

The Mark Literary Review

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Growing Pains

Jake Kendall

We're moving fast now. The crowds, the lights, and the noise of the city centre receding into quiet darkness.

I can't get my mind straight.

I feel I should know the time; yet no amount of squinting at my phone can process the swirling screen. There's a two involved – past midnight then? Two AM? Twenty past anything? Christ I'm fucked up. My phone is useless to me right now, though I'm glad not to have lost it. I push it deep in my pocket; patting my jeans to ensure I wasn't stupid enough to just drop it there and then.

I'm sat back-to-back with the driver, forced to observe the grotesque throes of passion between Elliot and that girl from the pub. They're kissing loud, slobbering kisses. Elliot has his hand on hers, pulling it across his lap, towards his crotch. The girl catches my eye. She winks and invites me to join them with her free hand.

I decline silently, shaking my head and look out the window instead. I don't know this route. Where the fuck are we going? The passing of unknown streets becomes a flicker book – my mind unable to connect the impression of still images linking at speed.

Speed... that's definitely part of that concoction the girl gave us – the “party powder” as she called it. My grinding teeth and lockjaw suggests there's also MDMA at work. Maybe something else too; we definitely agreed to go to this party of hers, but my memory has a black hole where leaving the pub should be. Whatever that powder is, we've

gummed and snorted too much of an unknown quantity like the drunk twats we are.

I feel a hand tapping my knee. The girl has disengaged from Elliot.

“We need to swap darling. We’re close now – I should concentrate for a minute.”

I nod and stand, carefully shuffling across to sit next to Elliot. He’s grinning, eyes bulging from the suspected ecstasy, his mouth twitching involuntarily like a cow chewing cud.

We’re too old to look this wasted. We let ourselves get carried away, we’ve allowed ourselves to lose control.

I tell him “I have gum somewhere. Let me get some for you.”

“Thanks man,” Elliot replies as I begin checking my jacket. “I got to say I love you. I really do. You know that?”

Yeah, definitely MDMA in there. I return the platitude and hand over a stick of gum. Elliot senses the flippancy in my tone and puts his arm around me, pulling me close to emphasise his sincerity.

“I need you to understand me, right now; you’re like a brother. You’ve made me so happy. There aren’t many friends that would step aside on their birthday. I felt like such a shit for asking, but you know how it’s been for me.”

Of course, that’s the reason for this bout of mawkishness. The girl entered our night quite a few drinks ago now. I say “girl” because obviously she’s younger than us – I’d guess early twenties. She spotted me wearing my obligatory 30th birthday badge at the bar. She insisted on buying me a shot. We chatted a while and it was good. I invited her back to the table. She’s perhaps a bit grungy, a little too thin –too alternative to be everyone’s idea of pretty. Still, I thought she was kind of sexy. Maybe that’s

a confidence trick – she’s certainly charismatic: easily keeping pace with the jokes, and calling out my friends that habitually picked the lowest hanging fruit. She drank hard and fast, necking large glasses of white wine faster than any of us drank our pints. Under the table her party powder did the rounds. I felt her hand caressing my thigh; her feet playfully nudging mine.

I guess she must’ve been giving Elliot the same treatment. As I used the downstairs bathroom he was waiting in the corridor outside, wringing his hands.

“Dude - I know it’s your birthday and she came back with you and all... I think I’m winning her over, though – if that’s OK? She’s laughing at my jokes, keeping eye contact... either one of us has a chance right now. Mate, I’m sorry if this sounds pathetic... You know I haven’t been with a girl for nearly three fucking years...”

That didn’t sound pathetic to me. Generally speaking, we’re getting better at communicating, at detoxifying masculinity and sexuality. Still, the internal voices are the most judgmental of all and the hardest to silence. I’ve heard them myself, my confidence ever-diminishing during a long barren run; whispering that I was unlovable, unfuckable, and destined for a lifetime of unhappiness.

Elliot is in danger of going that step beyond, into the red zone. Repeated rejection can result in bitterness, self-pity, and misogyny. Already Elliot’s firing warning shots. He repeatedly describes himself as “a nice guy”; he makes assumptions about who deserves what in life; his social media output is full of myopic defeatism, they go un-liked and un-commented upon like some lonely lighthouse beaming SOS messages into the disinterested nothingness.

Elliot continued pleading his case.

“You know how long three years feels in drought time? This is...” before I smiled and silenced him with a hug.

“Mate, I don’t mind at all” I said, and meant it. “If she gives you the chance, take it.”

I sat away from them after that; my ego half-expecting her to follow me across the table, or leave to re-join whoever she started the night with. She did neither. Another of our mates – Ryan – sat in my place. I kept a quiet eye on things. Ryan moved away before he was even a third of the way through his pint. I’m sure I heard him quietly mumbling the words, “I have a girlfriend, sorry.”

I watched her more objectively after that. I sat, trying to remember her name. I think she said it was something like ‘Mi’ or possibly ‘Fi’, but the background noise was too much. I felt like a shit for not clarifying it with her for a few moments before I realise it didn’t matter one bit. This is a girl looking for ephemeral and anonymous encounters. I doubted her interest in either of us is sincere or lasting. To her, Elliot and I are just passing faces, easily replaceable. The name she gave probably wasn’t even real anyway.

She tells the driver to stop. The fare is seventeen quid. I suggest an even split. Elliot stands all huffed up and insists upon paying for it all himself. He looks unduly pleased with the gesture. I think he believes somehow he’s improved his chances with her. Personally I’m unconvinced; I doubt many woman fuck for taxi fare, and I’m sure this one won’t even remember the gesture in ten minutes.

That’s the moment I realised Elliot’s comparatively naivety, and that his night won’t end the way he wants it to. There’s no turning back now though. We’ve come too far. His hopes are too high.

Outside the air is cold. I hop from one foot to the other. The girl wraps her arms around me.

“Are you having a good birthday?” She asks, pushing her head into my chest. I pull free before Elliot catches sight of us and starts with the inevitable paranoia and bad vibes.

“I got to say my mate is into you. I’m not saying get with him or don’t – that’s your choice. With all respect though, I’m done – from now on there’s no hugging and no touching between us. That ok?”

She stares back at me. I wonder if she’s offended and I feel like a dickhead again.

“You’re so sexy when you give orders,” she tells me, all matter-of-fact. “In that voice you could tell me to do anything and I’d just...”

Elliot interrupts, sidling up and putting his arm around her.

“Where’s this party at then?” His voice filled with feigned enthusiasm. The girl cranes her neck upwards and bites him hard in the earlobe. Elliot winces, his face flushed with surprise, the girl frees herself and leads him forward by the hand.

I’ve never seen the house were approaching before, still, I’m confident nothing wholesome happens inside. The front garden is piled up with bin bags, bottles, tins and nitrous oxide canisters; the windows blacked out; the sound of drum and bass seeps out from the door.

The girl pushes her way inside. As he follows her, Elliot looks back as if checking if I’m still behind him.

“She bit my ear,” he mutters, more to himself than to

me. “Mad fucking bitch.”

We haven’t had a drink for at least half an hour now. I share this thought with my companions and we duly make for a kitchen that obviously hasn’t seen the preparation or consumption of food in months. The counters are bare except for bottles, tins, baggies, ash, and burnt tin foil. The oven is actually repulsive to look at. In the corner two younger men are passing a joint. They chat about something to do with the government, marijuana legalisation and corporate interest – one of them clearly more enthusiastic about the conversation than the other.

Among the empties I find some full tins of lager and pass them around. The girl has her powder out. She and Elliot snort another line, I refuse mine. The girl shrugs disinterestedly before hoovering it up. The smell of marijuana has made me crave some. I suggest smoking to the group. The girl doesn’t want to, she wants to dance. So does Elliot apparently, but does he fuck – Elliot can’t dance and hates anyone that makes him try. I tell them to enjoy anyway and move over to the stoners.

“That going round?” I ask pointing at the joint. They look at me with an air of slight affront. I realise I probably came across as rude, presumptuous, or just too fucked-up to be palatable company. “I took too many uppers and need to take the edge off,” I add to explain my needs, speaking slowly so as not to slur.

The more placid of the two takes a big hit and passes it to me with a nod. Motor mouth introduces himself with some faux-friendliness – undoubtedly he thinks me an intrusion. As soon as it is polite to resume his lecture he does so with an “I was just saying...” At first I try and follow the conversation with a sincere intention of joining in. He’s talks too fast though, his rant unstructured and repetitive. It sounds like some standard-issue conspiracy tropes thrown together. I strongly suspect that he’s saying nothing worth hear-

ing; suspicions that seem to be validated by the sight of other people walking into the kitchen, taking one look at us and leaving.

I'm there for what feels like an eternity. When I'm sure that a socially acceptable period has elapsed, I make a concerted effort to finish my beer and slosh the empty can at them.

"Cheers for the smoke guys," I tell them. "I'm dry though." If they wonder why I don't simply pick up another and re-join them they are too courteous to verbalise it. That or simply relieved to be free of the silent swaying mess.

I grab another beer and begin exploring the party. The music comes from a crowded living room with some decks set up. I can't breathe in there, it feels like fifty people are crammed in and trying to dance. Outside, in the garden, someone is puking against the fence. A group of people are watching someone so far gone that I assume he's on LSD – this one's eyes are crazy, he staggers like his spine is made of liquid while he laughs uncontrollably.

"Someone take him out" comes a shout from the crowd. It's probably a joke, but the atmosphere here is hostile and weird and I can't see Elliot among them anyway.

I'm about to walk up the stairs when someone obstructs my path. He stops me by putting his hand on my chest.

"Here's a thieving bastard," he hisses.

The man is a good half foot shorter than me, but even at five-three he's terrifying: his arms are monstrous, almost certainly I'm looking at a case of over-compensating, though braver people than me wouldn't voice the thought in hearing range. I don't know what he's talking about. The confusion shows on my face. He points at the beer I'm carrying.

"I was told they were going free," I lie, a little meekly.

The man wrenches the can from my hand, spilling beer across my shirt. He leans against the wall and drinks deeply from the can, challenging me to complain. I'm frozen. Unsure of what to do, I do nothing. The small man finishes the beer before sending a sharp slap towards my face. I flinch a little in anticipation, but the blow was more of a feint - losing all force at the last second, he pats my cheek instead with a mendacious chuckle.

"Don't be scared sweetheart, it's all love here." His farewell snide and belittling as he swaggers past towards the dancefloor.

I make my way upstairs. I mistime one step and slip. The fall is slow, stupid and preventable. I catch myself on a knee and two hands and push myself back onto my feet.

Elliot is nowhere to be seen upstairs either. One room has mellow techno playing to those on a burn out - the room filled with marijuana smoke and a profound lack of conversation. I notice an unattended bag of weed, enough for a couple of smokes, and slyly pocket it.

The bathroom is disgusting, it smells so strongly of piss that I'm glad the party powder has robbed me of that ability myself.

The final room I check is lit by a red bulb and has nothing inside but a few mattresses. As I poke my head around the door I realise too late what this is for - and why two men are stood with their backs to me and their trousers down. On the opposite wall another man is filming with his phone. This is too much, I don't want to see any more, I just want to find Elliot and get the hell out of here.

I start back for the stairs - if it means fighting through the dancefloor I'm finding him. I find myself face to face with the girl. I'm about to ask if she knows where Elliot is when I realise she's topless and leading another man to-

wards the red room. Behind that man is another holding his camera phone up above them and shouting to the screen, “this girl’s fucking crazy!”

She doesn’t acknowledge me as she passes. I’m happy about that.

Elliot charges in from the garden, he’s scanning the hallway, presumably looking for the girl.

“Have you seen her?”

“No mate. Let’s go – I’m tired.”

“Tired? We’re too high for that – neither of us are sleeping tonight. Come on mate, help me find her.”

He notices the stairs and near-sprints up. I offer the word bollocks up to no one in particular before following.

Elliot’s in the mellow room, probably spinning out those inside with his manic energy and mad eyes. I wait on the landing, trying to find the right words. They don’t form in time. Elliot exits the mellow room and heads straight for the red one.

“Elliot, what if she’s gone?”

“She wouldn’t do that to me,” he presumes. “Besides, we’ve only just got here.”

“Do not go in that room.”

I put a restraining hand on his shoulder, it’s a mistake, his anger is being redirected towards it.

“Why – is she in there?”

“Let it go mate. Please?”

“Why are you saying that – why did you tell me she’s gone?” He turns to me, having made five from two and two. “You said you’d step aside – why say it if you didn’t mean it?”

I don’t like the look in his eyes, the aggression in them amplified by a cocktail of intoxicants.

“Is it because you’re always Mr. Nice Guy? Everyone’s best friend, until it comes down to it – then your fucking bullshit. You’d rather I stayed miserable than handle the fact that just one time a girl preferred me.”

At first I’m a little hurt by this unexpected revelation of mistrust and resentment; but Elliot takes my mind off it immediately, pushing me off-balance and hard against the wall. He lashes out with his fist, catching me awkwardly in the chest. His punches are wild and messy. I’m able to catch his second attempt and force his arms down by his side. I try and tell him that the girl wasn’t really interested in either of us, that to her we were just passing faces and easily replaceable. He won’t listen, though, he keeps asking why I lied to him, and telling me how much he really likes this woman he doesn’t even know.

I keep hold of him in a boxers clinch and allow him enough time to vent. Eventually he tails off and our silence is filled with general noise of whooping and shouting emanating from the red room. Elliot turns his head, focussing on the noise until it clarifies into the unmistakable sounds of communal fucking: the sounds of degradation and debasement, and of men saying ugly things.

Elliot’s face works through confusion through realisation and embarrassment.

“She’s in there?”

“Do you still want to go inside?”

He bows his head, “let’s go,” he mutters.

Outside the cool air is much appreciated. My mind has calmed down a little, I can read my phone – its quarter to four and we are in Roath. Home is only a twenty minutes away.

We walk in silence for a while.

“I’m sorry I lost it back there,” Elliot offers.

“That’s OK.”

“I hit you.”

“It’s OK, really.” “You OK?” I eventually ask.

“Yeah mate, fine.”

“I said some pretty stupid things too, let’s blame it on the booze. Booze and depression.”

I don’t know what to say to him. We’ve said everything before. Elliot stops suddenly, crumbling onto the pavement where he bursts into wild noiseless tears.

Dog-gone

Paul Beckman

She walks down the street wearing a fur coat wide brimmed hat leading a Jack Russell terrier on a leash. I watched her sit on a bench outside Central Park, back erect as it was when she walked. I took the seat on the opposite end removed my Amy Hempel book *Animals* from my backpack and read a page before turning to her and saying hello. She turned her head my way and I held up the book and asked her if she read it. She turned back, bent over, whispered to her dog got up and walked away.

I wouldn't have started a conversation with a total high class looking stranger if I hadn't observed her two other times this week going through the same ritual with different dogs. I felt the need to know if she was a rich society lady with multiple dogs or a down-on-her-luck once society lady now earning food money by being a dog walker.

There were other possibilities but I liked these two so I followed her—from a discreet distance of course. Tomorrow I'll dress better than today which is my normal ripped and stained jeans, hoodie and boots. My beard and mustache both have minds of their own but I speak softly and friendly and while I'm a tall good sized guy I believe I'm non-threatening.

Today I see her with a large bulldog (but aren't they all) and she does her usual walk around Central Park South and heads uptown and finally lights on a bench. She's wearing a blue Ike jacket, tight pink jeans and a fedora with a feather. I have on my blue blazer white shirt with blue stripes and chinos with cuffs falling just above my scuffed penny loafers. I stopped at a barber

shop and had my mustache and beard trimmed short and took a seat on the bench a non- threatening distance away and told her that her dog was beautiful and asked if I could pet him. She handed me the leash and I coaxed the bulldog over and rubbed and petted him and became his best friend.

The lady looked over at the two of us got up and walked to the street where I watched her flag down a cab and drive out of my life leaving me with this beautiful dog. Finally I got up and walked until I saw a cop and told him my story. You're the third one this week he told me and wished me luck.

The Stepwell

Kiriti Sengupta

Kalapani insinuates servitude for a lifetime.
In the premises of *Purana Qila*
the *baoli* is alive.
Eighty-nine stairs down
water is yet to scour the shine.
It awaits liberation.

Note: A stepwell is known as a baoli, regionally.

Direction

Michael Onofrey

I'd hear bleating and look out the window and see the old lady who rented out the room milking one of three goats, and this was how I woke in the morning—Paleochora, southwestern Crete, a long time ago.

Two cots, a wooden table, two rush-bottomed chairs. A black cord, snaking up a concrete wall to the center of the ceiling, carried current to a bulb. But I had bought candles in town, and it was candles that I used instead of the light-bulb.

At first I was on the beach, Libyan Sea lapping, but as more and more naked bodies departed when September began, I took to the hills, where my walks got longer and longer because I continued to think about direction.

Africa, just over the horizon, brought thoughts of Durrell's Alexandria, and at times I thought I could smell that vast continent, a warm breath from the south. And then I'd look east, and even though I couldn't see it or smell it, I knew it was there like a calling - Asia. I had been once before, the overland route, India and back, and I dwelled on those recollections, local transport and what that meant. I wondered if Cretan winters came from that direction—Asia, specifically Turkey. In back of me was Europe, its art, its food, its majestic buildings. And of course, aside from these considerations, there were any number of discount travel agencies in Athens that sold tickets to the United States, which meant returning home.

I was at a crossroads, a junction, a southern outpost where Europe left off. No matter which direction I chose, commit-

ment was required. Yet at times it felt like it didn't matter, and I wondered what I was waiting for.

I continued to pay for the room by the week. I traded paperback books with people I'd meet at the town's central café, bus to Chania arriving and departing nearby.

And then there was one day when I came down from the hills and went to the café for a bottle of beer and found Fran, who was standing in the doorway of the kitchen—late afternoon, summer crowd diminished, autumn having begun. Of those who remained, their usual hour at the café was in the evening.

I had seen Fran around, but it was two nights previous that put her in my mind indelibly, for she had sung *Danny Boy*—twice.

An upright piano was in the café, piano battered but playable. A man with a goatee and thin arms had sat down at the piano and had struck a couple of notes. It was how things usually began, someone fooling around before getting into a tune, but this time a woman rose and went to the piano. She wasn't stumbling, but her body was pitched to the right. When she reached the piano, glass of retsina in hand, there was nothing in particular that called attention to her presence or purpose. She might have walked over with nothing more than curiosity on her mind, or she might have been on her way to the restroom. The piano player was still feeling out the keys, but the drift of the tune was coming. Fran's head took a downward tilt. Perhaps she was cocking an ear. Dry brown hair fell from her head to her shoulders in broken pleats. She seemed flabby, but she wasn't fat, wasn't overweight. She was slim, yet her skin hung like bunting. Perhaps she had been ill and had lost weight. Her complexion was a roughish brown, weathered maybe, but between folds of flesh there were hints of yellow. She looked to be forty, but was probably much younger. I thought she was drunk—until she started singing.

Glasses and bottles and conversations stopped. Passersby were soon at the windows and doors of the café. Fran's head had risen and she was looking at some place across the room, voice weaving in and out of the piano, but this obedience changed as the tune progressed. She went beyond the piano player by establishing a certain mood as if by dictation, yet spontaneous. She held her glass of retsina limply in her one hand, piano player glancing up at her now and then. The sounds coming out of her mouth lingered, and when the song ended there was residue like something remembered.

Her dark eyes gave up on that vague spot across the room. She looked right, she looked left, head moving cautiously, applause having begun. She seemed to be trying to find where she was. She brought her glass up and looked at it. She took a drink, piano player watching her. She reached for the piano player's cigarette that was in an ashtray on top of the piano and she picked the cigarette up and brought it to her lips and inhaled. She took the cigarette out of her mouth, hand with the cigarette falling to her side. She set her glass of retsina down on top of the piano and gave her head a jerk to clear strands of hair from over her right eye. She looked up, smoke easing from her mouth, applause fading.

It was a spacious café, twenty tables or so. Fluorescent tubes were on the ceiling. A black-and-white tableau.

She began again. Same song, *Danny Boy*, but from a more recessed place at the back of her throat. The piano player hurried to come up behind her, for even though it was the same song it was different, a stronger degree of hazard, a further delving into some sort of past, some sort of psych that elicited disturbed corners. At a certain point the piano player's fingers eased off the keys, which left Fran all alone, one arm at her side, cigarette between her fingers smoldering, other arm slightly cocked with her hand on the edge of the piano. The café was quiet, her raspy, smoky voice prevailing. Toward the end, where the lyrics turn to "grave," the piano came back.

Applause began, but even that was different than before.

Fran brought her hand up and looked at the cigarette and took a drag. She walked back to her table and sat down. At that table more questions arose, for along with Fran there were two other people, a man and a woman, but it wasn't clear if the man and woman were a couple. It might have been that Fran was with one of them, with the man or with the woman. Or it might have been a three-some. The man had long hair and was late twenties, the woman short hair and a little older. The man stood up and went to the piano and got Fran's glass of retsina and brought it back and set it down on the table in front of Fran.

And this was what I remembered, nothing more, for right after that I left the café. I wanted to walk back to my room with the night surrounding me, quiet and almost chilly, because I wanted to take that second rendering with me. It was in my head and I didn't want to disturb it. I wanted to sit in my room with a candle burning and with a glass of red wine, and I wanted to listen to that song again and again in my head.

And now here she was, Fran, standing in the doorway of the kitchen of the café. I went to the doorway and squeezed by her and asked the man in the kitchen for a beer. Fran looked at me, but didn't say anything. The man handed me a bottle of beer and I paid for it and left the doorway to go into the café's main room, the room with the piano. I sat down at a table and lifted that cold bottle of beer and drank, and as I lowered the bottle I watched Fran walk across the room, large glass of retsina in hand. When she got to where I sat, she stood and looked at me.

"Would you care to have a seat?" I said and gestured.

She sat down across from me and said, "I'm Fran, but my real name is Flannery." She brought her glass up to her lips. A pint-size glass, yellowish liquid drifting into her mouth.

“I’m Jerry.”

“And the family name?” A strong lilt was on her pronunciation.

“Gail.”

“Gail?” she questioned. “Is that Irish? I know you’re not from Ireland. I can tell by the voice, but I mean the name?”

“I don’t know. I was told that it’s got just about everything in it. There might be some Irish.”

The day had heated up, temperature in the café comfortable. Fran was wearing a blue shift and her hair was stiff, probably from saltwater. From a pocket of the shift she took out a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches. She lit a cigarette and then, as if it were an afterthought, offered me a cigarette, but I turned it down because I don’t smoke.

“Leonard doesn’t smoke, either,” Fran said. “Do you know Leonard?”

“Not by name.”

She drew on her cigarette. Outside, clouds were building in the eastern sky. I could see the clouds from where I sat, view through a window that was in back of Fran. Perhaps there’d be a thunderstorm like the previous day, a brief explosive storm.

“I heard you sing the other night, *Danny Boy*. It was beautiful. Are you a professional singer?”

“Pubs ‘round County Cork.”

Fran drank some retsina. The skin on her neck was

wrinkled.

“*Danny Boy* was actually written by an Englishman,” Fran said.

“Really?”

“Most people don’t know that.”

She drew on her cigarette and took in more retsina. I sipped beer.

“Have you ever seen,” Fran began, “when the bus stops at one of those towns, one of those villages, one of those places along the roadway, and the driver gets out and goes inside for his tea, and the dirty-faced boy, who works on the bus, calls out for customers, while cripples hoist themselves up onto the stairwell at the front of the bus and then onto the floor of the bus, so that they can drag themselves along that filthy aisle for everyone to see—mangled, maimed, mutilated, twisted? Sometimes someone sets them up there at the front of the bus with a special cup to grip in their teeth, while their hands, if they got any, lever their body along the aisle, a tooth coming out their upper lip, tin cup below it, face smeared as if a hot iron had swept it. They come along the aisle on stumps, hands and legs gone. There’s this sound, and there’s this sight coming at you at the same time. It’s a spectacle put in front of your eyes for the purposes of revulsion and disgust. It’s a means, a way, a strategy for eliciting sympathy, compassion, and maybe even empathy, if that were at all possible. A quest, a mission, a task, an assignment. They are outfitted with a tin cup. Children are not spared. Quite the contrary, girls and boys alike. And then there are the mothers who come along and show you their babies.”

Fran’s head was at a tilt, but she now straightened it to drink some retsina. My bottle of beer was on the table in front of me. Fran inhaled from her cigarette.

“On the train it’s the same,” Fran picked up, “writhing down the aisle of the carriage, always facing you, always in the direction where you have to look at them. Calculated, planned, deliberate. A short crutch fashioned from a stick, one leg gone, the other twisted and with a lump of a foot at its terminus.

“And then there are the insane babbling, drooling, turning in circles, smelling of feces. Nothing is overlooked, no humiliation unexplored. It’s a catwalk of revulsion.

“The bus driver comes out of the teahouse and steps into the bus and climbs onto his seat and starts the motor. Cripples are trying to get off the bus, dragging themselves to the rear exit, scrambling like flopping chickens along the aisle, and the boy pulls them down the rear stairwell to the ground, and that’s where they are left, out on the dirt, dust swirling as the bus pulls away. Sometimes it’s snowing.”

She’s stumbling on her speech. She reaches for her glass of retsina and gulps, but then sputters and takes a swallow of air. She goes forward toward the table, body bent and shaking. She brings a hand to her face and stands up. Her chair skitters on the floor briefly. She’s weeping.

I get to my feet as Fran staggers toward the door, clouds darkening in that direction. She steps down onto the street. A woman in flower-print dress stops to look, upside-down chicken hanging from the woman’s one hand. Fran goes up the street and leaves my sight. The woman looks in that direction, the direction Fran has taken.

A White Mask in a Dark Corridor

Karine Ancellin

A French lover in New York
impeccably dressed
part of the fashion crowd.
With the New York glitterati,
they meet at The Pierre
happy hour whisky.

Holidays sailing in Greece
handsome tan, well read,
treading the trends of the times
with a pronounced French accent
a fancy foreign friend to most,

you tried my blue mother,
you had a daughter, me
you lured my aristocratic step-mother,
you had a son, my half brother,
you married your house cleaning-secretary,
you were too old.

Racist bathtub of bleached porcelain
narcissistic wall to wall mirrors:
muffling the thumps,
encapsulating masked malice
reverberating lacks, silences and love unimagined
morphing plastic surgery scars,
immigrant temperamental camouflage.

Alive, I kept you the parent ideal
dead, excruciatingly, I emptied your failure.

Wombsday

L.A. Rivers

7 sins?

No 7 deadly lies.

Insidious and acceptable

Taught as truth

Rotting will at the foundations of selfhood.

Question these and you are the betrayer of the tribe.

Wanton

Wasterel

Whore

Turn virtue to sin, what genius came up with that hefty mind control?

Take all that is right and natural and upend it to wrong?

Assume imbalance is the order of life?

Tick tock

Tick tock

Clock ticking down to wombsday...

7 deadly lies unveiled

Mountains rumbling as sleeping women wake

Waiting for no man to free them.

Madonna and whore integrating into wholeness.

People Like Them

Anne Leigh Parrish

He landed a good gig. Looking in on people's homes would keep them in Aspen. The hikers were gone; the skiers yet to descend. Those in town now were there for the golden trees, and the occasional red and orange ones the dry summer had miraculously produced.

The management company had turned him down at first, though his record was clear. It was because he was Hispanic, he thought. But so were the road crews, the waiters, the bellhops, the maids, and the servers in the Mediterranean restaurant.

He'd grown up outside of Boulder, and saw the town change into a high-tech mecca. His parents had sold their home and fled to Arizona, where another branch of the family was installed south of Phoenix. But Raoul couldn't go; wouldn't go. Those Rockies held him fast, and he held them just as fast in his yearning, hungry heart.

And for what did he hunger and yearn? Everything, starting with those stone mansions, occupied for maybe one or two weeks a year by millionaires who lived in New York, Dallas, Seattle, Denver, and one family from Honolulu who must have thought snow was an exotic delight.

He hungered also for Sally, who'd gotten up her nerve and moved up there with him, though to be fair, all she'd left behind was a job she didn't like processing Social Security applications, a mother she didn't speak to, and an ex-boyfriend who tried, every other month, to get back on her good side.

Raoul was thirty-one; Sally, thirty-five. Her blonde hair and blue eyes enchanted him. Opposites attract, she said, though they weren't opposite really, but very much aligned. Sally hungered, too, not for money, though God knew it helped, but for some spiritual space she could occupy and just be.

His job was to visit seven homes once a week; make sure that all the lights worked, the faucets ran; the grounds were lovingly mown, trimmed, and raked, though if he had to guess, the guys who came out in their tan shirts didn't really give a shit; and the interior dusted and mopped per whatever schedule had been arranged. Then, when an owner was on the way in, make sure the refrigerator and pantry were stocked according to pre-selected specifications, which usually included a lot of high-end champagne, French cheese, and Belgian chocolates, subject to change at the last minute, of course.

The arrangement was particularly convenient because the homes were within walking distance of their apartment, paid for by the management company, in the fancier part of town. High-end location aside, it had six hundred square feet and no mountain view. The windows rattled when the wind blew, and the wind blew all the time.

Sally got a part-time job in the bookstore, because they happened to be hiring the day she wandered in looking for a guide to local hiking trails. She didn't know anything about books. The manager said she'd learn. The off-season was always quiet, and she'd have time to get up to speed on new titles, mostly memoirs and mysteries, before December, when the skiers lit up the town. Christmas in Aspen was wild.

The weather went from crisp to freezing overnight. This meant Raoul had to assess the heating system in each home. Since they'd all been built within the last two to

three years, the furnaces were in good shape. Still, he got a service guy out to make sure, Lloyd from Leadville. Raoul saw nothing funny in that alliteration, but Lloyd sure did. His mother, after being unwilling to relocate to the middle of nowhere so her husband could work at the Climax Mine, underwent a change of heart and assigned each of her five children a name beginning with “L.” Lola moved to L.A.; Lester and Larry were still local; and Lisa, also local, was expecting her first. When asked how her angel would be christened, she said Mary, not for religious reasons, but because M came right after L.

The Parson home had two furnaces, and each needed a new filter. Strictly routine. Only Lloyd didn’t have any, and would have to order them special. He got in his truck, and waved to Raoul as he backed down the steep, curving driveway. Raoul stood a moment in the garage to watch him go. He pressed the button to lower the door, made his way across four parking bays, three of which were occupied by a Porsche, a BMW, and a Mercedes SUV, to the hallway into the kitchen.

This was his favorite property. It had over eight-thousand square feet; two master suites, both on the main level but on opposite sides of the house; floor to ceiling windows that gave on the slopes and the forests beyond; a jacuzzi surrounded by twining vines in a wrought-iron trellis; and a kitchen with two islands, two dishwashers, a six-burner Viking range; and three wall ovens. The art he didn’t really understand. All of it was modern, abstract, emphasizing color over subject. The floors were a rich honey color, decorated with heavy Persian rugs. Leather furniture was everywhere, and very comfortable to sit on, though he knew he wasn’t supposed to.

There was top-notch liquor on a wheeled cart in the den, a spacious room with wood beams in the ceiling and a stone fireplace. He helped himself to a crystal tumbler and a gen-

erous pour of Bourbon. There was wood and kindling ready to go, but to light a fire would be insane. If someone came to the door, he could ditch the drink, and say he was just closing up, but smoke from the chimney would tell a very different story.

The surrounding homes were empty. He knew because they were on his list. Their outside lights came on automatically at dusk, which it was just then becoming.

He called Sally, and told her to get over there.

“Where?” she asked. She had just finished her daily yoga routine and was sweaty head to toe.

He gave her the address.

“Why?” she asked.

“Time to party.”

“Huh?”

He explained.

“You’ll get in trouble,” she said, though she liked the idea a lot.

“No one around for miles. Who’s to know?”

She showered, and dressed in her usual jeans and pullover sweater. She seldom bought new clothes. She didn’t like thinking about appearances, hers, or anyone else’s, though of course she noticed what everyone wore, and whether or not he or she (usually he) were attractive. It was part of her inner dilemma, one she’d always had, between desire and acceptance.

Raoul was waiting for her in the driveway, wearing a smart

leather jacket she'd never seen. He ushered her into the the empty bay. Next to the Mercedes Sally's twenty-year-old Corolla looked pathetic. She pinched his sleeve.

"Nice," she said.

"Guy's got four more. You should see the closet."

"Are you sure this is okay?"

"Yeah, why not?"

She explained that most home security systems had a feature that let the owner see when doors were opened and closed. If someone really wanted to study the activity, the long time spent in the house would be hard to explain.

Raoul looked down at her skeptically. Her ex-boyfriend had worked for a home security system in Boulder, which is how she no doubt came by this knowledge.

"I'll say the cleaning crew didn't show, and I took care of it myself," Raoul said.

"Well, they don't know you, so they might believe it."

Raoul didn't clean anything, something on which Sally occasionally remarked. He thought she was too fussy about things like that. He said if she didn't do it, he would, eventually. To her this meant when the place became intolerable.

He showed her the house. In one of the master bedrooms there was a vanity table with bottles of perfume. Sally brought a couple of them to her nose, found one she liked, and dabbed some on her wrists and behind each earlobe. Raoul stared. He was surprised. She explained that in high school she'd worked in a department store selling cosmetics. Maybe that's where her disdain of fashion and finery came from, he thought.

The shower stall was enormous, with two shower heads. They stood in it together, fully clothed, and thought about what it would be like to use it every day. Sally said you'd never want to leave. Then there was the soaking tub, big enough for three people. That made her laugh. What kind of relationship put three people in a bathtub?

He asked if she'd brought the sandwiches he'd told her to pick up at the store.

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"Roast beef for you, like you said."

"What did you get?"

"Ham and cheese."

They were in the kitchen at that point, sitting in a pair of plush upholstered stools, their elbows on the island, a slab of white marble that had gray and blue veins running through it.

Raoul said they couldn't eat food like that in so nice a kitchen. Sally asked what else he had in mind.

The refrigerator was empty. The freezer contained meals one could put in the microwave. Nothing appealed. He told her to go get the sandwiches from her car. She came back to find that he'd opened a bottle of French wine and poured some into two crystal glasses. She didn't know he could move that fast. But then, Raoul was full of surprises. The wine was stored in a climate-controlled room behind the kitchen. He'd scoped it out on an earlier visit.

"They're going to notice," Sally said, and tasted hers. It was

smooth and rich. All the wine she'd ever had in her life was nothing compared to this.

"You worry too much."

"Maybe you don't worry enough."

They ate quickly and in silence. They realized they'd have to take their trash out with them.

"We should get out of here," she said.

"Not yet."

They wandered the house some more. In the room where Raoul had found the Bourbon was a wall of bookshelves and a ladder on wheels that you could slide along and climb. Sally went up it, and chose a book, a history of the Roman Empire. She flipped through the pages. The lettering was small and hard to read. She put it back, and chose another, this time one on the botany of South America. She put that one back, too. The next book she picked was a novel, written in the 1930s about a woman named Harriet Lowe. She pulled a pencil out of her back pocket which she'd taken from the store after filling out the order for the sandwiches, crossed out the name on the page, and wrote in her own. Then she crossed out her last name, so no one would track her down.

The whole time, Raoul had stood below, drinking his wine, gazing out the window into the purple evening. Stars were out. The trees were black. She joined him. Their reflections in the glass made them seem insubstantial, almost ghostly, and when he put his arm around her waist, it was as if a phantom had brushed her.

What if this were their house? Would the image before them become more solid? She felt cold, standing there, so she turned away.

Back in the kitchen, she poured herself more wine. Some spilled on the counter. She pressed the sleeve of her sweater onto the droplets, but a pink stain remained. She wet her finger and pressed hard, rubbing back and forth. Raoul asked what she was doing. She told him. He looked, and said there was nothing there.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“See for yourself.”

He was right. The surface was clear.

She put her face in her hands for a moment.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Too much wine.”

“Only had a little.”

He put his glass down next to hers, took her in his arms, and kissed her sweetly at first, then with more intensity. She’d said before that she liked being kissed that way. She was slow to respond, then did, forcefully.

He led her into the other master bedroom. It had a four-poster bed with a thick, embroidered cover. Against the wall was a charming writing desk that held several beautiful glass paperweights, full of swirling colors. She wanted to touch them, bring one to her cheek and feel its coolness, but he didn’t let go of her hand.

They lay on the bed, kissed for a while, stopped, and were still, side by side.

“You know, we’ve got a perfectly good bed at home,” she

said.

“Squeaks.”

“Yeah.”

She laughed. They’d wondered before what the people next to them must think.

She closed her eyes. She could be anywhere, even in her childhood room in the small home shaded by a tall cottonwood tree in Greeley. As an only child, her private fantasy life was rich. She lived in many different houses, all splendid, quiet, gracious, nothing like the one where her parents fought nightly, and her mother shared her bed when she couldn’t stand being close to her father.

She opened her eyes, and registered the luxury around her. She didn’t want to live where people had so much more than she did. Better to be where the field was more level. She could tell him she wanted to go back to Boulder, but there was too much money there, too. Other people would always have more, and people like her and Raoul just had to accept that. There was no point thinking anything else. If he didn’t see that now, he would have to, before long.

“We should go,” she said.

They got up, smoothed the cover and pulled it tight. They removed all traces of themselves carefully. He put the leather jacket back in the closet, and put on his denim one he’d dropped on the carpeted floor. He turned out the lights in the rooms they’d been in, and for a moment, they stood in darkness looking out into another darkness. They cast no reflection then, yet she felt firm and steady on her feet.

On the short drive back to their place, they agreed that a house like wasn’t all that great, really.

“Didn’t feel very cozy, did it?” he asked.

“Not at all. It actually felt sort of lonely.”

“Yeah.”

“Might sound funny, but I like our place better.”

“Me, too.”

She put her hand gently on his leg while he drove. The winter was going to be all right. She could feel it.

Rumors

Paul Robert Mullen

it cannot be considered indecency
to imagine pure pleasure
under the tree the one you jog past
every morning as i wait alone
for buses
so crowded by fears

you see in these communities
out of nothing comes *something*
since railways and motorways and passageways
bring voices often still humming
as pale winter dawns on us
as if we were all expecting sun forever

Religion

Kiriti Sengupta

The shirt I bought severs promises.
It attracts stain, odor, and crumples
briskly. The salesman had urged,
*We treat cotton to produce
fine fabric.*
Isn't propensity native? It refutes
mutation.

In Noise and Restlessness

Amanda McHugh

It was strange to become obsessed with a noise that no one else heard. It happened gradually, like a child trying to stay upright on black ice in winter. A dry rasp while she waited in line for coffee. She looked at the man standing behind her, thinking he was impatiently rustling a newspaper, but he was staring at his phone, submerged in his digital world. A quiet hum while she loaded the dishwasher. She opened and closed the door twice thinking she accidentally put her phone in the silverware holder before the noise faded. Sara took baby steps into her obsession, realizing too late that she was alone in the cacophony. Like the beating heart in that Poe story, throbbing louder and faster, driving the man to the edge of madness because he was the only one who heard the incessant pound.

It was his guilt that ultimately served as its cause. Casual observers would say that. His guilt drove him mad, guilt of his heinous act and fear of being caught that made him hear things that didn't exist. But Sara didn't have anything to feel guilty about. She hadn't murdered anyone. There was no dead body hiding beneath her floor boards—at least none that she knew about. And still the noise continued. It wasn't the lub-dub of her blood flowing to her temple—that would be more comforting at this point. It was a scratching. Quiet at first, but it had started speeding up recently, a frantic pace that made her uneasy. She imagined that body under the floor again. Maybe the person wasn't dead, after all. Maybe she survived the blunt force trauma or stabbing or whatever unfortunate event had befallen her, and was trying to scratch her way out, her nails grating against

the wood slowly. I have all the time in the world, that scratching implied, and I'm coming for you. Maybe she should take a few boards up just to check. They made it look so easy in movies. There was always a crowbar or creaky board conveniently located a few feet away. Sara didn't have a crowbar, though. She didn't even own a hammer.

Was she really contemplating destroying her apartment?

The thought hit her hard. That was something a crazy person would do. She pushed the image of a bloated corpse scraping its way to revenge to the back of her mind, locking it in a tiny dark room that only she had the key to. She felt a little safer with the monster out of sight, and for a moment the noise seemed to disappear.

She closed her eyes and relished the silence. The room was warmer than usual but she didn't care. She threw open the curtains that morning hoping extra sunlight would help her find the source. She welcomed the potential for discovery, solving the problem like a Nancy Drew plot, *The Mystery of the Incessant Buzz*.

When she was eight her mother found a mouse living in their pantry. She reached down for a box of cereal—Cocoa Pebbles, her daughter's favorite—and the tiny rodent ran out between her feet across the kitchen before disappearing. They searched for hours together but found nothing. Not a hole, no droppings, no shredded boxes. She started to question whether she had actually seen the mouse at all. But later that night while she tried to fall asleep, she heard a scratching behind the wall her room shared with the kitchen. She traced the path with her finger in the dark, left to right, right to left, along the baseboard and into the corners. Her stomach lurched at the thought of the mouse scampering in the crevices, uninvited, invading her space; but she also felt the hardness of the wall on her hand and welcomed the

sense of safety. She could feel the barrier. There was no way it could get her. What damage could the mouse do if it couldn't actually touch her? Lots of dangers lurked in the dark but disappeared with a little light. She tucked her hair behind her ear and the noise resumed. *Buzz scratch. Buzz scratch. Buzz scratch.*

Sara screamed, a short shrill cry of desperation. She threw pillows and upturned cushions hoping to find something she missed. There had to be something. An old radiator leaking. A burst pipe. She would even accept a wasp nest in her window at this point. The idea of hundreds of tiny wasps stinging her as she attacked their papery home gave her makeshift comfort; at least she would know where the noise was coming from. At least she wouldn't feel so unhinged. But there was nothing. She saw dust particles floating in the sunlight unobstructed. She envied them floating so carelessly along, a nuisance, surely, but content in their lazy paths.

If they could hear what I hear they would explode, she thought, and flopped on the couch. She plugged in her phone and turned up a playlist as loud as it would go. Panic! at the Disco prayed for the wicked on the weekend, and still the buzzing strengthened.

She hadn't seen her roommate in a few days. Jessie worked as a line cook at a new modern bistro on Fourth Street. Her hours were incredibly demanding, and beyond an occasional text exchange, they rarely interacted outside of a Sunday evening Netflix binge with popcorn and a bottle of pinot. She hadn't gotten a chance to talk to her about the noise. It was possible that Jessie had heard it and had forgotten to tell her; that wasn't entirely out of the question. She was so busy and wouldn't want to wake her up in the night for a random sound, so she never said anything. All at once the need to prove it wasn't all in her head engulfed her. She needed to know Jessie could hear it, too.

Her message was short but the autocorrect kept changing her words. *Ducking autocorrect*, she thought.

Gave you heard the nose?

Have you heard the joke?

Finally: Have you heard the noise?

She tapped her fingers, waiting for the response. She didn't recognize her face in the lock screen photo. That woman was carefree, covered in sparkles and singing off-key to the band playing behind her. It was the face of a stranger who didn't know the noise like she did. Was it really only two weeks ago she was that happy? She tried to remember the last time she laughed, but her thoughts were clouded with undead bodies and giant wasps.

Sara tapped the screen again. Three minutes. No answer. Why wasn't she answering?

Because she did it, her mind said in its crumbling told-you-so tone.

Did what? Jessie didn't do anything. She wouldn't do anything. They had been friends for years, even before they lived together. Her mother called them the Olsen Twins as kids, attached at the hip with know-it-all attitudes.

She put it in you. The noise. She did it.

That's impossible, she told the mind-voice. Jessie would never hurt me. This is crazy. This is what crazy people do.

Everybody told you to be careful but you didn't want to listen. Don't live with her, they said. Jealousy can make people do things they wouldn't normally do.

That's ridiculous. Jessie wasn't a jealous person. I mean,

sure, she wasn't thrilled with my promotion when she's still cutting onions, but she would never purposely do something to—

Hurt you? Are you sure? She's not answering your texts. She's out there living her normal routine while you...well, look at you. Disheveled and alone and fighting the buZZZZZZZZZZZZ—

For the second time that morning, Sara screamed. The scratching was deafening, and there was pain now. It was inside her head. The noise had mutated into a tiny demon, digging deep into her brain with its fiery talons. She clawed at her face and stared at her reflection in the mirror above the couch. There were tears in her eyes and gouges on her cheeks but still the noise got louder.

She put it in your ear.

Her shrieking stopped. She inhaled and tilted her head to the side, exhaled and tilted to the other side. She opened the camera on her phone, trying to contour her neck at an angle that would show the inside of her ear. The pictures were too fuzzy, blurred shots that wouldn't focus beyond the tiny hole where her earring should be.

You can't see it. It's inside.

The buzzing filled her thoughts, but that voice brought clarity. She held onto the idea with a tightening certainty.

Jessie had put something in her ear. It all made sense now. She wasn't crazy. Of course no one else could hear the noise. No one else could hear the noise because Jessie had put something inside her, snuck into her room and birthed this horrible situation, no doubt with a smile on her face. She needed to get it out.

On a drunken night in a life before the noise, Sara stopped for a slice on her way home from the bar. Was there anything better than a greasy pizza bite after a few hours of cheap beers? She didn't think so then, but she would gladly give

up all the former satisfaction she found in that indulgence for one solid minute of silence now.

She stumbled up the stairs and through the door to her apartment, knowing full well there was no chance she'd make it to her bedroom. So she crashed on her couch, fighting the urge to vomit food truck pizza all over the floor. She stared at the ceiling tiles, wondering how many more nights she would find hidden constellations in their manufactured spots. She found a dog, a school of fish, a broken heart, each one taking shape and disappearing in the moonlight. It was only an hour later when she tiptoed to the bathroom, shushing her own steps for fear she disturb the wonderful world shifting on the ceiling. One foot in front of the other, she carefully counted her steps to the threshold.

Nineteen. Only nineteen steps stood between her and her salvation.

Because that's exactly what it was: salvation. The line dividing normalcy and desperation was thin, fragile. A delicate balance.

If it isn't in control already. Better hurry.

Sara turned and ran to the bathroom. She would not let Jessie destroy her. She would not let the noise win.

BuuuZZZZZZ HURRY. BUZZZZZZZZ. HURRY. BUZZZZZ. HURRY.

"Shut up!" Sara yelled. Her reflection seemed to sneer at her, mocking her agony. It reared its head back in a broken cackle, drool dripping from its lips, the gouges a deep crimson against its pale skin. The demon burrowed further into her brain, and a guttural roar escaped her mouth. *Maybe it's too late, she thought. Maybe I am the demon.*

She threw open the medicine cabinet. The door slammed into the wall, shattering glass into the sink and floor. The light above the sink flickered, casting jagged shadows on the off- white subway tiles. She tossed bottles of aspirin and old prescriptions on top of the shards, tubes of lipstick and eyeshadow palettes crashing behind them, finally stopping at the small box of cotton swabs on the middle shelf. Her hands shook as she picked up the box and dug out a single stick. She held it in front of her face like a lit match, her pulse syncing with the buzz.

Do it, Sara.

“I can’t,” she said.

Do it. Do it now. DO IT.

She plunged the swab into her ear.

There was no relief. The demon’s cries rivaled her own, growing louder as it scrambled deeper inside her. She clenched her fists and jerked her head violently to the side, as if the movement would loosen its grasp and grant her freedom. She felt the panic sweeping over her. Why wasn’t it working? The buzz was deafening; she could feel it now, an electric current running straight through her. Something struggling to get out—or get in. The swab was still sticking out of her ear. A steady trickle of blood ran down her cheek. It had to work.

Deeper.

She grabbed the swab again and pushed harder. Blood spurted onto her fingers but she kept scraping. Dark spots floated in front of her eyes, threatening to steal her balance and her hope. She was like an animal cornered in the wild, desperate and dangerous. She would not stop. She would keep attacking the intruder. This was her mind,

her body. She had no choice.

Sara howled and pushed the swab one last time. She pictured a giant black moth crushed by a spike, writhing in pain but unable to escape the weight of the heavy iron. Which one was she in that scenario? The blood flowed freely down her shoulder and soaked her shirt. It seemed impossible that so much blood could come from such a small space. She tried to pull the swab out and realized the stick was too far inside for her to grasp. The black spots spread further across her vision, blotting out the stranger in the mirror and bringing her to her knees. She thought she heard a bell somewhere in the buzzing, a distant memory she could almost touch. It reminded her of running through her childhood neighborhood on bright Sunday mornings. She had always loved the sound of those church bells. Maybe she should have prayed more.

At first, there was only darkness. No floating sensation, no peace, just a black void where light should be. She was alone, but there were voices somewhere close. Muffled bits of conversation she couldn't piece together.

“Are you sure she wasn't attacked?”

“She did it herself.”

“How could it survive?”

Sara.

She opened her eyes. The room was white and sterile, the shades half drawn to mute the brightness. It was the type of day the weathermen would tell you to expect “brilliant sunshine.” Who knew the sun could be so smart?

Standing in the corner was a man she didn't recognize and a woman she most certainly did. Jessie's forehead was set with deep lines and she kept rubbing her eyes as if she had

a migraine, a nervous habit she picked up during her public speaking class. The man was tall, his dark eyes hidden behind thick framed glasses. She expected him to have a clipboard or a file, but his hands were stuffed deep in the pockets of his white coat, like a third grader who was caught stealing candy and didn't have time to hide the evidence.

Panic set in. A hospital. She was in the hospital. An accident? She couldn't remember driving anywhere. She had avoided her car altogether over the last few days because of the noise.

The noise. Images of wasps and broken glass and rivers of blood flashed in front of her. Sara tried to sit up. She was thirsty, parched even, and everything sounded strange. Another wave of dizziness smacked her in the face, and she collapsed onto the stiff pillow.

Jessie backed up to the wall and crossed her arms as if to find warmth. Or protection. The man exhaled and walked slowly to the bed.

"Don't try to move," he said. "You've been through quite a lot." He straightened his glasses then shoved his hands back in his pockets. "My name is Dr. Roberts. You're in the hospital. Ms. Anderson, here, called an ambulance when she found you unresponsive in your apartment."

He gestured back to Jessie to indicate her role in the scheme of things, then clasped his fingers together in front of him. In a different time, Sara would have sworn he was waiting in line to receive Communion—the head-down reverence, the somber tone—but there was no denying the fuzziness to his voice and the searing pain in her ear.

"We were able to extract the cotton swab. Unfortunately, there was extensive trauma to the ear canal and a fully-ruptured ear drum. Additionally," he cleared his throat and paused. "Additionally, we found a massive infection and

evidence of a foreign object.”

Sara forced herself slowly into a sitting position. “A foreign object?”

It was only a few seconds, but she saw the struggle written in his face: to tell or not to tell. Although that wasn’t really the issue. He was going to tell her, but how he told her was another matter. Would he remain distant and scientific? Or would he crumble to the weight of the moment and let the emotion take control?

“Look,” he said, seeming to decide on something in between, “We don’t see things like this every day, especially in our area. We’ve got you on an antibiotic and you should start to feel more normal soon.”

Normal. Not crazy. “But what was in my ear, doctor? What did you find?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small glass vial. He held it between two fingers, as if the thing inside would bite if he did more than that. “This is a palmetto bug, or at least a strain of one. Fascinating, really. I’ve never encountered one in person. Nasty little buggers, if I can speak frankly.”

Sara dry heaved. It was the size of a bullet and darker than oil. A cockroach. There had been a cockroach in her ear.

“As I said, we don’t normally see this type of thing, let alone an insect of this size come in still alive in the patient. Once we realized this was lodged past the swab, we tried to numb the area, but there were several—”

“It was *alive*?” Sara cut him off. Her voice sounded distant, water logged. She tried to push him out of the way, certain she was going to vomit. Instead, her leg flailed over the railing,

kicking the vial from his grasp. It smashed against the wall, the contents falling to the floor in front of Jessie's feet. She screamed and tried to run out of the room.

There was a rustle, almost a scratching, and everyone froze. Sara looked down at the bug, the source of her despair. Its wings flicked rapidly back and forth, a warning of sorts, like a rattlesnake shaking its tail. She remembered her frantic message to Jessie the day before

“Do you hear the noise now?” she asked.

The roach twitched. Once, twice, its wings vibrating as it turned over. It seemed to extend its legs, like a passenger after a long car ride, a long yawn and satisfying stretch. The vibrating became thicker as it walked forward.

“It wouldn't die,” the doctor muttered. “There were eggs.”

She knew it was coming for her. It stopped at the side of her bed, a blob of milky amber reflected in the lamp light. She tried to back away; the hissing began. At first it was only below her, radio static in the background. It took one step closer, threatening to climb up the blanket.

“Please,” she whispered, feeling the last thread of sanity loosen from her mind's knot. “Please, help me. Step on it. Do something.”

But there was no safety. She knew this time she wouldn't find salvation in the light. The hissing was inside her again, louder than before, filling every inch of her body. Her cries drowned in the noise, tiny legs emerging from her ear, tentatively feeling out the ground before claiming the new territory. There would be nothing more, and in that certainty she found relief.

Contributors

Karine Leno Ancellin was born and grew up in New York but then moved around to very different countries. She worked on “Hybrid identities” for her PhD at the Vrije Universiteit of Brussels. She earned an MA, with Honours, in Literature at the Charles V Institute of Paris VII-JUSSIEU. She is now a professor, writer and translator (English/French) living in Athens, Greece. She has published articles and interviews for the WIP, Kulturissimo, and other media. She is now involved in the promotion of pan-Hellenic Literature. She co-founded a poetry society with Angela Lyras (www.apoetsagora.com). Some of her poems have been put into music by the Jazz composer Leila Olivesi.

Paul Beckman was one of the winners in the 2016 *The Best Small Fictions* and his story, “Mom’s Goodbye” was the winner of the 2016 Fiction Southeast Editor’s Prize. He’s widely published in the following magazines among others: *Raleigh Review*, *Litro*, *Playboy*, *Pank*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Matter Press*, *Pure Slush*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Literary Orphans*. His third and newest flash fiction collection is *Kiss Kiss*, (Truth Serum Press.) Paul had a story selected for the 2018 Norton Anthology Micro Exceptionally Short Fiction. He hosts the monthly FBomb NY fiction readings at KGB’s Red Room in New York.

Amanda McHugh is a former English teacher and writer from upstate NY. She received her MA in English from the College of Saint Rose in Albany and her BA in English Education from Le Moyne College in Syracuse, NY. Inspired by the horror genre from a young age, Amanda’s works frequently explore the psychological, grotesque, or unexplained. Her short story “Only the Light Moves” was published in the *I’m Dead Anthology* (Zimbell House 2018). When she’s not

working on her debut novel, Amanda can be found with several iced coffees planning adventures for her family.

Jake Kendall is a Creative Writing graduate of Cardiff University based in his hometown of Oxford. His words can be found through the *Cabinet of Heed*, *the Mechanic's Institute Review*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, *Idle Ink*, *Burning House Press*, *Here Comes Everyone*, and *Lonesome October Lit*. Find him on Twitter @jakendallox.

Paul Robert Mullen is from Liverpool and has been published in literary magazines, e-zines, and journals such as *The Interpreter's House*, *Dreamcatcher*, *Dodging The Rain*, *The Foxglove Journal*, *Blossom In Winter*, and *The Canon's Mouth*. He also has three collections out on Coyote Creek Books (San Jose, California): *curse this blue raincoat* (2017), *testimony* (2018), and *35* (2018). He has also been interviewed about his work by various radio stations, magazines, and newspapers, most notably Sean Styles on BBC Radio Merseyside in September.

Michael Onofrey grew up in Los Angeles, but currently lives in Japan. His stories have appeared in *Cottonwood*, *Evansville Review*, *Kestrel*, *Natural Bridge*, *Terrain.org*, *Weber - The Contemporary West*, among others. His novel, "Bewilderment," was published by Tailwinds Press in 2017.

Anne Leigh Parrish has an upcoming novel titled *Maggie's Ruse* that will be published in October 2019 by Unsolicited Press. Previous titles are: *The Amendment*, a novel, (Unsolicited Press, 2018); *Women Within*, a novel (Black Rose Writing, 2017); *By the Wayside*, stories (Unsolicited Press, 2017); *What Is Found, What Is Lost*, a novel, (She Writes Press, 2014); *Our Love Could Light The World*, stories (She Writes Press, 2013); and *All The Roads That Lead From Home*, stories, (Press 53, 2011). Her short fiction has recently appeared in *New Pop Lit*, *The Slag Review*, and *O:JA&L*. Recent poems have appeared in *Mocking Heart*

Review, Crow Literary Review, S/tick, and Wilde Boy. She lives among the evergreen trees in the South Sound region of Washington State.

L.A. Rivers spent her youth gathering tales of adventure while writing marketing copy and training manuals for companies around the globe. Her travels took her to West Africa, the Persian Gulf, The United Kingdom, and on 100,000 miles of road trips in the western United States. Under a pen name she's authored six books, 1600 blog posts, and countless email campaigns for creative small businesses. Some would say she took being Hemingway's birthday twin a little too seriously and her writing career really did commence at the kitchen table in the quest to attain a library card. You can find her latest musings at 1001lanights.wordpress.com

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