different, the black of it shining with a bluish hue that he was quite convinced was new.

*...something about a perfectly pressed Nirvana t-shirt felt unholy...*

After an uncomfortably long pause, she smiled at him, a strained, efficient affair - Julia didn't spend energy moving anything other than the necessary components needed to qualify a smile -- namely, her lips.

'Hello, dear Wes!'

The voice was still the same, or close enough that it didn't matter, and she sounded genuinely happy to see him, even though her face betrayed no emotion.

Wes absolutely *hated* the new model.

'So, I, yeah, hmm...gotta bounce,' he stammered, slinking away

from her and keeping as much distance from her as physically possible in the enclosed space as they crossed paths. *As much distance* wasn't that much, and he heard the faint crackle of static as his jacket rubbed against her arm.

Julia turned around to track his progress in a ballerina pirouette—body steady, eyes fixed at a point, arm delicately following her movement as she raised it to wave.

'Farewell, Wes!'

Wes nodded and kept moving, reaching the stairs and taking it down two steps at a time, covering the seven floors in a matter of minutes, now equally in a rush to reach his work and to leave Julia behind.

'*Farewell, Wes,*' he mocked under his breath, mimicking the dramatic flair she put in everything she ever did.

*...body steady, eyes fixed at a point, arm delicately following her movement as she raised it to wave.*

He was being unfair and he knew it. It wasn't notions that made Julia speak like that, but rather the knowledge that being caught on camera blubbering around—like he'd just done—would swiftly end her journalism career. Julia should speak correctly or not at all; still, the

theatricality of that *Farewell, Wes* did not bode well, and the ominous undertone infuriated him.

The stairs led him straight to the underground train, so Wes wouldn't have to face the indignities of the weather outside. According to his tablet, it was raining—again—so he was grateful for that small blessing.

Taking a quick scan of his surroundings, Wes quickened his pace to go through the train doors the moment they opened for another passenger. He kept his hands tight against his legs, fingers curled, and slyly went past the scanner.

The passenger looked back with a mild expression, but the way she shrunk her shoulders and took two steps away from Wes made her disdain abundantly clear. As of yet, she just hadn't learned how to control the facial muscles of the new model well enough to manage

dirty looks.

Wes pretended not to notice and hid away by the back of the wagon. He didn't want to speak to anyone, didn't want to make eye contact, didn't want to waste his time interpreting confusingly bland facial expressions. He just wanted to get to work to sort out his problem as quickly as possible.

The train was strangely empty all the way from the dorms to his department. Wes began to wonder if he hadn't missed his schedule by a *lot*, but he kept on going. Now it was something of a mind game to himself—*how long could he resist checking the hours?*—and the prize was that, if he managed all the way to the office, then he wouldn't be late at all.

He managed to avoid the scanners on the way out of the train, but there was no way around it as he arrived at his department's entrance. There was nobody around, not when he showed up and not in the fifteen minutes he spent loitering, hoping for anyone to save him from embarrassment.

When he understood no one was coming, Wes lifted his hand to the sensor next to the door and let it scan the

*The train was strangely empty all the way from the dorms to his department.*

chip imbedded in his palm. The door to the building swung open, but the alarm came along with it, the shameful siren announcing to the empty space what Wes had neglected to do. The lights above the entire office floor flickered three times, and then silence.

Wes rushed to his table, grateful for all the empty cubicles bearing witness to his shame, despite getting a rush of uneasiness from the sight of them. He sat at his desk and snapped his fingers twice without thinking about it. The gesture he had programmed as an intern had become almost a nervous tick.

The siren exploded all around him, the lights blinking in madness. For the first time in his entire life, the computer did not turn on at the sound of his double snap. Wes crossed his arms above his head in desperation, like a child signaling he wanted to be off this ride immediately, trying to de-activate something, *anything*, even though he knew it wasn't going to work.

His boss came out of his office and started walking towards Wes slowly, taking it all in, and then stood next to his cubicle, arms crossed against his chest. So someone *had* been around.

In his face, an exaggerated expression of pity. Apparently, the new model required enormous effort to control the facial muscles, so now people had to choose between no expression or a gruesome gargoyle version of human emotion.

Graham had gone with *gargoylean*.

In his raspy voice, he repeated what the alarms had been blaring at Wes since he had gotten up that morning.

‘You have a System Update pending, Wes.’

‘I know, I know! If you could just turn on...’ Wes felt his cheeks flush red as his boss tsked at him. Even as he burned with shame,

*“You haven’t been following the news, now have you?”*

Wes felt a pang at the knowledge that burning cheeks would probably be gone at the next update, and that was the last time he’d be visibly embarrassed in public.

*Good riddance, but ah. Goodbye.*

Wes looked from the computer to Graham, trying to get him to hurry without having to tell him, but Graham still had that pitiful, impassive expression.

‘You’re obsolete, Wes,’ he said, too slowly. He either hadn’t mastered the new model or he thought Wes was very stupid.

‘I know! I know, but if you could give me access to the office computer, I could download...’

Graham shook his head slowly, his pity becoming an even more unconvincing version of sadness. Wes wondered if his anger and exasperation was visible in his red face.

‘You haven’t been following the news, now have you?’

Something slid into place and clicked in his mind, and Wes physically shook his head to try and shake the bad thought away. His newsfeed had glitched weeks ago, but Wes hadn’t rung assistance because of how much happier he’d felt without it. Nobody needed to know he wasn’t keeping up.

It had never occurred to him that he might have missed



something important, that there was actually content there he *needed* to know.

'There's no new updates for you, Wes,' Graham went on when a reply didn't come.

'So how am I...?'

'Wes. Your model has been discontinued.'

His words echoed in the space, and the emptiness of it suddenly became loaded with a dark promise.

'No,' he said, not angry, not pleading, but *explaining*. If he could only convince Graham that it wasn't so, then it wouldn't be. 'They can't do that.'

'*They?*' Graham repeated, managing a hint of mockery.

'It's not fair. They can't do that. It's not how it works,' Wes kept on, panic rising in his chest, and suddenly he was twelve again, trying to convince his mom his cat wasn't really dead—couldn't be—and deep down he knew that if he made a case strong enough for his argument, reality would *have* to follow along.

Graham was as unmoving as his very dead cat.

'If you'd been seeing the news, you'd know that the new model is compatible with your operational system.'

*Graham was as  
unmoving as his  
very dead cat.*

'AND HOW DO YOU PROPOSE I PAY FOR THE NEW MODEL?'

Graham shrugged his shoulders, a gesture that included all of his new and upgraded body. More handsome, more fit, more *neutral*. In that minor gesture, he seemed to say, *If I paid, why couldn't you?*

And in all fairness, Wes could have afforded it. If he'd bailed on the weekend trip he'd been planning for months, or if he'd kept his food shopping to a bare minimum, or if he hadn't splurged on his grunge jacket—he could have pulled it off, and all it would have cost was everything that brought him any joy in life.

If he did all the extra hours and none of the living, then, then he could have gotten rid of his ridiculous body, with its stammering and blushing cheeks and panicky lungs—then he could have been one of them and not crinkle around the eyes when he smiled.

'I feel for you, Wes,' Graham said. 'I feel very sorry.'

'YOU FEEL FUCK ALL!' Wes finally blurted, and Graham's expression melted back into clinical apathy. Seemingly Wes was no longer worth the effort of struggling with an expression of genuine pity.

Wes wasn't worth much of anything anymore, he realized.

*'But I'm still working!'* he whined at Graham, knowing he was begging but unable to stop.

'That is the problem, now, isn't it?' Graham replied.

Then he waved his hand in a vague gesture, and all of the lights went off for Wes.

# Three Past Lives as Seen Through Smoke

Avra Margariti

i.

I spent some time in an iron lung,  
itchy and bored out of my young mind,  
my right-hand neighbor whistling bird calls  
or wanting to play games with our tongues.  
The machine wasn't meant to keep us breathing.  
We weren't sick, merely too-powerful.  
My neighbor stuck her forked tongue in my ear,  
giggling, *it's time*.  
Me and the rest of the children gathered our powers  
and broke our iron shackles,  
ready to take on the entire secret laboratory  
just in time for desert too.

ii.

I was a coven mother, an oracle of carnival  
fame and fortune.  
*Come right up, my witchy children called to passers-by,  
put a coin in our colorful machine  
powered by mice running on a prayer wheel,  
spitting out butcher-paper prophecies.*  
I counted my coins like blessings at the end of the long day,  
fed soft cheese to my mice companions  
and retreated to my funhouse home of mirrors  
where all dreams look like prophecies  
and all prophecies like pipe dreams.

iii.

Spelunking in underwater caves,  
seapunks dressed in diving suits:

green, magenta, blue--  
a rainbowed oil slick.

Little mermaid and tentacled witch all bundled into one,  
helping others discover their sea legs, their siren voices,  
their legacy.

When divers try to catch me in their nets,  
all they get is a handful of seafoam.

Avra Margariti is a queer Social Work undergrad from Greece. She enjoys storytelling in all its forms and writes about diverse identities and experiences. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Flash Fiction Online*, *The Forge Literary*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Argot Magazine*, and other venues. Avra won the 2019 Bacopa Literary Review prize for fiction. You can find her on twitter @avramargariti.

## Doppia Sepoltura

Claire Loader

Loredana. All I wished was for her to rest, to nod her head to the flickering room, the sandstone alcove of our daily meeting place. They had closed her eyes at least, the slowly sinking spheres behind her wilting features trickling down like the waters of the island. Her hair had been luscious once, had fallen about her face like the laurels of her name, a dancing field now confined to the dark walls of purgatory—of hers and of mine. “What is life,” they asked. They on pulpit, us on pew. “Only those who face death will truly know.”

I had known death now for months. Known her forms, known her smells. Known those creatures that made feast with both. I had tended the essence of the human form as it fell away in my hands, as I dressed it again and again. Was this what I must understand? That we are reduced to these walls, to these stones, that we are in fact the dark chambers of death?

A cough roused me from my prayers, the shuffling of feet at the narrow entranceway signalled for my knees to part with the hard surface of their communion. I looked up from my meditation, the slumping spectre of mortality staring back, watching me from hollowed brows, mocking me from its throne of decay.

The air felt cool as it greeted me on

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the surface, felt thin, no longer threatening to drown me in its turgid brume. I took my time walking the gravel path, sea spray sifting through the morning sky, the softness of a day just woken tonic to my aching limbs.

It was customary coming from the crypt to join the morning meal, but I never felt like eating. Instead I would slip away to the sleeping quarters, hoping that the fresh water waiting in its ceramic hold would be enough to wash away the night's ritual. It was never enough.

*You look better in this light.*

I knew she would be there, waiting for my assent, the visceral form of my inner workings sitting quietly at the edge of the bed. I moved as if she wasn't watching, washed the smell of dust from my skin as if her own wasn't leeching

*I had known Loredana  
only fleetingly in life  
but knew her far  
better now.*

into the linen beneath her. I hadn't told of the apparitions, the voices coming daily. I was afraid of what to say. That they were God's, that they were hers, or more frighteningly still, that they were my own.

*Come, mia carissima, why won't you sit with me.*

It hadn't been of choice to come to Ischia. My parents were happy in their own souls to send me here without regards to my own.

"To be closer to God," they said, with no mention of the means. "To know your own mortality is to know another's intimately."

I had known Loredana only fleetingly in life but knew her far better now. What slipped away first, what of her then stubbornly clung to bone. How it was as she met herself again, pooling into the waiting vessel set beneath her chair.

The sickness had come swiftly, reaching up even into the craggy peaks of the island convent. Fever, night sweats, the metallic bite of blood as those who succumbed coughed themselves to their own end. She had taken ill not long after I arrived, my life of daily prayer quickly moved underground, as the life stole from her body and I became it's keeper.

The door to the hall suddenly opened, Sister Martina's face

enquiring from the entrance, the dark stains upon my bed suddenly gone.

“Have you taken breakfast, Sister?”

“Sì, Sister Martina. Grazie.”

Alone, the phantom did not return, but I felt the dark walls of our prison heavy on my skin, felt my empty stomach sigh like the still chamber of the putridarium, waiting silently for its evening prayers.

I took my leave of the main convent buildings, walked my way to the quiet edges of the sea cliff, the turquoise blue of the water below shimmering as I sat against a chestnut tree. I felt weary, light-headed. Eyes closed to the sun, I hoped the warm heat of her rays would clear my mind of its daily task, but the images lingered, the slow trickle of life as it dripped away a constant background to my waking thoughts.

*Alone, the  
phantom did  
not return.*

I wondered how long it would be, how many more nights it would take for her bones to finally fall, before we could place them delicately in their ossuary—white, pure, renewed. I wondered where it was we truly went, if her soul really was stuck in the grey haze of in-between, wandering the dark moors of limbo alone.

My body suddenly shuddered at the thought, my throat seizing as I began coughing uncontrollably. Shakily standing, I placed my hand over my mouth, thick spools of hot liquid coating my throat, my lips, my fingers. The sharp glare of red unmistakable on my trembling hands.

*Soon, mia carissima, you will know.*

## Shapes

John Grey

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Transcend*, *Dalhousie Review*, and *Qwerty* with work upcoming in *Blueline*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Clade Song*.

Shapes rustle in the trees.  
And ripple across the lake.  
And hunt for hare like foxes.  
And roll their unwelcome mats  
up to the house.

Shapes straddle the moon,  
pave the roads to and from,  
are mostly silent in the dead of night,  
but make sounds when  
they can't help themselves.

Shapes are restless,  
mount winds and ride  
or flutter like moths  
around street lamps,  
of reimage the clouds  
for their own ends.

Shapes are at the window.  
They're crawling up through pipes.  
And creeping across the ceiling,  
blotching the walls and floor.  
Shapes are everywhere.  
Shapes are not your friends.



# Toast

Srijani Ganguly

Their love for her had been a gradual thing. When she had bought them, one by one, although the kettle and the coffee machine had come together as a part of a deal, they had refused to respect her. They couldn't disobey her, of course; that went against their principles. But none of them, not even the simple-minded toaster, wished her good morning or asked her about her day when she came home after work.

But then, one day, she fell ill and spent her whole day on the tiny sofa in the kitchen. She kept making tea and heating store-bought soup in the microwave. Seeing her that way, so weak and fragile, made them realise she was not like other humans; the ones who made them, shouted at them to work better and faster; and the ones who kicked them around in stores when a potential customer did not buy them.

No, their human was not like them.

She had been sweet to them before, too, but they had ignored that. Now they eagerly waited to see her in the kitchen, to have her cup of coffee ready in the morning, to serve toast and an omelette the way she preferred, even before she asked the toaster and stove to do so.

"How are you today, my darlings?" she would ask them.

"Very well, ma'am," the fridge would

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answer, their chosen spokesperson.

“Not having trouble with wirings or anything, I hope?” she would ask the toaster.

“No, ma’am.”

“And you?” she would turn to the oven. “You don’t feel overheated, do you?”

“A bit, ma’am. But this—”

“Oh no,” their human would say. “That won’t do. That won’t do at all. I’ll call the repairman right way.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” the oven would reply in gratitude.

“Isn’t she just the sweetest?” the kettle would ask the coffee machine once she went away.

“She lightens up my mood,” would be the answer. “And you know how dark my thoughts get when I am idle and—”

*She gasped at the sound, looking at her appliances for assistance again.*

“Yes, indeed,” the microwave would interrupt. “You’ve told us about your ‘melancholic temperament’ before. We remember.”

This bond of theirs grew stronger and stronger, especially after a thief tried to rob them one night. He bypassed the security system somehow, sedated the cameras and the television in the sitting room, and crept upstairs into the other rooms. He had thought to steal her wallet and other valuables from her bedroom, but she had been in the kitchen then, on her phone, buying a new jacket for herself. She was just about to type in her card number when she heard him rummaging around upstairs. The fridge and microwave, who were awake with her, had heard, too.

She turned around to look at them.

“What should I do?” she whispered.

“Call the police,” the fridge urged quietly.

“And lock the kitchen door,” the microwave added softly.

She dialled the number for the police and tiptoed across the floor, to the door, and clicked it closed. She gasped at the sound, looking at her appliances for assistance again, and they (all of them were awake now) told her to move towards the stove. “Get inside the

cupboard next to me; the vessels are in the dishwasher so the space is empty,” it said. She hopped inside and a beep sounded on her phone. A voice greeted her on the other side and asked her what was wrong.

“I think I’m being robbed.”

“I see. Are you safe? What’s your address?”

She told the voice and in a few minutes heard the front gate opening, shouts erupting overhead, and a knock on the kitchen door.

“It’s alright; we’ve caught the thief,” came the tell-tale voice of a police android. “You’re safe now.”

Later, when she recounted the night to the three lawful robots, she made sure to include the role her kitchen appliances had made. “I wouldn’t have been alive if my fridge, microwave and stove hadn’t helped me. I owe everything to them,” she added. And the police said the same, when they recounted the incident to their contacts at the local newspaper.

*...their human had started sleeping on the sofa in the kitchen*

Everyone loved the story, and it spread like wildfire all over the state, the country, and the continent. Inside the house, things couldn’t be better. And now that their human had started sleeping on the sofa in the kitchen—she said she felt much safer there—the appliances felt even more in tune with her. Even before she could voice her thoughts, they would have things ready for her. But then, one day...

“How are you today, my darlings?” she asked them.

“Very well, ma’am,” the fridge said, presenting her with a glass of water.

“And you?” she turned to the oven. “You don’t feel overheated, do you?”

“Not at all, ma’am.”

“And you’re alright as well?” she asked the toaster. “Not having trouble with wirings or anything, I hope?”

But the toaster didn’t reply. It sat there motionless, and everyone around it tried calling out to it, but it still didn’t move. Their human moved towards it, frowning in thought, and the moment she touched it, she froze in shock and dropped down to the floor.

“What just happened?” the oven spoke in the shocked silence that followed.

“Is she—?” the coffee machine asked, just as the toaster sparked back to life. “Wha- what happened? I thought I was—my wires they...oh no,” it finally said, noticing the dead body. “Did I do that?”

“Yes,” the microwave sighed.

“Oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no,” the toaster kept chanting.

“Do we call the police?” the tea kettle asked.

“Yes, I’ll do that,” the fridge said, contacting its emergency services.

“She was the best human there ever was,” the stove remarked.

“I didn’t mean to,” the toaster was saying now. “I just got paralysed; the wires inside me were acting up. And...and I couldn’t help it. There must have been a surge of electricity passing through me. Then when...when—”

The others ignored it, occupied with their own grief. Never had they been confronted with death, a human’s that is, and so they didn’t know how to react. The oven wondered if the fridge should open its doors to keep her body cold when it suddenly noticed the toaster hopping across the counter in front of it.

“What are you doing?” it asked. “You are still connected to your plug point. Where are you going?”

“It’s my fault,” the toaster kept repeating. “It’s my fault. It’s my fault.”

Before the others could say anything else, it hopped inside the sink, activating the water sprout, and caused a short circuit that travelled through the plug point into the main fuse board. A spark lit up, somewhere along the way, killing every electrical object inside the house, and then built itself into a small flame. By the time the fire brigade was called in, the entire building was ablaze.

Thank you for reading Issue Thirteen:  
“Very Superstitious”

The submission window for  
Issue Fourteen: “Reconnection”  
will be open from June 15th to July 31st.

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# SILVER APPLES MAGAZINE

Creativity Worth Consuming

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*Creativity Worth Consuming*

***Confessions from the back page:***

*Cheese makes my face so tingly.*