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The Beloved Has To Be

Tucker Lieberman

Do you have to be in exile,
do you have to say what no one else is saying,
do you have to seek intimacy,
provoke them to feel what they can't feel
before you know if they can handle you?
How you must transform:
explain but don't excuse,
tolerate but don't settle,
pay dues but don't sell out,
sympathize but have boundaries,
be vulnerable and survive,
see the beloved's deeds and don't argue.
The beloved has to be in exile,
has already fled to the isle of former beloveds,
is now walking love's own beach.
Your blaze of memory is
neutralizing the irreversible,
reversing the irreversible,
unhexing the irreversible,
plumbing the depths of the irreversible,
gifting all lovers the irreversible.

Cascade

Kayla Bush

She became round
With her new light glowing
An aura of peace cascades
Down her spine
Across her hips
Within the middle of her.
As her light grows,
So does she.
With intellect and elegance.
Kindness and patience.
Virtues she was lacking
Now overwhelming in its presence.
As she is burst open by her light,
Graced by her glorious face
With that glorious cry.

Like the moon
Like the stars.
As if she has become a waterfall.
The sun streams down.
Twisting around,
She begins to glow and
The moon shines.
The wind granting her
The beauty of the earth.
Vices diminishing.
The pure air.
Full of life
Full of overwhelming joy.
She was complete.
The universe lauding in that moment.

Cleo

Molly Burns

I watched you at the window,
your head bent and soft and wet,
drinking from the tap
while rivers of mint and lavender flowed
beyond your shoulders.
Cut grass on your feet
from a sunlit Sunday nap.
Your eyes so green –
so green they were yellow –
stretched wide as the snake
blurred past.

Where is Jane?

Mubanga Kalimamukwento

Someone's banging on the door. It shakes in protest, scattering the splinters of light that push through the cracks in the wood.

Who is it? shouts the voice in my head. But my mouth, as always, is as still as the musty air in the room I call home. I glare at the door, twice my height, and will it to stop. I fist my palms and hold my breath. Any louder and Bupe, my brother, will wake up. But it ignores me—wretched door, and quivers again, *Nko. Nko. Nko!*

I tiptoe closer, as quiet as the colonies of roaches rummaging through our green storage bins—*mealie meal, sugar* and *rice*—the last two of which we haven't eaten in months.

It's me! yells Linda from the other side of the door, her shrill voice bouncing off the uneven walls. To this, the voice in my head growls, a blazing ball of sound trapped between my gut and lips. I don't want Bupe to stop snoring. If he does, he'll whimper, then explode into a ceaseless wail until *Bamayo* returns to shove her breast into his mouth, and slap me with her free hand. My punishment for disrupting her work in Mr Phiri's red BMW. Our one-roomed house, built into a fence, with leftover chunks of cement that were once building blocks for a real house, is just within her earshot. *Shh*, I say to my sleeping brother with my index pressed on my mouth. He stirs but dreams on.

I peel the door open, as one would a scab from a sore, gently, *panono-panono*, yet still it groans.

Do you want to play? asks Linda, tapping her feet, peering

behind me. She knows the answer.

I can't. I shake my head. *I have to take care of my brother.*

She smirks, spins, and shrieks, “*Nichi chibulu!*” As if being mute, makes me deaf too. The other children, waiting for her report a few meters away, snigger.

I'll come later, the voice in my head lies, even though we both know that by the time *Bamayo* comes back, the other children will have retreated into their homes.

I sit on the smooth side of the block that plays veranda, leaving the door ajar, and plant my chin into my palms. I lean into the shade of the corrugated roofing sheets above and watch the game unfold.

Linda kneels next to another child who will play *mother*, while the others encircle them, forming a train with their arms. They start to sing,

*I want to see my Jane, my Jane, my Jane,
I want to see my Jane, my Jane, Jane—Jane!*

Jane is here! I want to yell. *Jane is me!* But when I part my lips, the words won't form.

Where is Jane?

Jane is at school! fibs the mother, hiding the *Jane*—Linda behind her narrow frame.

School, I think, staring past the children. Through the gaps between the soaring blocks of weeping-white flats, over the red automobile where *Bamayo* is still rocking Mr. Phiri next to the fence, sits St Patricks Girls' Primary School.

I'll go one day, whispers the voice in my head, prompting my grin as I picture myself in the green checkered uniform.

I want to see my Jane, my Jane, my Jane,

I want to see my Jane, my Jane, Jane—Jane!

Where is Jane?

Jane has gone to the market! replies the mother.

Kabwata Market, my destination on the days *Bamayo* works overnight. With Bupe wrapped in a *chitenge* across my back, I sneak in through the rusty gate. The chain is never locked, just wrapped multiple times to give the illusion of security to the stall owners. The sounds of the night—Rhumba beats from The Twins Bar and wheels rumbling over the patchy tar of 9th Street, mask the clanging metal.

When the chains detangle, my nostrils are struck by the stench: ditches brewing urine and dirty rainwater, wood singed into charcoal, burnt tufts of synthetic hair extensions. Once inside, I race past the tailoring shops, careen right, into the gift-shop aisle, and let the glimmering wrapping paper guide me towards the fruit-and-vegetable section. There, trusting vendors left their wares, covered in black plastic bags, sealed on four corners with rocks. My brother's eyes flicker on and together we feast.

Carefully, I pull two cherry tomatoes from the corner of a neat pile. Out of a bucket, we choose the ripest guavas. A handful of raw groundnuts, and the fattest sweet potato for later, and we're ready to slink back home and creep under the blanket where *Bamayo* will find us sleeping when she arrives with the rising sun the next morning.

The children continue to circle the crouching Jane, asking once more,

Where is Jane?

Jane is washing the plates!

The ones waiting in a *shomeka* of murky water. A black fly zips over me, buzzing around the room before departing, empty-winged. I sigh and amble inside to lug the *shomeka* out and feed the water to the garden next to our outdoor toilet. Flaps of pumpkin leaves shading fist-sized gourds lap it up.

Under the tap that hangs from the mouldy wall of our house, I scrub the plastic dishes with soil to remove the oil and food stains, then place them on a patch of grass to dry.

*Where is Jane?
Jane is taking care of the baby.*

My job. Taking care of my brother—the baby. Change his nappies before they scald his backside. Wipe his nose, which is always runny. Pacify him when the hunger pains make him cranky, until *Bamayo*'s reappearance.

*Where is Jane?
Jane is sick.*

The thing I became, last week, after *Bamayo* brought a client home. She parted the curtains that split the room in two and flung herself on the mattress. Bupe and I faced the door and waited for the grunting to stop, but the man, darker than a moonless night, fatter than the mattress, wouldn't finish. So, *Bamayo*, needing to feed Bupe, called me to help. Her client grinned at me, ripped my skirt off, aimed his snake, shoved it between my legs, and grunted until it oozed a thick liquid into me that burnt when it slithered down my legs, even after he had left.

I made *Bamayo* miss work the next day, and many days after that because of my inability to get up in the mornings, spewing urine and blood.

*I want to see my Jane, my Jane, my Jane,
I want to see my Jane, my Jane, Jane—Jane!*

Their faces are now twisted in sadness over *Jane*'s affliction.

*Where is Jane?
Jane is in the Hospital.*

A filthy word describing the place to which we arrived, Ba-

mayo, Bupe, and me.

The word Hospital drips in my memory like blood from a wound refusing to heal.

Hospital was the disgusting look on the nurse's face when she touched me through her latex gloves.

It is the doctor quizzing my mother—what's wrong—while keeping his eyes fixed on his clipboard.

You know children. My mother had shrugged.

Hmmp, replied the doctor, his eyes glued to the sheet.

She just started urinating on the bed, said *Bamayo*.

Defilement, muttered the nurse, scrunching her nose. Together with Hospital, the letters of DEFILEMENT crawled on my skin, like the maggots on our toilet floor, making me scratch.

No. Bamayo shook her head vigorously, not minding that her curly wig might fall and show the scruffy lines of *mukule* under which she hid her fro. *I'm not married*, she explained. *It's just my children and me. This one has been a sickler from birth*, a truth she made me confirm by bulging her eyes.

Sickler, screamed the voice in my head.

Yes. I nodded, though my memory didn't stretch that far. The doctor lifted his gaze to stare at me. *Jane, did someone hurt you?* he asked.

Yes! screeched the voice in my head. *No*. I shook it.

The doctor weighed this, scribbled something, and proceeded to the next sick child.

*I want to see my Jane, my Jane, my Jane,
I want to see my Jane, my Jane, Jane—Jane!*

A mournful song this time—hunched backs and down-cast eyes, mimicking women approaching the telltale army-green tent pitched outside a funeral house.

The climax of the game is fast approaching, and the children, braced for it, have edged farther from the centre, where the *Jane* is now lying in the dirt, eyes closed, and head limp on her arms as pillows. The *mother* is wringing her fingers, begging the skies for a miracle.

Now *Bamayo* hovers over me. *Jane*, she pleads, tears streaking her flawless skin. *Buka!* she screams—wake up!

I'm trying to hold her begging eyes, but find myself drawn instead into the blinding light of the ceiling. The scents of the ward are pungent all of a sudden. The windows swing, bringing in the sweet breeze of nature, trying to overpower the stench of what looms. Now, the sounds roar; singing crickets howl, scratching my eardrums raw. Bupe's snore is a strange thunder on an August night such as this.

I tremble.

Finally, when my lids tire, press shut, comes peace in a familiar tune, now a slow, low, drone.

Where is Jane?

The question halts the noise, diffuses the smells, and in the blackness, I smile.

Jane is dead.

Forgotten Coffee

Adrian Slonaker

The lukewarm caramel latte idles
in a cup crafted from ecology-crushing styrofoam
that causes teeth to clench
when it's scratched by frayed fingernails.
The formerly frothy destroyer of doldrums
has been domesticated without dignity as a
liquid slacker stagnating since the last sip,
interrupted by a parcel drop-off
precipitating the zipping of Jordache jeans nabbed on eBay,
a tidal wave of work sweetened by a rush rate,
the spontaneity of a tension-killing twelve o'clock kiss,
a toddler's tearful tumble off a rumpus-room rocking horse,
and a dozen daydreams of demolished dorms and finished friendships
as bittersweet as the neglected nectar
destined for perdition in the dumpster.

Short Rains

Karen Shepherd

Rings spread out and blur the bricks beneath. His reflection alters when it rains. He is not a man with a briefcase walking through the city to get to an office. He is the ripples that touch the surface, the circles that start from one small point and stretch outward, widening beyond a single moment before thinning out and disappearing.

He told her when he went home that he would live in a place where storms sanctify the terrain. He loved the smell of the earth after the short rains doused the Rift Valley. Standing in her doorway watching the pock marks form in the red soil as the rain first released, he observed how the dirt path in front of her home turned auburn before the sun dried it again. The acacia trees, shaped like umbrellas, dotted the hills beyond the tea plantations. He lay with her, listening to the pinging on her corrugated tin roof as he ran his fingers along her braids, their bodies braided together.

He imagined what the moon would see if the clouds broke and it peered through her metal frame window. Would it have nodded in recognition of beauty in the contrast of pale and dark, how each were able to hold their own lines as they wrapped around each other?

She used to trace the blue-green vein on the inside of his wrist, said it reminded her of when she was a girl and her parents would take her and her siblings to the coast. She told him how they had stood on a bridge over a teal creek, white sandy shores on both sides. Her father had said water was the earth's blood, pumping oxygen to all the planet's corners, touching the toes of children on beaches across continents.

As she showed him how to add more maize meal to the boiling water and stir out the lumps, he told her she could come with him and of all the places they could live, all the trees they could settle themselves under. He told her about the redwoods that could live thousands of years, that Steinbeck said instilled silence and awe. The eucalyptus, he explained, had bluish leaves, bark that could be pulled in long pieces, and a scent like infused pine and honey. She handed him the spoon, her smile visible in the lantern's glow, and said she knew he didn't need reminders to stir constantly. She finished cooking the greens and tilapia. He spooned the ugali onto their plates.

Her head bowed, he watched her give thanks to a God that he had only known to lurk in places hidden to him. She said Mungu was not hiding, but that he just didn't recognize Him. *He is there, she said, in your pine and honey scented trees, in the rain you love to hear when we lie together and whose drops I catch so we could prepare this meal.*

Her trees were the Meru Oaks, parasols, bananas and pawpaws. She was like the baobab, absorbing the rains to sustain lives during the dry season. *My roots are here, she told him, but we share the rain.*

He asked before he returned home if she thought they would see each other again. *Mungu akipenda*, she said. As God wishes.

The trees in the city are mostly ornamental, selected for their flowers, seasonal colors, bark texture and hardiness, heights that are convenient to the buildings they stand in front of. Maples, dogwoods, oaks and hawthorns are pruned and tidied within their concrete surroundings.

He does like the cherry trees, though, their pink petals strewn like confetti on the sidewalks after a spring rain.

The rain falls again and he looks down. He sees not the man he is in this moment, but the man he is across short rains, long rains and storms that fill creeks that flow to oceans. He sees himself as a single drop, as circles that spread and stretch to touch far away edges before they fade away.

Gladly Stolen

Kenneth Pobo

How can love be stolen?
It's not like a pie
when the thief comes by
and grabs it when the widow
is downstairs pulling laundry
from the dryer—or

is it? You stole me
from my life of everyday
will be like everyday until I die.
I hadn't locked up my heart—
you took it and ran. Maybe

I stole yours too. You said
you thought of your life then
as a tip left on a table.
I scooped up the dough
and said let's go. Out for pie.
Which we did, red cherries
and a flaky crust. It still is,

27 years later,
warm from the oven,
ice cream melting on top.

Lucky Number Seven

Alison McBain

My grandfather nearly lost
house
wife
kids
Friday afternoons
paddling through smokers' fog
sitting at red and black
betting on green.

His hand felt empty
coming home to Reno
from the army's tender care
(bullet in the gut)
so he filled fingers
with a Colt Lightweight Commander
semi-automatic
chocolate bar grips.
It carried seven rounds
(lucky number seven).

It must have been lucky
he never fired it once
at an intruder
until one snuck into
his brain
intent on overcoming
his last defense.

Instead, he shot it
killed that fucker dead
with his lucky number seven.

Freckles in New York

Kayla Bush

She gained more freckles in New York. Her nearly iridescent skin now dotted with grace. Her constant delay she blamed on the trains. She moved through my apartment with such presence. Her skirts always too short as she spun for me all the same. “C’est la vie,” she’d say. She’s so carefree. Drinking espresso on her balcony in the afternoon, and I kiss her smooth, bacardi infused lips somewhere between witching hour and the sunrise.

Blue Moons

Ananya Guha

Somehow the road wavers
a mist hovers down town
everything is reclusive
and the sun callow faced
I walk down the steps
a little uncertain that the day's
hues will linger
like the man selling his wares
his gaunt face the shape of a sky
or those blue moons
above
below.

Unbecoming is time
as the winter settles down
into warmer evenings
blue moons laugh

Silently a whisper emerges
out of emerald skies
birds in search of blue moons
tears are inane, not far away.

Evelyn Sweeny and the New Pearl Motor Inn

Robert T. Krantz

I.

Evelyn sat in the white Adirondack chair on the back porch. She smoked a Parliament and tapped her foot quietly on the dusty floor. She turned her neck and moved a curl of black hair away from her eyes. It'd only be half a cigarette before she had to get back to the baby, and to the housework, but she needed a quick nicotine break. Phillis was already calling for her from the living room.

She took a small, white seashell out of her dress pocket and held it in her fingers, touching its smooth underside with her thumb, rubbing it like a child might rub a rabbit's foot. It was half of the shell Martin had given her at Crystal Beach the year they met. She liked how the lined grooves on the shell looked like rays emanating from the sun. Martin kept the other, matching half-shell on a chain around his neck.

"Pearls, Evelyn. Pearls," he'd say with his wide, happy smile. "All we need now is a grain of sand!" He'd point out to Lake Ontario whose water that day was as dark blue as Martin's eyes. "Know where we can get some sand, kid?" In all these years, Martin hadn't changed—same affable smile, same enthusiasm, same undying optimism and charm. He had charm in droves.

Physically, he hadn't changed much either—his black hair now cropped short around his ears only showing the slight-

est of gray, and his trendy beard still coming in mostly black. He was still thin, too, as he'd always been.

The summer she met Martin seemed charmed at the time and now she thought of it often. It had been unusually humid, and the 23-year-old man would show up at her workplace driving his father's Buick convertible, offering to take some of the girls to the beach. It was uncharacteristic of Evelyn to be so spontaneous, but finally the day came that she agreed to his persistent efforts. In hindsight, she blamed her acquiescence on the oppressive August heat, or the unhurried tedium of their Podunk town, or her monotonous job. She had many excuses why she got in the car that day, not one of them revealed the fact that the young man who slicked back his hair like Elvis Presley, had somehow wormed his way into her heart. She was in love with him before he even shut the Buick's door. That hadn't changed either.

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That afternoon, the summer sky was an azure blue. Wispy, horse-tail clouds eased in from the east. A pair of house sparrows flitted about in front of the purple lilac bush that grew in the corner of the yard—next to the chain-link fence. Their back yard was quaint. She was glad that Martin kept it up so well. Not all the yards in the neighborhood were as pleasant, not all the men worked on a regular basis.

Through the kitchen window, Evelyn heard baby John's shrill cry, followed by more calls for help from Phillis.

"All right, Philly. I'm coming. I'm coming!" she yelled as she stood up and snuffed the cigarette out under her shoe.

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Houses in their neighborhood were small, and the Sweeney's house was a little smaller than average. Martin had installed a white peel-and-stick vinyl floor in the kitchen last year and Evelyn had refurbished an old oak table that they placed in the nook adjacent to the kitchen. The table didn't pair that well with the floor, but Martin assured her that it was sturdy, and that sturdy was more important than how it matched with the floor.

Two bedrooms, a small living room and a bathroom rounded out the first floor and there was a long, slender staircase that led up to the steeped attic, which they had converted into a bedroom for Christopher. Phillis and Molly shared one of the lowers and baby John's crib was kept in the main bedroom—which was not even the slightest bit bigger than the girls' room.

Evelyn walked into the living room. Little Phillis was standing over the baby's crib, moving the paper sail-boat mobile around over his head. Phillis had Irish red hair and deep green eyes that flickered when she smiled. She wore a plain white dress and was barefooted. "He won't stop crying," she said, accenting each word melodramatically.

"Here, let me take him," said Evelyn as she lifted the baby to her shoulder. "You cried worse than this, Philly—cried all day and all night, every day, every night!"

"I couldn't have been that bad. I would remember it if I were," Phillis said with a smirk.

"Can you go find Molly and Christopher? We've got to be ready when your father gets home from work," said Evelyn as she gave Phillis's arm a little pinch.

Of the three older children, Phillis was the happiest and most easy going. In the summertime, the seven-year-old loved to romp around the back yard pretending to be a unicorn or a lioness, or sometimes a Shakespearean actress on

a London stage.

Molly and Christopher were both more subdued and had thoughtful ways about them. At nine-years-old, Molly was already reading Steinbeck. Her resemblance and mannerisms were so similar to Evelyn's that often strangers would smile and make pleasant conversation about it. *She even has your wavy black curls ... she even moves her curls out of her eyes with the same mannerism as you. You even have the same eyes.*

Christopher was quiet, but not brooding or overly moody. He just felt more comfortable watching and listening rather than participating, especially in social situations. He had thick black hair like his father's, and they both combed it back off their similarly wide foreheads the same way. Christopher was twelve. Martin thought that someday the boy would be a very successful accountant because of his penchant for keeping very close tabs on his weekly allowance—to the penny, in fact.

- - -

Martin pulled the black, late-model Oldsmobile into the driveway and honked the horn twice. Evelyn, hearing the blears, poked her head out the side door and waived to him in acknowledgement. She then scurried the kids out the side door toward the car.

Martin got out of the Olds and went around to the passenger side. It was strange that he was in tan chinos and a black t-shirt and not his factory blues. He opened the door for the children and kissed Evelyn on the cheek as she helped each of them into the backseat.

Did you get the stuff I asked you to get ready? He smiled.

She nodded toward the macramé bag strapped over her shoulder. "Yes, their suits are packed. Everything's here. How was work today?"

“Baby, it was the best day of work I’ve ever had!” said Martin. “Okay, everybody ready? Let’s move out!”

The children shouted their hurrahs.

Evelyn held baby John in her lap. She couldn’t shake a foreboding feeling inside her stomach. Martin could be impetuous at times and, as happy a person as he was, he could be too optimistic, and could, at times, slightly overvalue himself. His mother called him grandiose, but Evelyn thought that was a bit overstated. She preferred *ever-so-slightly enamored with his own potential*—and he was gullible.

There was the time he bought a 1949 model-year, Ford F100 pickup truck from a travelling junkyard man who had been poking around the factory. Martin got hornswoggled on that one, believing that the purchase of the truck was a golden opportunity, the perfect way to start a side business of restoring classic vehicles. He assured Evelyn that restoration was easy work, quick turnaround and fast cash. Plus, he only paid \$800.00 for it!

It never even crossed Martin’s overzealous mind that if he had to have it towed home, maybe it wasn’t going to be the best deal. Nor did he think about the fact that he didn’t even own anything beyond the most basic of tools—hammer, screwdriver, chisel, that sort of thing. Martin had no experience restoring anything, and no money on the front end for parts and materials.

“It’s a grain of sand now,” he said. “But I swear, Evelyn, this truck is gonna be a real pearl.”

Everything was a grain of sand to be turned magically into a glistening, priceless pearl.

The F100 still sat out back on cinder blocks with a tarp covering it.

It was a fifteen-minute drive across town and Evelyn watched Martin with a suspicious curiosity. They drove past Murphy's, L & M television repair shop and the historical Riviera theatre whose marquee displayed *The Bad News Bears* as that week's feature film. When Christopher saw the marquee, he was sure that's where they were all going, and he pointed it out to Phillis while holding his index finger under his nose—shh. Molly quietly made fun of him when Dad drove right on past the theatre. He pinched her leg in retaliation.

It was a pleasant day for a drive and Evelyn lost herself for a few moments watching the shadows of the trees and leaves dapple the hood of the car and feeling the breeze move over her arm as they drove through the old neighborhoods. Martin turned left on Wheatfield Street, drove over the train tracks, then went right onto River Road. It was just a few miles north when Martin pulled the car into a small, unsteady-looking motel's parking lot. The cars brakes squealed.

"Why are we stopping?" she asked. She looked around to see if there was a police car or ambulance behind them that she hadn't heard. She felt the familiar knot in her stomach.

"Well, we're here," said Martin.

"You're taking us to a motel?" Evelyn asked.

"Behind that office right there, there's a pool. It's fantastic!" He laughed and turned to the kids. "You guys wanna go swimming?" Cheers and hurrahs went up from the backseat. "Well, that's good because I know the owner of this place personally."

The motel was the old Oakdale Motor Inn and it was notorious for high school parties and Saturday night police raids. The courtyard was a gravel square surrounded by a 'u' shaped building and each room had its own screen door

and small, slab patio. Orange and blue plastic lawn chairs were scattered about in the courtyard and there was an old, weather-worn Coke machine by the office door.

Martin raised his sunglasses to his forehead. “Babe, we did it! I’m not taking you to *a* motel, I’m taking you to *our* motel.” Martin beamed.

“Wait a minute, Martin. I don’t understand,” she said. “We’re here to go swimming, right?”

Martin coughed and cleared his throat. “Bill Hatcher down at the bank agreed that I’d be the perfect man for the job. He approved the lease this morning. It’s ours. We are the proud owners of the Oakdale Motor Inn. I mean, more operators than owners, but Bill says that’ll come in time.”

“Martin, are you telling me that you bought a motel? *This* motel?” Evelyn could not conceal her fury that expanded each moment that passed in which she further understood what her husband was saying to her. “No, no, no. Martin, please tell me you did not buy this motel.” Her hands shook as she brought them up to cover her mouth. “Oh my God, Martin, please.”

“I gave my notice to Charlie this morning.” Martin smiled a wide, charming grin. “I figure we’d call it The New Pearl Motor Inn. Fix her up. Have a big grand opening...”

“Kids stay in the car,” said Evelyn. “Martin, get out of the car.”

She handed baby John over the seat for Molly to hold then stormed out of the passenger side and slammed the door. Martin winked at the kids and followed Evelyn.

“Babe, this was our dream, to make something of ourselves and have a great life. Think of it. No more cranky bosses, no more agonizing overtime, no more grit and grime from that hellish factory. And, the money. Well, Bill Hatcher showed

me the numbers. I'll tell you. No more dusty two-bedroom, dilapidated shanty for my family."

"Goddamn you, Martin. We already have a great life and you do this? You really did this, Martin?" She made a fist and took a step towards him then spun around in frustration. "You get on the phone and tell Bill Hatcher that it's not going to work out. You call Bill Hatcher right now! Call him. And when you get off the phone with Bill, call Charlie and tell him ... umm, tell him you were drunk."

"Evelyn, you're not excited?" Martin asked with a perplexed tone in his voice.

"Goddamn you, Martin!"

"Babe, we always dreamed of owning our own business, really making it work ..."

"Martin I was talking about making crafts together or selling fucking chairs!! I was not talking about buying the godforsaken, run-down Oakdale Motor Inn from that snake-oil bastard Bill Hatcher!"

But even as she spoke the fiery words to her impulsive life partner, she knew as much as she'd ever known anything that the deal was done. There would be no rescinding the contract, especially a contract penned by the slimy Bill Hatcher. Her words were utterances scattered in the ether. She tried to think of where she had gone wrong with what she knew about her husband before they were married. How the still, small voice inside spoke to her in the evenings just before the wedding, whispering fair warnings against his dapper charms and perpetual insolvency.

She didn't mind being poor. Everyone in town was poor. In her eyes, they were still lucky. They were, after all, content, if not happy, in their humble life—the children a joy, their home loving, good relations within their families and with

friends. What more could these small town, Podunks reasonably expect from life? And this was the problem: Martin had ambition. He always had it and he always would have it. If it wasn't The New Pearl Motor Inn, it'd be a car wash or a laundromat, or, God forbid, some greasy-spoon restaurant on the side of some desolate highway.

Not only did Martin have ambition, he was a chronic failure in business matters specifically, and real-world, grown-up living matters generally. Never marry a dreamer, she thought. Maybe that's what the small, still voice inside—a voice she'd muffled with her own smitten-ness—had been trying to say to her. Never marry a dreamer.

She watched as he walked back and unloaded the kids from the Oldsmobile, wondering what in God's name they were going to do with the children. How could they raise a family in a motor inn? Where would they live? In the rooms? She lit a cigarette and looked at the horse-tail clouds clawing the evening sky and she wondered what the next step would be and how, if any way possible, she could circumvent the inevitable disaster.

She drew deep on the smoke and tried to access the still, small voice inside her with no success. *That damn voice is never there when you need it.*

By the time she finished smoking the cigarette, she had surrendered entirely. She snuffed on the butt with her shoe and snickered. *Goddamn it, Martin.*

In a moment, she made a resolution to herself to stay with Martin and give The New Pearl Motor Inn a chance. *I'll give him one year and then I'm taking the kids and moving back in with Mother.* She smiled and conceded to herself that perhaps it wouldn't be so bad. Then she laughed at her own Pollyanna—of course it would be bad! It would be an epic boondoggle. But she was still crazy about Martin and the deal was, for better or worse, done. Bill Hatcher! Martin cut a

deal with Bill “The Bomb” Hatcher!

Evelyn followed the sound of splashing and laughter out back past the rusty chain linked fence to the pool area. Molly was on Martin’s slick back and Phillis and Christopher tugged on his arms, one arm each. Baby John was set in his carrier on the ground next to a wood picnic table. She walked over to check on him. He was sleeping soundly so she sat at the picnic table and watched Martin play with the kids.

Martin got out of the pool and walked over to Evelyn wearing a cotton towel around his waist and a coy smile.

“You okay?” he asked as he touched her bare shoulder.

“I’m okay,” she said as she looked up at him.

“This place, all of it, it’s just one big grain of sand,” he started. “Look at these kids. They’re great kids. I mean, really great. And you, you’re beautiful and smart and hard-working. It’s just that I knew that anything we did together would turn out great. We just gotta stick together and grind this place into a pearl.” He kissed the top of her head and smelled her hair. “I love you.”

She took the sea shell out of her dress pocket and looked at it thoughtfully. “You’ve got a year.”

Martin nodded.

“And I want that son of a bitch Bill Hatcher’s phone number.”

II.

The New Pearl Motor Inn was just like any of the several motels dotted along RiverRoad in North Tonawanda, New York—halfway between Buffalo and Niagara Falls. The Anchor Motel and The King’s Cove Inn were close by.

Generally speaking, the bulk of traffic heading from anywhere in the U.S. into the newlywed capital of the world travels north along Niagara Falls Boulevard. There are probably thirty to forty hotels and motels along this route, increasing in frequency as Niagara Falls approaches.

Martin's fatal flaw was that he didn't buy a motel on Niagara Falls Boulevard, but instead got himself tangled up with a marginal piece of property along a seldom-travelled back way to Niagara Falls.

As the Fates would have it, Bill Hatcher got Martin approved for a business loan and repairs began right away. Evelyn was nervous about the nature of the loan as Martin had no real credit to speak of except the small note on the house. There was that feeling in her stomach again.

In early June, the kids swam in the kidney-shaped pool as Martin and Evelyn spent their days painting and fixing up their new property. Evelyn had picked out a deep blue color and they decided that white trim would accent it nicely, give it an oceanic feel.

Evelyn, being thrust into her new position, began screening potential employees. They'd need a housekeeper or two, and maybe a general maintenance man. She also took charge of the rooms and quickly realized that they'd all have to be painted and new bedding and curtains would have to be supplied for each one—fifteen rooms in all. Martin also considered a valet or attendant of some kind, but the idea never took root. The office would have to be remodeled and the parking lot needed a couple loads of new gravel. Days were long and hot, and the work oftentimes went late into the evening. Martin and Bill Hatcher hoped to have the place open by the Fourth of July holiday. Evelyn thought it'd be a miracle if they made it by August.

— — —

Bill Hatcher was obese and did little to physically help out

around the place. His fat belly bulged around his too-high belt, and his heavy eyes were set deep inside puffy hammocks of dark, spotty skin. They flitted around nervously, as if he were working for someone else, someone keeping tabs on the progress. Hatcher wore white leather shoes and often complained that they were getting dirty while walking around the property. He stunk like a cigar. Evelyn had never actually seen him smoke a cigar, so she thought it was strange that he smelled like one.

The thing Bill Hatcher did right was children. Sometimes on Saturdays, he and Mrs. Hatcher would stop up and bring fishing poles and lawn chairs out to the bank of the Niagara River and keep the kids entertained for hours while Evelyn and Martin pressed on with the heavy work.

They'd catch small-mouth bass and colorful sunfish mostly, but also their share of steely, gray-finned sheep-head. Bill always had a pocket full of Tootsie Rolls and suckers. This won him over rather quickly with Molly and Phillis. Christopher didn't care for sweets.

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Threatening news came just as optimism began to escalate. The last week of June, the local newspaper—The Tonawanda News—reported that the Niagara County Road Commission had decided that there were too many potholes on River Road, and that they were too deep to be ignored. Large crews of tanned men in bright green and orange safety vests stood on the back of large flatbed trucks and dropped orange and white striped barrels every ten feet. River Road was essentially closed from Ward Road in North Tonawanda up to Williams Street by the Summit Park Mall. Most, if not all, of the traffic was being diverted back down Ruie Road to Niagara Falls Boulevard—local traffic excluded.

“This is a problem, a real stickler we got here,” said Bill Hatcher as he bent down to wipe

his shoes with a handkerchief.

Evelyn was livid and paced the office. "Didn't either of you see this coming, with all your prognosticating and business wherewithal?" She crumpled up the newspaper and tossed it into the metal wastebasket.

"Now just relax. We're in the phonebook and there are things we can do," said Martin. His thick brow seemed uncharacteristically heavy.

Baby John started crying.

"Martin. There are not going to be any cars passing by here until August!" yelled Evelyn.

"What kinds of things can we do?"

"How many days till opening day?" asked Bill.

"Eight days," replied Martin. "There's plenty of time."

"There's a little bit of time, but that weekend will make or break us," said Bill.

"Martin Sweeney, you are insane! There's no time!" Evelyn's voice expanded.

"Now, hang on Evelyn. Let's hear Martin out." Bill turned toward Martin. "You were saying there were things we could do. Like what *things*?" Bill asked.

"We could have a bar-b-cue, for one. Put flyers all over town, take out ads in the local papers." Martin said.

"Martin, what good are local flyers about a bar-b-que going to do? We need tourists to book rooms, not local drunks to come and fill the place up with the local beer-swilling, hotdog eating gentry. Who's going to rent a room in that

scenario? Who?"

"I know a guy. He'd sell us a pig," said Hatcher. "We could dig a pit."

"A pig is not going to help!" screamed Evelyn.

"Well, what about AAA? Can't we get in touch with them and have them do something?" asked Martin.

Evelyn was very close to losing her mind. "What the fuck is AAA going to do?!"

"I got an idea" Hatcher said. "What if we reduced rates for opening weekend? Thirty dollars a night."

He pulled out his calculator and began pecking the buttons between brief intervals of looking up at the ceiling tiles, as if for answers. "Well, now, the lease payment is due the seventh, so ... hmmm. Full capacity times 30 dollars is ... I think we should be able to hold the bank off with that."

Evelyn physically pushed Bill in the chest with her hand, forcing him back a step.

"God damn it, Hatcher, you *are* the bank!" She screamed.

"Well, not exactly. Then there's also the line of credit," Bill coughed. "That'll be due the tenth."

Martin and Bill glanced at each other almost imperceptibly. Almost.

"What was that look?" Evelyn turned to Martin. "What was that look, Martin?"

He stared at his shoes.

"What the hell is going on?" Evelyn yelled. She was close to his face now.

The baby's shrill heightened.

"You may as well tell her, Martin. She's got a right to know." Bill added solemnly.

"It's just that, well, Baby...the line of credit didn't actually come from a bank, exactly." Martin choked out the words.

"Well, who the hell did it come..." She gasped and brought her hands up to cover her mouth. "Oh no...you idiots!" She looked back at Hatcher. "The goddamn Bomb. That's what they call you. You goddamn greasy, snake-oil son of a bitch!" She hit his chest again.

Hatcher raised his hands to block Evelyn's attack. "No, no. It's not me. I didn't do it!"

"Who?" She screamed.

"Just some...umm..." He looked toward Martin. "They're friends of mine, really friends of my family."

"Jesus Christ! You went to The Mob?"

"No, no, not the Italians. No." Hatcher paused. "Well, let's just say it'll either be Janko or Gerwazy stopping by on the tenth."

"You two went to the goddamn Polish mafia to finance this place?"

Molly timidly walked into the office.

"Oh hi, Moll. It's okay, baby. The grown-ups are just talking. Go find Christopher and ask him to take you swimming." Baby John was now screaming inconsolably. "And here, Moll. Take your brother too. You know how to bounce him up and down to make him comfortable," said Evelyn.

“How can I go swimming if I’m watching him?” asked the youngster.

Evelyn exploded, “Moll, just take him... put him in his carrier. Something. Go find Christopher!”

Molly started crying, lifted baby John’s carrier and ran out of the office.

“Real good, Evelyn. Really nice on that one.” said Martin.

“You’ll have to excuse me, folks. I’ve got to get back to the missus,” said Bill. “I’m sure everything will work out fine.”

III.

July third came without a single booking for the weekend. Evelyn remained in the apartment room behind the office. She drew the yellow floral-patterned shades tight and cried in bed all morning.

Martin fiddled with a stapler at the front desk.

Neither of them had seen or heard from Hatcher since their last meeting.

The day was beautiful, and Phillis, Molly and Christopher started in the pool early. Molly even took baby John into the shallow end just to get his feet wet. His toes splayed when they touched the water.

Around noon, Evelyn came out of her room and cooked hotdogs and hamburgers on the grill. All this food is going to be wasted, she thought. She wasn’t sure if she and Martin were going to make it, not after this. But truth be told, she was more worried about his kneecaps than their marriage. She looked at the red, white and blue bunting that hung from the underside of the roof. It looked great. The

place looked great, too, with its blue paint and white trim and aquatic theme that included a large iron anchor next to the walkway and wooden posts with rope sectioning it off. *Nautical*, she thought.

Martin came out of the office and kicked the gravel, sending a couple stones skimming across the parking lot. He approached Evelyn and tried to give her a hug.

“No,” she said firmly.

For once, Martin had no words for her, no consoling charm.

He had been defeated utterly.

In her pocket she held the half seashell in her hand and rubbed it over and over.

Now and again a station wagon or a camper passed the motel and a faint hope spiked, only to have it dashed as the vehicles continued on.

Martin brought out a couple cold bottles of Budweiser and offered one to Evelyn, unscrewing the top for her. He sat down opposite her in the old Adirondack chair.

“Are the kids okay?” she asked as she took a swig.

“They’re fine. They’re in the apartment watching TV.”

“Fireworks soon. Will we be able to see them from here?” She asked, looking up to the tree line.

“I think so. If not, I’ll walk the kids down to the river’s edge,” said Martin. He wanted to say something else, to add something... “You know... I...”

“Just don’t, Martin. I’m going to be taking the kids to my mother’s tomorrow,” she said in a matter of fact tone.

“Guess not every grain of sand becomes a pearl, after all.” Martin frowned and lifted his beer toward her. “I’ll be getting out of here, too.”

Evelyn looked up. She clinked his beer.

“Still, we did a hell of a job with this place.” Martin forced a smile.

“This place cost us *everything*.” Evelyn whispered.

- - -

Bill Hatcher’s Cadillac appeared out in the middle of River Road. He turned the car into the parking lot with screeching tires and put it in park by the mailbox. He got out of the car and left it running. He was wearing a red, white and blue cowboy hat and what looked like a blue leisure suit. He ran out into the middle of the street and started moving his arms like he was motioning something to turn in to the parking lot.

“What the hell?” Martin looked at Evelyn.

“I don’t know,” They both stood up.

They saw it simultaneously--a silver coach bus, with a massive front shaded windshield and custom red and blue pin-striping down its sides, turning into The New Pearl Motor Inn’s parking lot. Hatcher was jumping up and down, waiving his hat.

Evelyn and Martin looked in disbelief—Evelyn with her hands over her mouth, Martin with his hands folded on the top of his head.

The bus rolled to a stop. The marquee sign on the front of the bus read: INDIANA

Hatcher got back into his car and sped into the driveway. He hit the brakes not ten feet from Martin and Evelyn and turned his radio down.

With the joy of a little kid holding a Fourth of July sparkler, he beamed. “They’re Baptists! Come in from Indiana. Some convention or some damn thing. I found them down at the King’s Cove Inn, but no one was there. Looks like old Dusty has closed shop. Anyway, they’ll have to double up, and I told them we’d give them a deal. They said I was an angel. Ha! Imagine that. Me, an angel.” His delight was palpable. Evelyn touched Martin’s hand. They watched the bus begin to unload.

“Hey, Bill,” shouted Martin. “How much did you tell them for a room?”

“Why, Martin. You should know me better than that. It’s a premium weekend! Fifty bucks a night. They don’t call me The Bomb for nothing. Boom!”

- - -

Evelyn removed her shoes and placed them on the path next to the edge of the river. It was Sunday, and seagulls floated above the river’s foam. She walked slowly through the long grass, feeling a soft prickling against the soles of her feet. She stood still for a moment and lifted her head to see the perfectly clear afternoon sky. She opened her arms wide and felt like a child pretending to be an airplane. Then she opened her palms and whispered “thank you” just in case anyone was listening.

Unfolding, Finally

Tucker Lieberman

You ask me to mirror you. I don't exist
to help you imitate yourself. I exist
to break silences you did not know,
to make you hear and unhear them.

I stab the known, careless of its resurrection,
I present the unknown in a gift box,
I devour the wriggling, lukewarm lies,
I echo drones with holograms.

What hurts, what helps—well, you grow.
Has your inertia yet bitten its own tail,
have you coughed up your stalled beliefs?
Are you perpendicular to the ground yet?

I craved great arms of information,
reaching, clasping, taking what they wanted.
An inconvenient fact took me from behind.
It still instructs, and I do not self-destruct.

You live: salted, hydrated, reconstituted,
unfolding at the unexpected word,
called forth by exhortations of tough love,
breaking silence in a way I knew you could.

Swat

Kenneth Pobo

Aunt Stokesia gave this very
gorgeous morning complete
with sun and a lulling breeze

with pink lily buds bopping open
when it seemed even last night
that they'd stay tight at least
until Wednesday and no one ran
a clattery lawn mower that whirrs

so badly you want to get in the car
and run the mowing guy down
knowing you were only protecting
a sweet silence that any good
morning deserves a swat

on its blue-sky behind
and morning continued to be ex-
quisite and Aunt Stokesia soon
would get in her Toyota and
drive to work where she opened
and closed files
on a coffee-stained desk

that tiny ants walked on until
her index finger squashed them
one by one.

Anticlimax

Debasis Tripathy

Altaa from fertile footprints
has left a bloody trail;
patterns fading after a few steps.

The walls burnished here
and there with prints of palm;
dried turmeric powder spills down.

The house still smells of marigold,
broken petals collected in the corner;
the flowers are wilting.

The crumpled bedsheet whiffs
in disappointment from last night of union -
yet another anticlimax!

**Altaa is rose red color dye used to adorn and decorate
hands and feet of Indian women.

Brother Sebastian's Friend

Adrian Slonaker

Clouds like clods of cosmic clay clustered
over the imposing stone monastery
and gardens splashing neon hues against
the stern chestnut robe of the Roman-nosed Franciscan
when the punkish painter with the plastic
crucifix pendant and pale purple eyes
peered past a spiral-bound sketchbook
where she practiced impressions of her
“brother-in-arms.”

Sixteen days and seven hours later,
a fortnight after she'd shaved her head
and purchased a pair of charity shop combat boots,
she whispered those words into his
left ear, her husky tone trapped between his head
and the hedgerow,
harnessing him to a dreamlike quandary
and an improbable peace never produced
by vespers or matins.

As sweat permeated his armpits,
their astringent scent sating the artist's nostrils,
a tattooed arm fumbled against famine-stricken fingers.
Half-coherent curiosities and clumsy caresses
enabled an engine long dormant
as the monk meandered over the limit,
unaware of what pleasure
or penance awaited him.

Two-Cat Town

Alison McBain

I grew up near
a two-cat place,
the oldest town in
California
not birthed as
a hatchery for cities.
Cities progress:
box store building blocks
knocked over
by urbanist toddlers,
the Wild West mystique
suffocated
beneath the blooded remnants
of new expansion.
If we concrete our problems
away
we can ignore
the wide open spaces
that burn
at the center of our hearts.
In the rush of gold
maybe we'll find riches:
cracked glass treasures
laid over the skeleton
of forgotten names.
Maybe we'll become a Diamondback
lacking a tongue,
lacking a mouth,
lacking a voice.

Limits

Kenneth Pobo

In summer of 1967 Lenny was almost thirteen. When his mom asked him if he was sad that his childhood was ending, he said, “No, but I don’t want to be a teenager. I want to be twenty-one right now.” Illinois was the only state he had ever been to. His folks didn’t travel. His dad said, “Everything anyone could ever need you can find in Illinois. Why go to New York City when you have Chicago?” Lenny felt small as an aspirin in a bottle, but he thought maybe someday someone would open the bottle and, like Jeannie in *I Dream of Jeannie*, he’d fly out and go—in flaming color.

Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band had just come out, the first album Lenny paid for with his own money. “I want to be George,” he said to no one, dropping the needle on “Within You, Without You” for maybe the two-thousandth time.

One July day, ninety-five degrees and rising, his mom had a headache. She opened the aspirin container—Lenny flew out of the window. “My, my,” she said, not stopping him. Lenny liked flying. He had a hunch that he would as he liked to ride his bike fast. In only a couple of hours he looked down at Indiana, aiming for Ohio.

Just west of Indianapolis, he met Rita, a flying girl hippy heading for San Francisco. Her family didn’t understand her, grounded her for a week for wearing pedal pushers. They kissed in mid-air, Lenny’s first one. It tasted like the bubblegum that came with baseball cards.

Arms tired, Lenny landed outside of Zanesville. The sky looked like gray pants hanging on a line. He called his

parents and said he wouldn't be home for the rest of the summer. His mom shrugged. His dad, busy watching the Cubs, said, "Yeah, yeah, ok." Lenny only had three dollars on him. He spent it on juke box songs like "A Whiter Shade of Pale" and "Don't Sleep in the Subway." Then he took off again, up, up, and away, the sky really was the limit—and it had no limit.

Jazz in the Love

Kayla Bush

Before the night the smooth jazz clothed their bare bodies & created a new sense of vitality between them, she wasn't sure if he'd stay. For he was a man of few words. While they made love among the autumn kissed leaves, she felt anew, rejuvenated. The soft, cool breeze gently tousling through their wild hair. Knowing looks brought about by that glowing moon of harvest. And then he simply said *stay*. She looked at him, surprised that he uttered that word. She said yes, so they remained there, his arms around her. She felt strong. She was able to keep him. And despite the threat of early snow, she remained unfazed.

The Dude Who Bought Douche

Adrian Slonaker

Bathed in shades of milk and strawberry Pop-Tart filling,
the rectangular package had popped into my field of vision
in the Awkward Aisle of the Price Chopper.

I placed it before the pimply
teenager at the till and remembered
my spreading redness the time I
bought condoms and lube and Fresca
at Shoppers Drug Mart on St. George in Moncton
from the pale lady with grandmotherly hair the
color of dandelion fluff
who looked as if she'd rather be selling me
Coffee Crisps or plutonium.

From deep in his diaphragm, the lad addressed me as
"dude"

and beep-scanned my Summer's Eve,
uncertain of whether I was running errands
for a wife or a girlfriend,
on a product research assignment for
a team of marketing Millennials in quirky neckties,
or preparing to be probed by a bearded butch buddy
behind a closed motel room door.

I dropped six dollars and tapped my right loafer
while the callow cashier counted sixty-four cents
in pennies and nickels,
and a phalanx of frat boys brimming with Budweiser
barreled up behind me.

When I collected my sack and sprinted into
sunlit anonymity, I promised myself and my deity-of-choice
that I'd
use Amazon next time.

Contributors

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Kayla Bush is a creative writing and publishing/editing double major at Susquehanna University. She has served on a poetry reading board for *Rivercraft* and has been a copy editor for *Flagship*. She was a guest poetry editor for *Anti-Heroic Chic* and is currently their nonfiction editor. She is from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and this is her first time being published by an online literary magazine. Find her on Twitter @writeaway17.

Ananya Guha lives in Shilong in Northeast India. He has just retired from service and for almost 38 years he has been a teacher and academic administrator. He has been publishing his poetry world-wide for almost 35 years. He holds a doctoral degree on the novels of William Golding.

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Alison McBain is an award-winning author with nearly 100 short works published, including prose/poetry in *Litro*, *FLAPPERHOUSE*, and *The Airgonaut*. Last year, her poem "Assimilation" was nominated for the Puschart Prize, and her debut fantasy novel *The Rose Queen* was named one of the best books of 2018 by the reviewer website Bookshine and Readbows. In her spare time, she is the Book Reviews Editor for *Bewildering stories*, and the lead editor of the small press publisher *Fairfield Scribes*.

Kenneth Pobo has a new book forthcoming from Clare Songbirds Publishing House called *The Atlantis Hit Parade*. His work has appeared in: *Hawaii Review*, *Amsterdam Review*, *The Queer South Anthology*, *Nimrod*, and elsewhere.

Karen Shepherd lives with her husband and two teenagers in the Pacific Northwest of the United States where she enjoys walking in forests and listening to the rain. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in various journals including *Constellate Literary Journal*, *The Literary Nest*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Riddled With Arrows*, and *Wales Haiku Journal*. Follow her on Twitter @karkarneenee.

Adrian Slonaker zigzags back and forth across the Canadian/US border and works as a copywriter and copy editor. His work has been nominated for Best of the Net and has appeared in *Pangolin Review*, *Aerodrome*, *WINK: Writers in the Know*, and others. He is fond of rain, wrestling, owls, folk-rock music and long chats with charmingly eccentric folks.

Debasis Tripathy is originally from Odisha, a state in eastern India and he currently lives in Bangalore. He started writing seriously a little late, but luckily since then, within a short span he has his writings published in *FormerCactus*, *Prachya Review*, *Nuances*, *CLRI Journal*, *Setu*, *Muse India*, *Pangolin Review*, and *Indian Review*, among others.