

# The Mark Literary Review

Edition Seven

*June 2019*

Content Warning: This edition contains images of  
violence that may be upsetting to some readers

# *Contents*

Dodging Fridges	Martin Webb	3
Small Towns	Loukia Borrell	6
Undercity	Renato Barucco	7
Baghdad Iraq: The Armorer	Paul David Adkins	17
Antique	Brodie Lowe	19
Earthworms	Morgan Russell	34
The Cookout	Liz Wride	35
Inundation III	Philip Berry	47
Pull the Chain	Kushal Poddar	48
School Supplies	Lauren Lansford	49
Nature	Tom Pryce	50

# *Dodging Fridges*

## Martin Webb

A fridge dropped out of the hellish night sky, shattering as it hit the asphalt. Shrapnel rained over us and I instinctively turned away from the detonation. This was nothing unexpected, although in hindsight I really should have remembered to stay vigilant.

Johannesburg's city centre on New Year's Eve was a whirl of chaotic, mindless fun. This quest for exhilaration was the reason I ventured out every weekend back then. The imminent prospect of death was an ever-present albeit acceptable risk which added to the adrenaline rush. Or so I'd thought at the time.

A row of nightclubs bombarded us with their eclectic musical vibes as we passed. We held hands, grinning like fools, absorbing every gift that life had to offer. A carload of hooligans drove past with the windows lowered—hardly a surprise in the insane December heat—and one of them unloaded an entire magazine from his automatic rifle. Bullets sprayed overhead, drawing a jagged line of holes in the brickwork. A couple of bouncers emerged from a dark entrance and returned fire, cursing as they did so. The car sped off, laughter and rap intertwined with the dissipating gunsmoke.

We took shelter in a cafe, one I used to frequent as a student some years previously. It was a Portuguese-owned franchise called Fontana's, on a neon-bright corner in a seedy area called Hillbrow. We sat there enjoying ice cold beers and a hot bowl of cheesy nachos coated in mayonnaise and mustard. A good way to celebrate New Year, we figured. The

fridges, microwaves and various other kitchen appliances were still raining down outside. The city's poorest citizens, living in squalid high-rise tenements, obviously couldn't see the folly in this annual tradition of hurling white goods from their balconies. Why they did it I still can't fathom but, as God is my witness, it's the truth.

I'd met her at a nightclub the previous evening. The club was called Alcatraz, and it was as filthy as it was dark and foreboding. But the beer was cheap and the music was brilliant. It also attracted hordes of black-clad waifs, beautiful in their angst and rebellion. Metallica screamed at me from speakers six feet high as I slammed my body into fellow revellers. I was usually one of the last people to leave, dragging myself off the dancefloor and out into the new morning's dim light. That night though, as I made my way towards the murky stairwell, a small voice spoke from the shadows.

"Wanna fuck?"

I glanced around and spotted a diminutive veiled figure lurking in an alcove to one side. Since I was raised to be a gentleman it would have been churlish to refuse such a generous offer, so I replied in the affirmative. It was a bit of a gamble based on the club's clientele but fortune favoured the reckless on this occasion; she was a stunning redhead dressed in purple and black lace. She later told me she'd been watching me for weeks and had decided at the last second to stay behind when her friends went home. It was only a few blocks' walk back to her flat anyway. Nervous and uncertain, she'd blurted out the first thing that came to mind. We returned to her small apartment, worked ourselves into a stupor during the next couple of hours, and spent the rest of the day sleeping. That night, New Year's Eve of 1993, we were back on the streets, dodging fridges.

"What holds your heart?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

A gum-chewing waitress ambled over and glanced at us with disapproving eyes before dumping two fresh beers on the table and heading back into the grease-spattered kitchen.

“I mean what makes you shine? What gives you joy in this corrupted, shitty world?”

“That’s a pretty bleak outlook.”

“Says you, the archetype Goth girl.”

“Don’t judge books by covers. And besides, you looked in a mirror lately?”

“Point taken. But you didn’t answer the question.”

She smile’d, an almost childish grin, and in it I saw stars. “Dancing,” she replied. “Dancing holds my heart.”

We finished our drinks and paid, heading back out into the chaos.

A fridge dropped out of the hellish night sky, shattering as it hit the asphalt. Shrapnel rained over us and I instinctively turned away from the detonation. I thought I’d shielded her sufficiently. Turns out I was wrong. A sliver, a razor-sharp projectile, sliced into her neck. She bled out in my arms, staring silently up at me. Her pale eyes reflected confusion and fear. Then the ambulances, the police, the questions and the flood of emotions, and the end of so many things.

What might the future have held for us? All these years later we could have been happy, maybe had a couple of kids, maybe been a family with a home in the suburbs, the nine to fives, the white picket fence and the sensible shoes. Hell, maybe I even would have found out what her name was.

# *Small Towns*

## Loukia Borrell

I love small towns.  
Everything is simple.

They have street names  
like Main and East,  
Church and South.

The doughnut shop  
opens at 5 a.m., get your  
own coffee and hear the cashier  
complain about the local newspaper.

All in a row, the health department,  
police station, dance school,  
beauty parlor, hardware store,  
funeral home and one Italian restaurant,  
Anna's, which seems out of place here.

For in this slice of Americana, there is no reason  
to learn the difference between calzone  
and calamari, or pecorino and parmesan.  
This is a town where bacon and bourbon  
are kings, and entire weekends are dedicated to both.

The speed limit is 35, then 25, so don't go faster,  
they'll know. Those old men on their porches,  
balancing coffee and crossword puzzles on their knees.  
And the deer at the edge of town, making their way into  
the forest, curling up for the day, tucking their hooves  
under their white bellies, big, sleepy eyes dreamy  
and ears wide open, listening for small town secrets.

# *Undercity*

## Renato Barucco

He might as well be a ghost. His appearance is as close to invisibility as human features can get. Something to do with proportions and colors. His movements are delicate, noiseless. In high school, a few years ago, kids used to call him a loser. Nowadays, co-workers and neighbors say he's an odd man who keeps to himself. True and true. Most folks don't even notice him, though. He doesn't complain. The opposite. Blandness is his superpower. He moves through spaces like a whiff of smoke, sometimes perceived, mostly ignored.

People are supposed to sense eyes on them thanks to a gaze-detection system of sorts engineered by evolution to protect them from predators. The skill is lost in modern humans, as far as he's concerned. At least in the big city, certainly in the subway. The women he chooses, for example, never realize he's watching. Case in point: Alesia. She works at the register, too. Every day, she asks his name. Every day, he says his name is Bob, a lie intended to expedite her work. Bob is easy to understand, write and remember. He's not interested in that last bit, though. He succeeds. There's never a vague trace of recollection on her part. Not even today, and he's wearing a suit for the occasion, his pointy shoulders and ostrich neck engulfed by fabric. He looks ridiculous. It doesn't matter. He'll get rid of it as soon as he's done. He already picked out the trash can in the bathrooms of the Time Warner Center, second floor. He carries a change of clothes in his gym bag. More than one, to be exact, elements of a procedure he refined year after year, encounter after encounter.

Men who look like a shadow find ways to make up for the lack of memorable traits. Career, money, a lively personality, other debatable strategies. Not Invisible Bob. He fully accepts his nature and relative solitude. He knows no irony. And though his life may seem joyless, he knows what gives him pleasure. He chases that pleasure.

He's been studying Alessia for over two months now, coming to the coffee shop every day at 6:30 on the dot, ninety minutes before closing time. That's how dedicated he is. He orders a cappuccino even though he doesn't drink coffee. It's a small investment in the grand scheme of things. It gives him time to hang around the counter and, as the other girl froths milk he won't savor, observe Alessia from a vantage point. Drink in hand, he sits on a communal stool in the middle of the concourse, a little to the side, and checks his phone, reads a magazine, pays attention to the comings and goings of the underground market at Columbus Circle. All in all, all an act. Truth is, he has eyes only for her: Alessia.

The other girl seems nice enough, all dimples and head nods. She gets off at seven when foot traffic slows down, and the shop stops serving coffee. Alessia spends the last hour of her shift by herself selling bottles of water, pressed juices, the occasional cupcake. He stays until she pulls the shutter gate, then watches her vanish down the staircase to the downtown trains. Tonight, however, will be different. He'll follow her all the way to the platform and make his move.

There's something different about her. Either that or anticipation plays tricks on him. She's wearing makeup, keeps checking her phone. He swears she's excited about something.

"At what time is he getting in?" asks the other girl. Words aren't clear. A dull rumble is the place's piped music. He

relies on lip reading, a skill he developed growing up with parents whose voices were never louder than whispers.

“He’ll be landing any minute. I can’t wait.”

She is meeting someone, someone she knows well. The discovery excites and worries him in equal measure. He takes another pretend sip of his cappuccino.

“Is he meeting you here?”

“No. I figured by the time he gets off the plane, takes a cab, and gets to Brooklyn; I’ll be home. I planned out the entire weekend.”

“I’m glad you finally decided to take time off.” The other girl takes off her apron. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“Christmas. Dad doesn’t like to travel. It’s his first time in New York.”

Her father. What an enticing scenario. Though, it adds urgency to Bob’s plan. She took the weekend off. He won’t be able to wait three more days.

Alessia has been working at the coffee shop all summer, Tuesday to Sunday, two to eight. From overheard conversations, Bob learned that she wants to keep the job through the fall, classes permitting. How can she deal with it on a daily basis? She must need the money. A vibrant young girl, spending sunny afternoons below Eighth Avenue, in the subway, in front of hordes of strangers. All those eyes, all the time. Prying. Watching. Glancing. In the evening, she must be disoriented. He would be. Humanity is thrilling and draining.

After meeting him, she’ll no longer need to work.

Dad's trip was a surprise. Alessia tells the other girl her old man hasn't seen much of anything outside of Akron. First, he didn't have the money to travel, and then he lost the will because of what happened to her mom. What exactly remains unsaid. Something tragic, likely an untimely death. Leaving Dad alone in their empty house the day she left for college had been excruciating. Alessia, poor angel.

"I'm about to leave. Are you going to be okay?" asks the other girl. Alessia nods, but Bob has the feeling she doesn't like to work alone. She gets keyed up. The shop isn't busy; it's not that. It's not fear, either, not quite. There are workers in the other stores and at the kiosks. Cops show up often. But still. The subway wasn't meant for people to linger.

The other girl leaves. Moments later, Creepy Guy shows up. He's a regular who comes around most days, always late in the afternoon. Bob noticed him from the beginning. How could he not, as overt as he is? He orders a lemonade, leans on the white column, watches her. Worse, he stares at her. On Monday, he stayed for forty minutes, ample time to finish a lemonade. He hung around even longer on Wednesday. Occasionally, he smiles, his lips stretched in a mad grin. Because of an unfortunate face tattoo—a mime-like blue tear on his left cheek, his smile feels equivocal, threatening. He's enormous, too. Tall and broad, thick arms covered in monochromatic ink.

He orders the usual. Alessia asks for the name, which is strange this time of day. Perhaps knowing it makes her feel secure. Creepy Guy unsettles her, that's for sure. She doesn't know Invisible Bob is watching over her.

The guy's name is Jay, or so he says. Upon enunciation, the mad grin makes its first appearance. He has the nerve to ask for her name in return. She doesn't say a word, just points at the name tag on her apron. He leans forward.

“Alessia. Where’s that from?”

“Ohio.”

She doesn’t look at him, doesn’t want to engage, writes the name on the cup and pours the drink.

Invisible Bob takes a sip of his cappuccino, a real one this time. Jay is not his name, he thinks. Certainly not the way she spelled it on the cup—JAY. Maybe J, just the letter, the initial of his name. He stares at Jay staring at Alessia, the only person with a real name. What does he think he’s doing? The creep should call it a day and go home. Bob bets he lives off the A train somewhere in Washington Heights. From the look of his boots and pants, he’s a painter contracting jobs through the union. His tattoos point to troubled years, street gangs and time in juvie. He has no discretion and no class. Like a beast cornering his female, his presence alone invades her space. He is arrogant, entitled, careless, all the things Bob hates in men. Alessia has one responsibility in this: She’s irresistible. Orchid mouth, porcelain skin, eyelashes like petals of a rose, and that sadness, a blue aura. Not outward despair, an inner supplication. Bob often wonders what’s that all about. Her vulnerability makes her precious, more so in the subway, an unforgiving microcosm. Among harsh noises and fetid odors, greasy humans and hungry rats, Alessia is a restorative vision.

It’s been thirty minutes. Creepy Jay isn’t moving, isn’t drinking his lemonade. He’s just gawking. Alessia glances at him on occasions, an observation that baffles Bob. He’s been there more often than Jay and for longer. Not once has she laid eyes on him. It’s fine. Alessia is not interested in the guy; she’s afraid of him. When a woman is scared, her eyes change. They acquire a specific luminosity, a liquid restlessness.

Alessia looks at her phone one more time, pouts her lips ever so slightly. Is it because she still has forty-five minutes to go? Perhaps Dad hasn't texted, or she just can't wait to go home, take a shower, wash the smell of subway and coffee off her hair.

A group of girls comes by, high school age. One buys a cake pop, another a raspberry cupcake, nothing but iced water for the other three. They laugh and yell, talk to each other and live stream their downtown adventures through devices. Bob knows these girls. The type, at least. They stroll up and down Simpson Avenue in the Bronx, hang out by the entrance to the station, meet boys at Grand Concourse. Their words—accent, topics, cadence—give away their journey. Uneven skin, thick backpacks, funky hair. They are appealing to him, almost distracting. He already had one of these girls two years ago. Tatiana was her name. Brown eyes, dyed hair, a nose piercing. He remembers her rib cage more than anything. Tiny, delicate. She used to commute for school from the South Bronx to Harlem. 4 or 5 train. She met her a late Wednesday afternoon at the Jackson Avenue station. It was October. The sun shined orange and low above the city. Trains run above ground there. Not a pretty view and, yet, such a delicious memory, one of his best.

The girls head to the 1 train. They'll transfer to the 2 at 96th Street. Bob has spent so much time in the subway system he can recreate its people's past, predict their future. He looks at the girls as they walk away, and so does Alessia. Creepy Jay is still leaning against the column, a different expression on his face. Frown borrows, darker eyes, tight lips. What's on his mind? Alessia must be thinking the same. She wipes the counter with unrequired vigor. It didn't need cleaning.

Only twenty-five more minutes. As Alessia starts storing the goods left from the day, Jay's hand moves. He brings

his right pointer finger in front of his lips, taps them three times, and points at her directly, unequivocally. Accompanied by a sly smile, the gesture shakes her to the core, Bob can tell. He's upset. Should he intervene? Right. And do what? Alessia leans over the counter and takes a look around. It's the time of day when commuters transit through the concourse speedily, in waves. They have a schedule and a destination, somewhere out of here, above ground. Even subway stations can be deserted for a terrifying minute. She sees only the woman who sells greeting cards, and she's shutting down her kiosk. She looks in Bob's direction, past him, as though he and his suit camouflaged perfectly with the background. Her phone beeps, distracting her. Finally, a smile appears on her face. Was that her dad? She takes a deep breath.

"New York City," she says out loud, shaking her head. Hard to tell what she meant by it. In any case, this is not New York. It's the subway, the city's dirty conscience with its own rules, its own crimes.

Bob puts his pretend book away and walks down the hallway. He stops at the kiosk that's closing, checks out greeting cards, a farce. It's almost eight, and even if she hasn't noticed him at all, he doesn't want to be too obvious. He'll meet her soon enough. Just a matter of minutes, unless Jay turns out to be a real problem.

At closing time, she turns off the lights, pulls the shutters, locks up the store. She looks taller from this side of the counter, stronger even. Bob observes the scene from a safe distance, not wanting to be seen until it's time. From his location, he can't see clearly, but it seems she's stalling, monitoring Creepy Jay over her shoulders, hoping he'll go away. From the look of it, he isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Her phone lights up, and again she smiles. It has to be her

dad. A wave of travelers floods the concourse. She walks against them, through them, energized by their presence or by the text message she just received. She heads to the trains with a spring in her step. Jay leaves the plastic cup on the floor and follows her. Vulgar is what he is. Maintaining an appropriate distance, Bob walks in the same direction. He waited for this moment all week. The next few minutes are crucial.

Beep, click-click. Alessia flies through the turnstile. Beep, click-click. The telltale sounds of someone swiping right behind her. Without turning around, she takes the stairs to the platform. Warm air blows through her hair. Jay is only a few steps behind her. Bob enters the station, too, walks down the stairs, turns sharply left. He stands under the staircase, facing the uptown track. He has a good view of the platform. It's mostly empty. A train just left the station. Alessia passes a guy lost in his phone, his concentration guarded by noise-canceling headphones. She walks towards the north side of the platform. Behind her, Jay slows down. Bob is too far to stage a casual contact. He considers aborting his plan entirely, but Alessia stops in her tracks. She turns around heavy on her heels to face Jay who keeps walking in her direction one slow stride after the other. She looks straight into the stalker's eyes, marches backward, toward Jay. A challenge indeed. They walk past each other in the middle of the platform. Immobile under the staircase, Bob watches unseen, a few feet from them. Unexpectedly, Jay ignores Alessia. Not a word, a wink, nothing. Her chest raises as she takes a sigh of relief. She's the one staring back now, perhaps trying to determine the origin of her fear. She looks at Jay's chest, at his dirty boots. She shakes her head. Bob can see beads of sweat on her forehead, that's how close she is now. He relishes her proximity until he hears a noise in the distance, another downtown train approaching. The subway current of putrid air intensifies. Alessia leans forward, her feet on the yellow line, peeks into the tunnel, hoping to

see a bright letter A in a blue circle. Bob has to act. Now or not today.

He walks decisively up to her. From the corner of her eye, Alessia takes note of an expected, jerky movement Creepy Jay makes. He brings his hands to his head, squeezes his eyes as he sees Bob for the first time and at his best, approaching Alessia from behind, a certain intensity in his facial expression. Jay's eyes open wider and wider. Not surprise. Not curiosity. Fear, terror, horror. Those are the words.

It's impossible to guess what goes through Alessia's mind as Bob grabs her by the shoulders. Likely, she wants to turn around, find out who or what is behind her, the reason Jay appears frightened all of a sudden. Everything happens fast. She looks down at her legs, moving forward against her will. The bony, sweaty hands on her skin, the push. Then, only a series of sensorial flashes: Bright lights, the train horn, violence. Until she feels no more because Alessia is no more.

Ah, the sweet pleasure. It almost makes Bob cry. Almost. He wishes he could capture the essence of the moment, confine it in a vase, taste it slowly, a little at a time. But great pleasures never last long. The body in his hands, the surprise, the chaos, the blood: It's art he depends on, impossible to explain. He doesn't have to. No one will know the girl didn't kill herself or didn't fall on the tracks by accident on her way to meet Daddy. Creepy Jay is a witness who won't remember a thing. Men who drop to their knees, cry and shake their head no-no-no-no-no never remember. Bob recognizes a void when he sees one. He knows all too well the sorts of tricks trauma plays on the mind of the weak. He bets Jay won't talk for a while. Perhaps he'll move to another town, never set foot in the subway again for sure.

Depending on the camera's angle, it's possible the whole stunt was caught on tape. It wouldn't be the first time. Most platforms have video surveillance nowadays. He'll get away with it, as always. He knows how to find ideal spots, how to transform. Right before the accident, a small man in an ill-fitting suit walked into the station and vanished. Later, a teenage boy in shorts, tee, and baseball cap ran up the stairs, entered the Time Warner Center, went to the bathroom. Now, a regular New Yorker in jeans and polo walks to his apartment on West 72nd Street listening to the sound of approaching sirens. An angel's absence registers immediately. That's his gift to her. The sky is generous, a cotton candy pink. He's feeling energized and powerful, still invisible, already onto his next project. An easier station this time. Perhaps in Brooklyn.

# *Baghdad Iraq: The Armorer*

Paul David Adkins

A new lieutenant burst  
into the arms room,  
didn't even greet the armorer,

and blew up—

*Why are these weapons missing?*

He shot his finger at a list.

*I have to account for these!*

*You*

*are on the blame line!*

As he exploded  
he seemed to the armorer  
to evaporate  
to a clacking set of teeth,  
a yapping dog.

The armorer nodded, rocked—

*Yes, sir. Yes, sir.*

The officer finally huffed,

*You will go to jail!*

The armorer raised a finger,  
leaned to slide the desk drawer,  
rummaged to produce  
a grenade.

He set it on his desk—  
a green apple,  
the ring of its pin dangling  
like a silver leaf.

# Antique

Brodie Lowe

“Switchin it up on me today?” I asked Mr. Ed who had rolled up a bag of Grizzly and shoved it in his back pocket.

“Switchin what up?” he said, pushing a hard finger into his mouth, tightly packing the tobacco.

“The horses. They switchin it up me? Or is it the same old shit?”

Mr. Ed just shook his head, looking down as he passed me, tonguing the fresh wad deep in the pocket of his cheek, and descended the hill to the ranch house where he’d no doubt prepare his second Bloody Mary for the morning.

I wished the man could take a joke. I wasn’t a comedian, myself, but damn. Laugh already. I thought it was pretty clever, a play on words and all. No harm, no fowl. Just a joke. But it seemed that most men who handled money and responsibilities that went far beyond my own didn’t have time for laughing. It was something they’d lost in between losing their virginity to women who sucked their souls bone dry and absorbing the hunger that’d been inherited from their fathers—the hunger for money and control and to keep it all going like a well-oiled machine for the next generation. Must have been some type of burden there deep inside their heart of hearts. One that wouldn’t allow them to screw it all up and waste it all away and lose all that generational hard work that had been planted before them. But then again, Mr. Ed wouldn’t know a joke if it walked up and hit him upside the head. Only movies he ever talked about were war documentaries. And *only* documentaries.

He didn't even watch *Patton*, for God's sake. And you can forget about *The Dirty Dozen*.

There's a lot you can tell about a person by what they watch. If they watch a rom-com (I don't care if it's *The Princess Bride* or *Romancing the Stone* or *Splash*), they're still looking for something else in their lives. Something more. Whether it's love or the next big and better chapter in their lives. If they boast about how good the latest sci-fi flick is, I can usually talk to them because they don't lack imagination. And that makes for good conversation. Still, even if I talk to those people long enough, they'll eventually mention their alien conspiracies that they swear up and down they can confirm because they can show me where the probe went and how it's still sore down there. That's when I leave those types of talks. Wave at them, acknowledge the poor attempt they made to try and be sociable, and then just shake my head at them and head back home.

I'd sit up late at night after Mitzy, three quarters of the way knocked out from Ambien and the last quarter from an herbal tea that she called "camel meal," would go to bed. I'd watch Larry, Curly and Moe beat each other senseless over a few misunderstandings. Those three stooges had an immeasurable amount of hubris. And a dangerous dose of competitiveness. That was my sleeping pill. My "camel meal." I didn't know what that even meant. *Camel meal*. Sounded like she'd either wake up with a hump the size of The Rock of Gibraltar on her back or chew slowly and determinedly through the breakfast I'd scare up for her the next morning, lips all protruding and loose and drooling, like I'd seen those lethargic camels do on *Lawrence of Arabia*. But I wasn't Lawrence. And I didn't know how to take care of things that had more in storage than me. Those kind usually took care of me. I'd do the dirty work. I was brave enough for it.

I knew what kind of person I was. I watched comedies

around the clock. Every chance I could get. I'd watch those three stooges fight over positioning in every situation they were in. Always fighting for first. First to go through the door. First to do something right. First to make sense of things out of honest interest. For me, those shows were sedatives. Something to escape the stresses of real life.

I knew exactly who I was.

Mitzy and I'd gone to couple's counseling at a rinky-dink office downtown just a mile away from the church with the bleached white steps that led to the big oak doors in front. Now, why a church wouldn't offer services to save a marriage, I'd never understand. But we went (upon request from Mitzy's nagging mother) and it wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be, but that counselor had me second guessing why I even married in the first place. I wanted to grab him by the shirt and say "Listen, Dr. Hoyle, I ain't ever fell out of love with her. It's just that I got busy trying to make ends meet. That's all. That's it. And I'd change it and get close to her all over again like when we were young, but I'm afraid I won't be able to pay the bills. And then we'd lose the house. And then we'd lose each other altogether."

It's hard to love in a world that keeps requesting more from you. It's hard to keep your heart Downy soft and supple in a desert of demand.

Our marriage had been on the rocks since I threw out her favorite quilt earlier in the year. On accident. We were in the middle of spring cleaning, throwing out cracked supper plates, bent silverware, old clothes that either didn't fit anymore or had been washed so much that they had holes in them, and Christmas tree ornament angels whose noodle bodies and pasta wings had been nibbled on by starving rats in the attic. Their painted mouths, open in

heartfelt song, and gently closed eyes no longer looked like they were singing heavenly choruses. They looked like they'd screamed for their little lives as rodents bit into their farfalle wings and tore at their ditalini hair. And I felt downright sorry for those things. Even if they weren't real. They didn't hurt anybody. Just liked to sing. Liked to brighten the holidays once a year. How dare I keep something so full of joy hidden in the dark eleven months out of the year? What if someone did that to me? Well, my joy would sure be stolen. And I'd become bitter and even a little ruffled like those angels.

By the end of it all, I'd loaded up about a dozen cardboard boxes in the back of the pick-up and then hauled it all off to either The Salvation Army or the dump.

A few weeks later, Mitzy came into the den where I was watching *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* and asked me if I'd seen her quilt.

"Which one?" I asked.

"The only one I've got."

"That one."

"The one that's been in my family for three generations."

"That one."

"Have you seen it?"

"I don't know, sweetie. Where'd you put it last?"

"In the linen hall closet."

Oh, yeah. The linen hall closet. Where I grabbed a bunch of old tattered blankets and towels during that spring cleaning

day.

“You didn’t pack it up in those boxes you hauled off a while back, did you?” she asked.

I muted Costello’s frantic screaming on the TV (partly because that’s how I felt on the inside just then and didn’t need any additional anxiety) and stood up to face her, hands in front of me in a plea. I remembered that ugly quilt and all its random, meandering colors. A diseased unicorn that had taken too much Metamucil and Ex-Lax must’ve relieved itself on it. Octagons and rectangles of cloth had lost their shape due to excessive stitching by a sewer whose sole purpose was to make the quilt fire retardant.

“I think I did,” I said.

“Shane.”

“I thought you didn’t need it. Matter of fact, I was going to buy you another.”

“You know how important that thing is to me.”

“I know, honey, but did that thing not make your legs itch? It sure did mine.”

At night, when we watched movies like *The Ghost* and *Mr. Chicken* and *Some Like It Hot*, she’d bring that old scratchy quilt out of that godforsaken closet and drape it over both our legs. I couldn’t enjoy the movie because the itchy cloth drove me up a wall. Some parts of it were made with satin, some with fleece, and others with cheap polyester. There was never any consistency with the material so I had to wear some of my old Russell sweatpants to stave off a poison ivy type of itch.

I tried shaking the idea that her quilt was still out there.

Could be at the dump. Or The Salvation Army. Couldn't remember which box I'd put it in, no matter how hard I tried.

But here I was, working on a Sunday morning, making extra money so I could *date* my wife again, as Dr. Hoyle had told me. "Date her," he'd said. "Like you used to. Take her to a nice restaurant. Enjoy ya'll's company again." So I'd decided to knock out some extra hours at Mr. Ed's for some of that spending money that would allow me to date Mitzy again.

I looked out the open side entrance in the middle of the great hall of horse stables and saw Marigold, a Banker horse, getting his trot on inside the riding ring. Mr. Ed's son and daughter sat on the fence, shooting off the heads of cat's tail grass at each other. He'd taught them how to handle them horses since they were knee high, but they weren't interested in petting or feeding them anymore. They'd only bring those horses out for about an hour each and then put them back in those dark and lonely stables for the rest of the day. And if a rat got past their cat, Micah, and got under their hooves, those horses would let the world know about it.

I grabbed a pitchfork and entered Marigold's stall, green bottle flies swarming around a few piles of crap. I brought in the rusted wheelbarrow and went to work.

When the wheelbarrow nearly tipped over and dumped some of the same manure back onto the ground, I figured I'd shoveled enough. I cooled down a little when I wheeled the rusted barrow out of that heat box of a stall and a summer breeze hit me. Walked it out of the stables and over to a mountain of black manure and dumped the waste at the base. Wondered to myself that if I would've saved all of my crap, and not flushed it all down the commode, it would amount to a sight like that. A mountain. Would've definitely intimidated Frodo and Samwise

Gamgee.

Mr. Ed's two kids liked to play in it. To them, it was soil that had a weirdly sweet smell. They'd throw whole handfuls of that stuff at each other like it was a snowball fight. Mr. Ed wouldn't dare buy them any video games. No Nintendos, nothing. Didn't want them bickering over screen time or controllers or fighting each other with real fists after losing to one another with artificial fighters onscreen. But he'd bought them plenty of books to read and gave them all hours of the day to play outside, climbing trees and jumping after black snakes in the woods with shovels hoisted above their heads like little cannibals on an island of their own.

At first, I thought I'd heard a raccoon screaming out desperately for help, but when formless noise changed to sobbing, I knew it was a human. A kid. Sounded like Mr. Ed's son. "Please! I'll do anything! I'm sorry!" the voice rang out.

"Ya'll don't hurt each other down there!" I yelled out and I knew that there were other ways of being civil about calling them down for their chaotic ways, but Mr. Ed had done tried that. I'd watched him. In fact, I'd seen him sit them down and explain to them how climbing trees can end up with broken collarbones. Told them to stop throwing horse manure at each other because if it landed in their eyes, they'd get leprosy and be shunned like those poor souls they'd seen on *Ben Hur*. But they wouldn't listen to reason. So he'd have them pick off hickory branches and he spanked them with those. But that only worked for a few days.

The pleas stopped and Mr. Ed's daughter, Rachel, stormed out of the tree line, stomping her way past the mountain of manure, past me, her head down, shaking in frustration, saying "He started it!"

I entered the woods and sure enough, Mr. Ed's son was

right there, but his back was tight against a tree. And there was sisal rope wrapped around him and the tree.

“I don’t know what happened to her. She’s going crazy!” the boy said. “Was talking about going off to find a giant pig’s head and some book about flies and some island.”

“Sounds like gibberish to me. What’d you do to get her this pissed off?”

“Flushed her goldfish down the toilet.”

“Now why the hell did you do that?”

“She stole my baseball cards and wouldn’t give them back,” he said, fighting against the rope. “When I get out of this, I’m gonna tear her blame head off.”

“What if a big hand came out of the sky and dropped you in the middle of the ocean and left you there to die? Would you like that?”

The boy shook his head. “You gonna tell my daddy?”

“I ought to,” I said, untying the rope from behind the tree.

The boy rubbed his arms and stepped away when he was loosed from the tree and looked angrily toward the house. “I’m gonna get her. Tell her that I can’t lose something like that. That kind of thing’s priceless. I ain’t ever selling those cards. I’m keeping them forever and I’ll have them back,” he said and walked away.

Then I thought of Mitzy and the quilt and how she would be heartbroken if she never got that thing back.

After dumping off more manure and shoveling out wet spots from the third stall, Mr. Ed stopped abruptly at the

entry. "You gonna clean that shit up over there?" he asked, bracing both hands on either side of the doorframe. He'd been drinking all morning, I could tell.

"What shit? The shit I've been shoveling up for the past three hours?" I said.

"That four wheeler over there."

"Fill me in some."

"There's a crashed four wheeler over there against the telephone pole."

"That ain't *my* job."

"The hell it ain't."

"You want to take over here while I clean up the mess those little hellions of yours just made?"

"Boy, step out of there for a second. And drop the pitchfork."

I obliged him and walked into the cool breeze and put my hands on my hips, saying "You want to tell me what you got in mind?"

"Don't have nothin on my mind."

"What you call me out here for then?"

"To give you a whoopin on your candy ass for talkin back to me," he said and swung a left hook at my head.

I ducked out of the way and he stumbled, falling face forward and banging his knees on the hard dirt. He swam his way back to his feet and said "Come on, big boy. Hit back."

“Don’t have the time to act like you and your kids. I’m a grown ass man.”

He swung again, this time losing his footing completely and stumbling for what seemed like five yards with long, wobbly strides until his torso had gone too much ahead of his feet and he banged his head against a stall door that had a horse’s navy blue fleece sheet draped over it.

I thought about Mitzy and her quilt and how I didn’t need to make money for us to get closer again. I needed to get her quilt. I needed to get away from this man because it was only going to get worse.

“I’m done,” I said. “With you and this whole place.”

I left him there to rub his head in confusion, a practice he’d probably be doing for the rest of his life.

I drove down the road and parked on a shoulder that ran alongside a neighborhood’s pond. I got out and sat on the grassy bank. Cupped bent knees with the inside of my elbows and interlocked my fingers, staring off at the water and its long ripples made by gentle geese.

I thought about Mitzy and how, when we first started dating, we’d fed bread crumbs to wild geese and talk about the future. We’d hiked to the tops of small mountains and I’d stopped just to hug her. Remembered smelling Pert shampoo in her hair and the Juicy Fruit gum that she loved to chew.

I got back in the truck and drove toward The Salvation Army. Once there, I walked toward the clothing section, sifting through blankets and comforters and raggedy-ass quilts that made Mitzy’s look nice. But hers wasn’t there. Someone had either bought it or I had dropped it off at the dump and it was at the bottom of a landfill. There was no

way of telling.

Knowing I didn't have enough money to take Mitzy on a real date, I drove to Piggly Wiggly and loaded up the cart with cans of cream corn, okra to fry up, some chicken thighs, a bottle of Stubb's Bar-B-Q sauce, and a six pack of Michelob.

The air was heavy and humid as I drove back home with the windows down, thinking about cuddling up to Mitzy and watching *Airplane* or *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. But I knew that there was no way she'd enjoy it because her mind would be on the great loss of that quilt that'd been cared for by so many long gone hands that didn't touch things in this world anymore.

That's when I saw the quilt.

Nearly wrecked the truck.

It was draped over a human body that stepped carefully through kudzu about twenty yards off the side of the road. Looked like Igor from *Young Frankenstein*, head down, looking for tracks of his master to help him find his way back to the castle.

I pulled over on the shoulder and waved at him when he looked sideways in my direction. "Hey!" I yelled. "You know that thing's mine!"

The stiff man beneath the quilt flipped me off and picked up the pace. So I got out of the truck and ran to him.

"Stay away from me! I ain't hurt nobody!" he said when I reached him, grabbing at a pain in my side under my ribcage.

"I ain't here to steal from you," I said, catching my breath.

“I just need that thing back.”

He turned to face me and, in that bright sun, I could see years of drinking hard alcohol scrawled on his face and bloodshot eyes that searched my own for answers.

“Who’re you?” he asked.

“Where’d you get that thing?”

“None of your business.”

“I’m not talking for my health.”

“Man gave it to me.”

“What man?”

“I don’t know. Had a nice suit on. Looked like he’d worked at some office downtown.”

“Why would he give you this thing?”

“Because I had my sign up, I guess.”

I saw the cardboard sign dangling from his left hand. The words looked like they’d been scratched on with charcoal.

“You homeless?”

“Lookin for one, yeah. A home. Got money?”

“I don’t.”

“Then leave me alone.”

“I need that quilt.”

“It’s mine.”

“Got some beer back in the truck. Want some?”

“If it’s for free.”

“You can have it if you give me that quilt.”

“Why do you want this thing?”

“It’s my wife’s. I threw it out a while back and I don’t know how a man in a fancy suit got it, but it’s my wife’s and I need to get it back to her.”

“You get in a fight with her? That why you threw it out?”

“No. It was an accident.”

“You threw this thing out on accident?” he said, pulling the quilt tight over his ears and shoulders. “This is a nice blanket.”

“I know it is. That’s why I want it back. I’ll give you the whole six pack for it.”

“Six pack? You didn’t mention no six pack. Thought you was talkin about just one little beer.”

“The whole pack.”

“Show me where it is.”

I led him back to my truck, looking back every few seconds to make sure that he hadn’t sprung a wild hair and run off with the quilt. When I reached the truck, I opened the front passenger door and grabbed the Michelob off the floorboard and handed it to him.

“Now give me the quilt,” I said.

He plucked a bottle from its cardboard slot and placed the case on the asphalt. He swallowed the beer fast and it was soon empty, but the quilt was still draped around his shoulders. He put the empty bottle back in its slot and did the same with a second beer and the quilt fell off his head. The third beer made his shoulders loose and the quilt fell at his heels. He bent down and picked it up.

“Here you go,” he said, handing it to me like a used piece of tissue paper. The rough quilt immediately scratched my forearms and I remembered why I hated that thing in the first place. “What’s all that food for?” he asked, eyeing the grocery bags in the truck.

“For my wife.”

“Boy, you’re really doin a lot for that wife of yours today.”

“Have to.”

“What you got to eat in those bags?”

“Nothing for you.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Better get on, man. Take your beer.”

“I ain’t had supper with some people in a long time. You got a house?”

I stared blankly at him.

He continued. “You got a house. Must be cozy in there.” He stared at me, waiting for an invite.

“Thanks for the quilt. You’re welcome for the beer.”

“Okay, then. I ain’t gonna be a bother.” He picked up the beer and walked aimlessly back through the kudzu. And I thought about Mr. Ed and his crazy kids and how the homeless would never have to worry about being spoken to in a belittling manner for not doing their job the right way. I got a little envious. It was odd and I quickly pushed aside that feeling and I thought about my warm house.

I had the quilt.

I could make Mitzy happy again.

And we *did* have room for another for supper.

“Hey!” I yelled at him. “Hop in.”

He returned to me, his eyes wide and awake, the six pack dangling by his side where the cardboard sign, now lost in the kudzu, had been.

When we reached the house, I told him to grab the groceries while I clutched that quilt tight by my side. We worked our way up the front porch’s three warped wooden steps and, before I could unlock the house, the light came on and Mitzy opened the door.

She stared in shock at us two stooges. We tilted our heads as if a vital circuit in our necks had expired, spotting the glowing fireplace behind her, seeking salvation through resolute tunnel vision, and bearing gifts of food and quilt.

# *Earthworms*

## Morgan Russell

Little boys cut pieces from me  
to see if I will become more than myself.

Five aortic arches,  
each a broken heart.

I till the soil for the grandmother until  
the grandfather takes me fishing.

Now he's the little boy cutting me apart  
for scarcity's sake

# *The Cookout*

## Liz Wride

I noticed first, that I was different, at old Mrs. Withers' Labor Day cookout. By that I mean, her cookout was the first place anyone had ever treated me different.

She lived in the next town over, and would host her neighbourhood every year. It was real important to my mom and my Grandma Rose that we go, so my sister and I spent more than a half-hour getting our hair combed into respectable styles, before my mom settled on the most appealing; gelling or clipping it into submission. My hair was militaristic in its obedience to the gel: resulting in a middle-America, middle-part. Years later, I'd look back at the photographs of myself from that day and realised I looked like a total milk-carton-kid. If ever I went missing, that middle-part would sure as hell guide me home.

My sister's hair, even then, at four years old, was a very specific beast. It looked exactly like the scribbles she drew on crayon self-portraits, that hung in the kitchen art gallery of La Refrigerator. Her hair would have a solid two hours, before it suddenly sprung forth, unleashed from the bobby pins my Mom painstakingly stuck in it. It would go full medusa.

Along with this very specific hair routine, it was extra important that everyone brushed their teeth—and flossed. Our teeth had to gleam.

I'd get buttoned into a bright white shirt, my sister zipped into a pinafore dress. My mom would carefully tuck the cardboard sales tag into the collar, so that the make, size,

barcode and price, were very well hidden.

“Now you be careful in this, or we aren’t gonna be able to send these back.”

She said, straightening my collar. She doesn’t give my sister the same waring, although I remember, she is more docile. As the rhyme goes: *sugar and spice and all things nice*.

My mom and Grandma Rose spray cans and cans of hair-spray at their curls, before my mom turns to my Grandma Rose, “Mom, please can you wait a while before you light your cigarette?” My Grandma Rose obliges until my mom’s back is turned then pulls a cigarette from the pocket of her pants. She smiles at me as she lights it.

“What’s the worst that can happen, kid? If I go up in flames, they can use me as firelight for the barbeque. If I’m still burning by sunset, grab some graham crackers and some marshmallows—and we’ve got ourselves some s’mores!”

Right before we’d set off, I’d see my mom reach into the box beside her bed. She’d take the thick gold band, and slip it onto her fourth finger. When I asked her about it, she said it wasn’t respectable to go to cookouts without wearing jewellery. Grandma Rose told me that gold rings fit cookouts well. They shone under the glare of the sun, and that was important. I knew my mom was faking being married.

So, in our still-tagged clothes, with hair that could collectively withstand a hurricane, we head off for Old Mrs Withers’ house, in the Old Buick. I liked that old car: the torn leather on the seats, the way it always seemed to smell of salt water taffy because someone lost a candy down the back of a seat cushion years ago.

I’d been assigned the task of holding whatever food we were

taking. I didn't realise that I was setting myself up for (basically, a life-long job). Grandma Rose told me that *she'd hold the side-dish next year*, or *she'd hold the side dish when she quit smoking*. I held that damn side dish in the back of that torn up Buick for every damn barbeque, cookout, and community gathering, until the day we lowered my Grandma Rose into the ground.

That year, Grandma Rose had opted for a seven-layer pasta salad. My mom had covered it in saran wrap and all I could see, staring at me from the top layer, was row after row of tomatoes. I hated tomatoes. I secretly hoped they'd wilt beneath the saran wrap and the whole thing would spoil. Of course, nothing happened to it.

Now and then, my sister rhythmically kicked her feet together, as if make-believe jumping rope, or some of the other games girls played during recess that, even then, as little kids, was totally alien to the boys. Occasionally, she mumbled a rhyme of eye spy to herself. Nobody answered her, so she searched the car's interior with her eyes, before setting them to rest on some mundane object, and proclaiming herself the winner.

Being the oldest, I got to sit by the window, but I wasn't allowed to wind it down. My mom had a fear of windows, like I was suddenly gonna try and stick my whole head out of it, the way the neighbour's dog, did. In the end, I had to settle for my Grandma Rose providing all the air through her half-open passenger window, which she spent half the time blowing cigarette spoke out of.

Our neighbourhood seemed better from the back of the Buick. It was like someone had cracked open a pack of crayons and stamped on them. It all went by in a sudden blur of colour. Flashes of orange grey for people's rusting chain-link fences, the yellow-green of the slowly drying lawns, the grey-black of strewn roof tiles and the bright red of the fire

hydrants. The brown black of biscuit, the neighbourhood stray who escaped from the pound time and time again. The chalk red brick of the public library and the milky-white of the broken sign: *LIB ARY*. The flaky primary-colour paint of the park: the jungle gym and the swing-set. The bright blue of the policeman's siren, as someone was pulled over, further down the road.

As a kid, I saw the whole place like some vast finger-painting that someone had smudged. I just liked seeing the colours run into one another. My mom kept her eyes on the road. My Grandma Rose regarding the world outside through half-open eyes and a haze of cigarette smoke. My sister, as always, thought with her belly.

"I'm hungry." She grumbled.

"There'll be food a-plenty at the cookout." My Grandma Rose, said. "There'll be buffalo wings and corn."

"Ice cream, too, I guess." My mom chipped in. "I've also been told that Mrs Withers makes the best home-made lemonade you've ever tasted."

"Won't that rot our teeth?" I asked.

"Don't you start with me, Evan..." my mom warned.

"Patricia, the boy's got a point."

\*

When we pulled up outside Mrs. Withers' house, it looked how the White House front lawn looks on Easter. People covered the grass, just waiting to get inside the house. Some were holding baskets, others carrying saran-wrapped bowls. My sister needn't worry—there would be food a-plenty, alright. There were a couple other kids, none who

were my friends.

One kid was even dressed as Leonardo from the Ninja Turtles. I wanted to go up to him and ask if he'd swap it for a clean, white shirt with a tag still on, that stuck in your neck like a wasp. But I couldn't get anywhere near. It was Grandma Rose that saw my longing look. It was Grandma Rose who had got the television fixed, so I could sit too-close to the screen on weekends, feeling my eyeballs square-off, as amphibians beat each other up with all the rhythm of my sister's imagined jump-rope and I lifted too-sugary cereal to my mouth. It was my Grandma Rose that leaned down, and spoke through cigarette breath: "I bet that kid's still got the label on his clothes, too." My caught the end of the too, like a Chinese-whisper passed around the school yard: *Bernie Paulson eats his own boogers... Paul's son eats his own boogers... Ronald McDonald eats his own booger-burgers*—my mom just ushered me and my sister right over to Mrs. Withers.

She was an odd-looking woman: thin and bendy, like a red vine. Her back seemed to be curved, but she seemed to stoop that way, so she could look down her nose at folks. Her hair was stuck-up, like half-chewed salt water taffy and her skin was pale, like milk. Her clothes seemed to hang stiffly on her: a dress of too-bright, too-flowery fabric.

"Janet..." My mom said to her, nodding towards me and my sister, "These are my children: Evan and Samantha."

Mrs. Wither's body snake-hooked so she could bend down far enough to regard us on our level. "Took you long enough to RSVP..." She mumbled.

"Janet, things are busy, with work and all..."

"I can imagine so." Mrs. Withers said. "I mean, technically, Halloween isn't that far away. It'll be upon us in no time. You're bound to have a rush on toilet paper, down at the

store...”

Her body contorted again. She was eye-level with me and looked me dead in the face. She seemed less concerned with my sister, who was transfixed with the butterfly-pattern of some lady’s dress. “He’s got a weird eye.” Mrs Withers said, her voice matter-of-fact.

She was talking about my heterochromia. My left eye was a light, piercing blue; the right a greenish-hazel. Up until then, no adult had ever pointed it out in such an unforgiving way.

“Only man I ever knew with a weird eye was my Uncle Frank. Lost an eye in the war. Got it replaced with a glassy, blue thing, that he used to pop out on Halloween to frighten the neighbourhood kids. Strange man. Strange eyes.” She straightened up again, her eyes darting about, ready to greet potential guests on the horizon.

My mom put her hand on my head. I could see her face get real red, the way it does sometimes before she yells at me and my sister.

“Mrs. Withers, may I ask you a question?” I suddenly piped up.

“Well of course, child...” She said, with all the warmth of a cartoon villain.

“Are the store tags still hanging on your clothes? Are they just tucked in, at the collar?”

A look of sheer horror spread across Mrs. Withers’ face—a smirk across my mom’s. Mrs. Withers tried desperately to find the words for a response. The first Carmichael child had embarrassed her, and the cookout had barely begun. Of course, this was *nothing* compared to what my sister would

do later on.

\*

Inside her house was like some sort of morbid zoo; a penitentiary for unfortunate beasts (of which she was perhaps the most unfortunate). Animal heads of every description: boars, stags, bears were mounted on the wall. Their eyes were glassy, dull and glazed—but still, they seemed to watch over Mrs. Withers kitchen and den area with all the precision of a hidden hunter, ready to pounce. There were so many people that we shuffled like a queue waiting for a fairground ride. I hear their chatter:

*Do you suppose she hangs fairy lights on the antlers at Christmas?*

*That bear—the bear from the bear-skin rug—I hear it ran into their cabin, when they were staying in Vermont. It well and truly earned its place, by the sofa...*

My mom and my Grandma Rose managed to distract my sister from a complete dead-bear-related-meltdown, by not repeating the Buick game of eye-spy. She would spot the grizzly sofa throw and immediately think teddy bear. The crowd paid no mind to my sister. They held their own kids in their arms, while poking at the antlers of the long-dead deer. Kids made pistol shapes with their fingers, shot each other dead, and rose again—before repeating the sequence.

What I learned that day, in the queue for Mrs. Withers' backyard, was that where there were dead things, not too far away, was the thing that killed them. As I craned my neck, looking beyond the silent heads, I saw guns secured to the walls. They seemed held up by some invisible force, the unseen hand of the unseen hunter, victorious even in his absence. They gleam with more life, than the eyes of the beasts.

Then I realised that this wasn't a queue, this wasn't the destination—this was the party. People had congregated in Mrs. Withers' den to ogle the hand guns in glass cabinets, to feel the weight of them in their hands, and discuss at length, the things they had, or wished to kill.

At that age, my knowledge of guns was limited. Everything was comparative to a water pistol—specifically the water pistols that you got from the 99 cents store, that jammed after about the second dual of the water fight—leaving you drenched and ashamed at high noon out of the drive way, as the neighbour's car drove by. The one gun was the length of the mother-of-all-water pistols. Some were the size of a regular water pisto—but these were in a glass cabinet, like the glass box Bernie Paulson brought in for show and tell, except his was full of old stones.

Mrs. Withers' backyard was the backyard of my dreams. The lawn with worthy of any major league baseball stadium and the lawn furniture gleamed a dazzling tooth-paste-white. In this town, the sun seemed to shine a particular shade of lemon-yellow, and the air smelled heavily of barbeque food and sugary sweet joy. It made my little kid brain happy to see that the adults too, had been forced to wrestle with combs and barrettes before they were allowed out their front door. Women wore flowered dresses, some to the knee, others to the ankle. Some were in cream coloured slacks and sorbet-coloured tops. They had clipped big, gold earrings to their lobes, or looped bracelets over their wrists—I knew because I found one lady's big, green earring slowly sinking in the orange pop at the kids' table. The men were dressed, as the men were dressed. I didn't see many men, and had little idea how they dressed at cook-outs or at any other time. Part of me was reassured to see that they were in white shirts, as well. Some had undone their top buttons, or rolled up their sleeves. Some had gotten barbeque sauce down themselves.

I didn't realise it then, but what I was witnessing was a sort of a slow death. These people in front of me—the men in their shirts, and the women in their floral fabrics—wilted in the afternoon heat. Over the hours, they would turn from sausage-skin-pink to chargrilled, and depart holding the ice from their drinks on the deep rose of their sunburn. There was an odd formality about them, as they stood around, unwittingly destroying Mrs. Withers' lawn with the heels of their shoes. They didn't venture much from the people they knew, and the women acted as if they laughed too hard, they'd get pricked by the thorns on their dresses, or their floral pattern would wilt.

It was only the kid in the Leonardo costume who truly enjoyed that afternoon. He ran from the kids table, to the barbeque and back again. He followed his own imagined race-track, that looped a figure of eight on the floor. I always remember envying him. He got to do whatever he wanted. Me? I was sat at the kids' table, paper towel stuffed into my collar, as I turned my fingers brownish-red with barbeque sauce. My sister was fixated on the corn. It was yellow and shining, like her as-yet-unleashed hair.

As I stuffed chargrilled meat into my mouth, I felt someone watching me. I thought first of Mrs Withers' bear. Maybe it has walked out behind us in the queue. Maybe it had growled great lung-fulls of air, baring its teeth to the afternoon sun. Maybe. When I turned, I saw a pair of very real, very brown, very animal eyes staring up at me.

Not a bear, but Mrs. Withers' dog.

The tag around his neck told me that his name was James.

Even as a kid, I immediately felt uneasy. There's always something unsettling about people who give dogs human names. I'd learn later that this was often a character trope of the childless, who attempted to fill the void. It was also a

trait of the recently bereaved. I forever remembered James the dog. Even though, for all his puppy-dog eyes and low growls, I never shared my barbeque-covered chicken strips with him—he had a profound effect on me. Years later, I'd get my own dog—name it after myself—and put the name and phone number on the dog tag. What a way to pick up girls. All because of some crummy Labor-Day Cookout. Although, I'm kinda lying. I did share my food with James—unintentionally.

You see—the sound of the gun going off made me jump and I dropped my chicken strip. It hit the evergreen lawn—a piece of dead meat. James waited, and baring his teeth lunged at the chicken, like he was hunting it, even though it was already dead. The sauce covered his gums and teeth like blood. Even after he'd eaten it, James continued to repeatedly lick the spot where the chicken had landed.

All around me, the adults moved like a videotape on fast-forward. They became the fabric of their clothes, the skirts of their dresses pressed against their legs as they ran; the crinkling of the men's sneakers as they moved with a sudden sharpness. Everyone instinctively cowered, covering themselves the way we do at an Earthquake drill in school. There was only one person that never flinched—that was Mrs. Withers.

She simply stood, blood pouring from her right eye.

Now she was the heterochromatic: one eye blue, the other blood red.

She slumped suddenly, like a quickly deflating balloon.

Was it Mr. Withers? Back from the dead and angry that more people hadn't paid any mind to his trophy bears?

No—*It was sugar and spice, and all things nice.*

My kid sister—holding one of Mrs. Withers’ pistols in her hand like it was a water pistol from the 99 cents store.

A particular kind of horror was etched across my mother’s face. For a moment, I could have sworn there was a joyous disbelief—a similar sort of emotion felt by Dorothy when the Wicked Witch was flattened—but there was something else, also—a sheer, sheer, terror.

My sister had dropped the gun instantly—shock of the noise.

She had brought to an abrupt end, Mrs. Withers’ annual cookout. It was rumoured that that day — my sister became a hero. Upon the unlikely event of Mrs Withers’ death—then the hosting of the cookout, it transpired would fall to Soccer Mom Extraordinaire—Stacey Wallace. I heard years later, that Stacey’s house was thoroughly respectable—that her dead animals lay shrivelled in their hamster cages from malnourishment, or unfortunate cat-related accidents—rather than hanging proudly on her wall. The neighbourhood welcomed this. It had been time to tone things down. Mrs. Withers’ had been too extreme. She’d made her own lemonade for goodness sake. Who had time for that? Especially when the cans were twelve for two dollars, seventy nine.

From that day, I got my own bullet. Did I walk over to Mrs. Withers, with all the innocence of a child, as the adults stood in shock, the flowers on their dresses blossoming into lilies—and place my finger firmly into her bloody eye socket? Did I reached in, amid the red and the squilch, grabbing the bullet like a candy-grabber-claw at the video-game arcade? When I lifted the red-stained shrapnel into the sun, did the adults look away, because they’d only ever rented this level of corn-syrup soaked violence from the video-store? Did I take the only remaining scrap of Mrs. Withers’ brain with

it? Is it true what they said—that if you stood real close to Mrs. Withers, and leaned over, there really was nothing but empty space and air? Mrs. Withers' cookout became another finger-painting smudge. It became the way our neighbourhood looked from the back of the Buick, only this time, it was the dirty-brown of blood and rust. The electric red and blue of the police siren, gave a flash of primary colour—and the chicken strips sat on their plates, still dripping barbeque sauce.

# *Inundation III*

## Philip Berry

Avril took her eye away from the telescope and looked down. She smiled at her ten-year old daughter, Mattie, who stood at the bottom of the iron ladder beneath the dome. The direct view had not added to Avril's knowledge, but she had felt an urge to observe the sector with her own eyes. A still scrolling line of fluctuating numbers on the screen of her workstation had already told her all she needed to know. The neighbouring sun, 3.2 light years away from her own, had exploded. Only today had the leading edge of neutrinos hit her geostationary sensors. Tomorrow would come the visible light. Heat would follow, then slowly build. There was time to relocate, to hop back to the centre, the origin system. The move would only afford her an extra few years. Years of knowing. Mattie, impatient for her mother's attention, had a hand on one of the ladder's lower rungs. She liked to watch the skies with Avril, and could be trusted not to go break anything. Perhaps, thought Avril, we should stay here. We can be the first. The first to feel the wave.

# *Pull the Chain*

## Kushal Poddar

The morning train mails away.  
The shit beside the railroad still fresh.  
The girl on the facing seat sleeps  
in between her legs.  
A labor knotted hand lights  
the day's first cigarette guarding it  
from the wind framed by the ajar door.

You know, the ringing in your head  
comes from your eyes beating  
the houses, trees, meadows and madness,  
people staring at the passing shape of you  
as the train itself, a serpent, hissing, going, going,  
gone.

Your mind, lost and found midst  
a cloud of smoke, assembles an acid rain.

# *School Supplies*

Lauren Lansford

I gave them patience,  
permission

beveled rose erasers:  
slippers for our ballet  
of mistakes.

hallway high-fives, umbrellas  
in the rain,

and advice I could not keep.  
I gave them myself.

I gave them time, bluffed energy:  
my proof of love.

I held their mothers  
at graduation, and

At their funeral,  
I gave them flowers.

# *Nature*

## Tom Pryce

Gunpowder scatters across flame of setting sun,  
slowing to dandelion seeds caught in the wind;  
fluttering flock of silhouette wings woke from their nest,  
perched among peaks of black keys for trees:

A skyline that exists only in contrast to neon contrails  
marshmallow painted by hospital chimneys;  
trains seen from bridges -

the circuitry-arteries of modern cities,  
buzzing distracted commuters from A to B -  
tracks the capillaries  
to retro future chrome,  
brutalist stations the artificial constellations  
that map a landscape imbued through dull windows;

windows the electric chorus of buzzing shop facade,  
whirling phosphorous notes breathed onto breeze of night;  
polluted glow caught on flapping fly paper staves,  
carved by bellow'd-baritone of exhausting cars:  
winding, weaving,  
a hurtling toward serpentine veins  
tattooed across midnight of blackened countryside  
waking at dawn to do it all again,  
sacrifice on the altar of the subaltern.

# Contributors

**Renato Barucco** received an MA in Psychology from UCSC in Milan. He currently conducts research on gender and sexuality at Columbia University, Department of Psychiatry. His nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Advocate*, and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn.

**Philip Berry** has had flash, short fiction and CNF appear in *Literary Orphans*, *Liars' League*, *Deracine* and *DNA Magazine* among others. His work can be explored at [www.philberrycreative.wordpress.com](http://www.philberrycreative.wordpress.com) and @philaberry. He lives in London.

**Loukia Borrell** was born to Greek-Cypriot immigrants in Toledo, Ohio, and was raised in Virginia Beach. She graduated from Elon University and, for 20 years, worked as a reporter and correspondent for various newspapers and magazines in Virginia and Florida. She is the author of *Raping Aphrodite*, a historical fiction novel set during the 1974 invasion and division of Cyprus, and two other books, *Delicate Secrets* and *The Words Between Us*. Her poetry and short stories have been published in *Deltona Howl*, *Blue Heron Review*, *West Texas Literary Review*, *Voice of Eve*, *bioStories.com* and *The Washington Post*. She is married, has three children and lives in Virginia.

**Paul David Adkins** lives in NY. In 2018, Lit Riot published his collection, *Dispatches from the FOB*. Journal publications include *Pleiades*, *River Styx*, *Rattle*, *Diode*, *Baltimore Review*, *Crab Creek*, and *Whiskey Island*. He has received five Pushcart nominations and two finalist nominations from the Central NY Book Awards.

**Lauren Lansford** is a queer woman and public school educator whose writing is largely informed by those experiences. She has previously been published in *Spyglass* and *Sybil Journal*.

**Brodie Lowe** is a finalist of Broad River Review's Ron Rash Award in Fiction and Still: The Journal's Literary Contest, has fiction and poetry that has appeared or is forthcoming in *Broad River Review*, *Mystery Tribune*, *The Bark Magazine*, *Strange Stories Magazine*, *Antithesis Journal*, *Frontier Tales*, *Gypsum Sound Tales*, *Nebo: A Literary Journal* and elsewhere. He holds a BA in English from Western Carolina University and is an alumnus of Spalding University's MFA Community Workshop (Fall 2018).

**Kushal Poddar** Edited the online magazine "Words Surfacing." Authored "The Circus Came To My Island" (Spare Change Press, Ohio), "A Place For Your Ghost Animals" (Ripple Effect Publishing, Colorado Springs), "Understanding The Neighborhood" (BRP, Australia), "Scratches Within" (Barbara Maat, Florida), "Kleptomaniac's Book of Unoriginal Poems" (BRP, Australia) and "Eternity Restoration Project- Selected and New Poems" (Hawakal Publishers, India)

**Tom Pryce** is a 25 year old poet based in Cambridge, England. He was recently a student of philosophy and now works as a writer for a technology company. He first had poems published in 2018, while studying for his master's degree. He since has had two poems published in the *Ekphrastic Review*.

**Morgan Russel** Morgan Russell is a rhetorician and poet, and her work may be found in a number of places, such as, *Cabildo Quarterly*, *Rabid Oak Issue 12*, and others. She is a reader for *Brave Voices Magazine*, *805*, and *Marias at Sampaguitas*. When she's not reading or writing, she can be found mainlining coffee or babysitting until she gets into a grad program or finds a cubicle job in Corporate

America. Find her on Twitter @conniptionns

**Martin Webb** was born and raised in Africa and now lives in England. He was an editor for DC Comics before writing for Penthouse magazine. Since then he's had a number of feature articles published in a variety of magazines. When he's not busy editing his second manuscript, Martin writes flash fiction. His most recent piece, "Dreams of War," has been published in the anthology *Today, Tomorrow, Always: Volume 1* by Margery de Brus LLC. You can find him on Twitter @MWebbAuthor.

**Liz Wride** is a writer from Wales. Her short and flash fiction has appeared in *Milk Candy Review*, *Mental Papercuts*, *Okay Donkey Magazine*, *VampCat Magazine* and others. In 2015, her short story 'Potato' was shortlisted for ELLE UK's Talent Awards. She is editor-in-chief of @FlamingoLit, an online literary magazine inspired by flamingo-print shirts and Alice in Wonderland.