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Conversation with Earth

Orlando Clark

At my lowest I sat outside, I sat right next to a tree
No friends no, no foe, nor family
Just me, myself and my melancholy
And through this tree the almighty spoke to me
she said

“my son, life is like a symphony
And you are the orchestrator of your own misery.
I will tell you a little story

To show you the mystery of god’s glory”
Stunned in awe by this tree that spoke
I pinched myself to ensure I was woke
this can’t be real, must have hit my head
It’s surely real for this she said.

“Centuries ago when the world we know now was without shape or form
before even the oldest pharaoh was born.

Light years before flora and fauna was a thing
long before kings and queens and even wedding rings.
Though this story might make you grin,
Look deeper than the wits to find the truth within.



There was a man from a town
And all day long he would wear a frown.
He believes he has the worst of luck
In despair he’s always stuck
Just like you he wanted answers
Just like you sought divine sponsors
He searched for space where he could shout
So the highest hill he apt to mount.
On this hill he spoke to a rock

Pardon serendipity but I kid you not
“ I am the worst” the little man said
“might as well I end up dead”
“well, yes” the rock replied in a convincing tone
This shook the little man to his bone
The rock spoke again in a different note
And thus he said in baritone
“Problems are plenty of this I’m sure
But just like you every man has his own.
The tongue you have is a powerful thing
Please be cautious of the words you sing
For every claim you make the earth says “yes”
So if you speak of yourself speak the best
For what you say I will attest.”

□

“Change how you look at what you see
What you see will surely change
Quite aware this advice is strange
But what you preach will surely be.”

Misconceptions

Molly Hahn

i thought i was supposed to get prettier as i got older.
that somehow the battle scars left
by puberty would wash away as i left high school.
i thought my hair would magically straighten every morning of my twenties.
and that my skin would lose all these
moles and freckles and red blotches and dry patches and random hairs.
i thought i would get taller.
or at least have the interest and ability to wear heels
day in and day out.
i thought my voice would become melodic,
that my tongue would stop tripping over nothing and
speak silky words of sophistication and wisdom.
i thought age would bring me a new body--
a body i can see in my head,
a body that felt like me.

A Day in the Life of a Death

Neil Randall

“That’s the place, over there.” Bachman pointed to an attractive three-storey house situated on the other side of the canal. “Hardly a man of the people, eh?”

“And there’s only one exit?” asked Mitchell. “Only one way in and one way out?”

“Of course there’s only one exit, you idiot! The rear of the building backs onto another arterial waterway.”

Frowning, Bachman took out a crumpled newspaper clipping, carefully unfolded it, and smoothed it out on his lap.

“Look.” He jabbed a red, nail-bitten forefinger at a smudged headline: **LEADING ACADEMIC CALLS FOR GOVERNMENTS TO FINALLY NEGOTIATE WITH TERRORIST GROUPS.** “He’s complacent. He thinks that he can live here, in this peaceful little suburb, and be immune from world events. He’s a hypocrite.”

Mitchell nodded in agreement and half shielded his eyes from a glint of bright sunlight that momentarily dazzled through the windscreen.

“So what’s the plan?” he asked, lowering his hand. “How are we going to get to him?”

“Each morning, without fail,” said Bachman, “he leaves the house at nine-thirty, walks approximately two hundred

yards to a little café on the corner – a busy establishment that caters for office workers, young professionals, students and various artists. He sits in the same corner seat, orders a large black, takes out his little computer and writes nonsense like this.” He lifted the newspaper clipping and waved it around in the air.

“And we plan to take him down in the café?”

“No, no – far too dangerous. We must intercept him en route. At around a quarter past nine, therefore, we’ll get out of the van, walk to the corner of the street and wait. From there, we’ll be able to see him approaching.”

“And what of pedestrians, potential eyewitnesses?”

“I doubt they’ll present us with any problems,” said Bachman. “Fear for one’s life is a powerful immobilizer. Besides, at that hour of the day the area should be relatively quiet. But if any passersby choose to be heroes, we will have no other option than to eliminate them.”

“And our getaway?”

“If all goes well, we run back to the van, drive approximately two and half kilometers out of the city to a prearranged rendezvous point. Once there, our associates will provide us with another vehicle – a clean vehicle. Then onwards across the border.”

“Excellent.” Mitchell checked his wristwatch, a battered Casio diver’s watch with a scratched face and chalky, discoloured strap. “All we can do now is wait, then.”

They fell silent for a few moments. A cycle bell trilled. A heavy vehicle thudded over a loose, clunking drain cover.

“It’s a little strange, though, isn’t it, Bachman? How we

sit here, outside this bastard academic's house, waiting to put an end to his life, while he's indoors, completely unawares. What do you think he's doing at this exact moment? – taking a shower, taking a piss, fucking his wife?”

“It's of no importance,” said Bachman.

“No. Not in the greater scheme of things. But it's intriguing, is it not? – from a philosophical point of view, if nothing else. For he has no idea that this is his last day alive, but we, complete strangers to this man, do. It's an irony: how we know and he doesn't.”

“I see no irony only the natural flow of life, and death. How is he any different to a man who gets knocked down by a bus or an old woman having a heart attack?”

“Because, respectively, they are accidents and unfortunate medical conditions, everyday occurrences, whilst this...”

“... is no less philosophical? – God, fate, mortality. At any moment any person in any part of the world could be struck down, be it by a bullet to the head or a brain aneurysm. The moment of death is the same as the moments that preceded it, and the moments that will immediately follow – minus one insignificant individual. No more, no less.”

Arthurs shifted halfway down the bed.

“You look so beautiful,” he whispered to Nina, rolling onto his side and gently running his fingers up and down her great swollen belly. From his vantage point, with bolts of grainy morning sunlight creeping in through a gap in the thick curtains, her distended stomach looked like a wonder of the world, as breathtaking and spectacular as a

great Himalayan mountain range, or mysterious and wondrous as one of the pyramids. “I can’t believe we’re going to be parents soon.”

He rested an open palm on her stomach, stroking the warm, soft cocoon that had nourished, sustained and protected their unborn child for the last seven months.

“Well, we better get used to it,” said Nina, stirring slightly, brushing a few strands of tangled blonde hair from her face. “In eight weeks our lives will never be the same again.”

Every time he thought about parenthood, the idea of becoming a father for the first time at fifty-two, it terrified him. He worried about complications, birth defects. He worried that something awful might happen to Nina during labour. He worried that he might keel over and die without seeing the child born at all. He worried about the kind of world they were living in now, and the state of society in twenty years’ time.

“Right.” He shifted back up the bed, touched the side of Nina’s face, and then planted a soft kiss to her lips. “I better go and grab a quick shower now. Do you want me to bring you a cup of Chamomile when I’m done?”

“Please.”

After showering and towelling himself dry, Arthurs shuffled over to the sink, wiped the steam from the mirror, leaned close, and stared at his reflection. Not for the first time these last seven months, he wondered what he saw staring back at him, he wondered what kind of man his child’s father really was: moderately successful in his field, some would say renowned, a little controversial, well off (but that had more to do with his inheritance than his own academic work – no matter how acclaimed), a little

overweight, undoubtedly, a little bleary eyed and blotchy skinned (he liked a glass of wine or two each evening), a mop of scruffy greying hair (he had always had an aversion to barbershops, not the actual hair-cutting process, but the waiting around and interminable chit-chat with the barber himself), hobbies: not many, friends: few but faithful, achievements: few but frivolous. Momentarily discouraged, he felt as if he had already let his unborn child down, that he hadn't led the most exciting or worthy of lives. Then it struck him: *I'm in love, and am loved in return by your mother. That's my greatest achievement, and that's why you're here.*

"Yes, that's why you're here." He picked up his toothbrush and studied the bent, broken bristles. "New toothbrushes, must remember to pick up new toothbrushes today," he said to his reflection, while absently squeezing paste onto a brush head that was some weeks past its best.

Downstairs in the kitchen, he boiled the kettle and took a packet of chamomile tea out of a cupboard. A creature of habit, Arthurs never had anything at all for breakfast. Nothing passed his lips until his regulation large black at the café on the corner. Not until one o'clock would he ever consider eating anything solid.

As he waited for the kettle to boil, he sorted through some papers on the kitchen table, notes he had made last night concerning the rights of terrorists to commit atrocities, that to all intents and purposes they were soldiers in a war, not a bunch of armed fanatics. To give his theory more weight, he had used case examples from Northern Ireland and Palestine.

The kettle boiled.

He filled Nina's cup with boiling water. While the tea brewed, he opened his laptop and quickly checked his

morning emails. Amongst the usual interdepartmental circulars, interview requests and junk mail, was a message from the parents of a bomb victim, a fifteen-year-old girl murdered in a recent terrorist attack in Manchester.

Professor Arthurs,

My wife and I were appalled by your comments regarding last month's bomb attack which robbed us of our beloved daughter Jade. How can you espouse such dangerous views when people of all ages all across the globe are being indiscriminately slaughtered? There can be no, I repeat no justification for terrorist activities, for the use of such violence. Maybe if you suffered at the hands of a terrorist, if your son or daughter were, God forbid, a victim, you would feel very differently.

Yours with complete disdain

It wasn't the first time Arthurs had received such a message. As much as he sympathised with the families of terror victims, he knew there was a much bigger historical and geopolitical picture to consider, he knew their stance was far too subjective and emotional. They miss the point, he thought to himself, as he spooned the teabag out of Nina's cup, placing both spoon and saturated bag on the draining board near the sink.

He took the cup of tea upstairs.

"Here you are, darling." He placed it on the bedside table.

"Thank you," said Nina, leaning forward, dragging a pillow around to support her back. "Are you going soon?"

"Yes," he replied, absently slipping an arm into a suit jacket. "Do you need anything before I leave? Are you sure you'll be all right on your own?"

“Of course. And I have my cell phone right here.” She picked it up off the bedside table and waggled it around in the air. “Besides, you’re just up the street. If anything happens you could be here in two minutes – maybe less.”

“Okay.” He walked back over to the bed and pressed his lips to her forehead. “I’ll be back around lunch-time.”

“There he is,” said Mitchell, nudging Bachman’s elbow. “Over there. He’s heading our way.”

Both men looked right and left. The streets were almost deserted; traffic thin, only a few pedestrians were spotted up and down each side of the sun-drenched pavements. One of whom was renowned academic Professor Nathaniel Arthurs.

“You ready?” asked Bachman, reaching into his inside pocket for his gun.

“As I’ll ever be,” Mitchell replied.

“Let’s do this –”

“Wait.” Mitchell tugged at Bachman’s sleeve. “Look. He’s stopped to talk to someone.”

“Nathaniel! Nathaniel!”

Arthurs swung round to see his old friend Wilf Krieger’s smiling face and wide-open arms.

“How’s things?” They shook hands warmly. “How’s Nina getting on? They say those last few weeks are the hard-

est.”

“Pretty good, thanks. A bit tired, a bit fed up – but otherwise we’re both very excited, can’t wait to meet the new arrival.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Krieger. “Can I tempt you with a quick coffee upstairs?” He gestured over his shoulder. “It’s a long time since we had one of our famous chats, our discussions about the inherent evils of the modern world.”

Arthurs hesitated, checked his watch – 09:26 – thought about the article he was contracted to write for *New Politkura* magazine, weighed it up against how much he enjoyed Krieger’s company, his conversation, especially.

“Erm, I think I’d better take a rain check on that one, Wilf. I’ve got an absolute mountain of paperwork to get through, not to mention an article to write.”

“Not time for just one cup?”

Arthurs smiled, felt close to relenting, but knew from experience that one cup of coffee would inevitably lead to another, that the conversation would flow, and before he knew it it would be gone one o’clock and Nina would be wondering where he had got to, and a whole working morning would have been wasted.

“No, really, Wilf, I can’t – not today. I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do, unfortunately.”

“Okay, no problem, I understand, Nat.” He shrugged. “Don’t be a stranger, though, eh? And you take care of yourself now. Nina and the baby will be relying on you in a couple of months’ time.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me, Wilf. I think I’m what they

call one of life's survivors. It would take an army of millions to hold me back."

"Shit," said Mitchell, edgy, impatient. "When's he ever going to stop talking to that -"

"Now," Bachman hissed under his breath, reaching for his gun and striding down the pavement.

At first, it wasn't clear if Arthurs actually realised that a man was approaching him drawing a silenced pistol from his inside pocket. The academic carried on walking at the same brisk pace. There was a level of distraction, of challenge almost, as if he was aware of his fate, and fully prepared to face it head on. Only when Bachman was almost on top of him did Arthurs stop and look up with a puzzled, uncomprehending expression upon his face.

"What? Who are -?"

"This is for the children of Manchester. This is for all the victims of terrorism all around the world."

Bachman shot Arthurs clean through the top of the head, blowing off a large proportion of his skull. A cloud of blood, bone and brain splattered high into the air. The laptop wedged under his arm fell smashing to the pavement, splintered shards of plastic scattering across the concrete. A moment later, he too crashed to the ground, slumping lifelessly over onto his side. Dark blood poured from the top of his head, forming a thick syrupy puddle that glistened ruby-like in the bright morning sunshine.

Two pedestrians and a cyclist happened upon the scene.

"Get away!" shouted Bachman, pointing his gun at them.

“Run. Go or I shoot, I shoot all of you.”

The cyclist performed a hasty, clumsy U-turn and pedalled off as quickly as he could. The two pedestrians sprinted across the road.

A far-off siren wailed. Cars slowed.

“Come on,” said Bachman. “Let’s get out of here.”

Fade to Black

Fabrice Poussin

Fade to white;
the weary soul opens to a vignette of a meadow,
soft edges on the softly undulating tall grasses,
reeds, a flora intense with lives and desires.

Slowly zooming in;
the heron undisturbed, continues his morning hunt;
the mountains like to disappear, making room
for the intricate details of unseen abundance.

Volume up;
life explodes in songs, tonalities honoring the stars,
dew minds its way along the long, newly born foliage;
the planet rejoices beneath the festive multiplicity.

Pan left;
oasis of a teal surface so perfect, nectar eternal,
in her tiny paradise on stilts, safe she sleeps yet,
reigning over a domain her own, unspoiled.

Tighten a little;
in minor chords she stirs, still dreaming of yesterday,
surrounded by a snow white veil, weightless as air,
she shows the deep blue of a tender soul, smiles.

Fade to black;
on a vision of bliss, letting her prepare for today,
her heartbeat, light and intense, at once echoes
through all that lives to sing her praise.

Caffeine Dreams

Michael Bettendorf

The last time we spoke, you were red-eyed and soaring high. I tried to bring you back down to Earth because I had something to say, but I don't remember what it was anymore. You smoked cigarettes while we walked around campus. I puffed a cigar. Something cheap from a gas station. Something fruity. I wish I could remember what it was.

Scratch all that.

The last time we spoke, was in a dream. I heard your laugh and cried. I woke up, melancholy and nostalgic for our conversations over coffee. Something our moms used to do. Do you remember?

You used to take your coffee with flavored creamer, no sugar. Then again, so did I, but that was then and now I only want it black. I wonder if your tastes would have changed too. Maybe developed is the better word. Chocolate coffee and coconut cream was your favorite combination. We used to slam that shit by the gallons and play Super Nintendo.

Do you know I still can't finish our game? The save file is exactly how we left it almost a decade ago. Every now and then I load it up and remember how you stayed at my house for days after graduation so we could beat it. We still only have one dungeon left.

I wish I could remember what we talked about, but memories can't be trusted and it probably doesn't matter anyway.

That's not fair.

Whatever we talked about mattered, in some way, in that moment. But we only get to talk in dreams now and cannot control the frequency. If I could, I'd tune my brain to your frequency so we could finish that talk. So why don't you haunt me instead, in my caffeine dreams. I'll turn the coffee pot on and wait.

Oaten Orchard

Kara Goughnour

I collect clipped-leaf infants
of coleuses but I am not
the mothering type.
My carpet is a collection
of beige leaves fallen
in a firm fuzz of plushed felt.
When I say that I am a plant person,
I mean that I want to be,
because keeping someone alive
is a learned skill and I am still
self-practicing. I am planting
myself in the oaten orchard
of my living room,
I am trying to let myself live.

Light

Orlando Clark

For if the true beauty of a man is found on the inside
Then to see the true beauty of the world you must close your eyes.
The earth is a prudent teacher, its lesson comes with the wind
Seas, trees, bees and even the bird that sings.
So gloat not on thine own understanding,¹

For all men are fools because, all men learn daily
Knowledge is wide, cannot be fathomed in the mind of a single man
Understand that the bit you know is like tears in an ocean.
Fear not the dark and not knowing,
For too much light retards the mind from growing.

A wise man is not the man who knows it all.
A wise man is a man who shares it all.
A foolish fool is a man who tries not to understand.
A wise fool is man who knocks on the door of a wiser man.

1 See Proverbs 3:5

Piece of Work

Molly Hahn

I want you to revere me like an infinite
stroll through a museum.
Gaze upon my artifacts, my
history of washed out memories,
my collection of abandoned dreams,
my silent sculptures.
Study the small descriptions floating
beside large paintings of misplaced
emotions. Marvel
at the blank canvas walls that stretch
between my pieces.
Lazily walk around, losing time and
place in me,
spend an afternoon, a morning,
a lifetime,
wandering between my displayed
history. Find yourself in back corners, behind
the staged reproduction of my childhood--
stare even at the works in progress.

Phantasm

Fabrice Poussin

Standing there
the safe side of a window
accomplice of their secrets
sharer of pains too familiar.

It seems a world continues
out there full of laughter
joys of multiple kinds a little
symphony on a makeshift stage
risks renewed on a manufactured mountain.

More comfort is found in solitude
where all remains buried deeply
no fear needed of a revelation
skin deep inadvertently blurted
out with a single syllable uttered
too quickly, too widely with
the embarrassed chuckle.

He sees through the slats of protective
blinds a land revealed as fragments
sharp with souls' edges they
must not be touched.

The sentence: exile,
leper in quarantine
no longer allowed to assemble
the puzzle of his simple desire.

The pieces sharp as hopes,
cut to his bruised soul
no matter how much he pleads
a voice muffled by the deep walls
too close he remains still.

The crowd is now so foreign
no one waves, no one feels,
as he dies, while his last tear
hesitant, rolls to oblivion.

He's Come Undone

Bonnie Carlson

How much longer could he continue to brush his teeth at the kitchen sink to avoid the bathroom mirror? The prospect of facing himself after all these months filled him with a mixture of curiosity and dread. Mostly dread.

So, shirtless, in wrinkled pajama bottoms—his daily uniform—he spit out the toothpaste, rinsed, and brewed himself a third cup of coffee. Time to get the day started. As he lit the day's first cigarette, he glanced at the kitchen wall clock. Two p.m. He carried the mug and cig back downstairs to his man cave, the basement space his mother had finished off for him when he moved back in—never mind that it violated the homeowner's association rules—back before she got sick. As he padded downstairs, the ghost of his mother haunted him as he thought about how much she'd hate the cigarette stench of his room.

Being homeless sucked when you had a dog and none of the shelters would allow pets. He wouldn't go anywhere without Max though. Eventually, as she had in the past, his mother relented and let him move in. It took a lot of coaxing to convince her to let Max stay, that he wouldn't bother her cat. Little did she know how soon she would come to depend on him.

He couldn't get rid of that nagging voice in his head. Brian, you need to get your shit together. Get a job. He sort of wanted to work, but not really. What he really wanted was money. As soon as he got his inheritance he wouldn't have to work. At least for a while.

A year and a half had passed since he'd gotten laid off from that lab job. He didn't see that one coming, and he didn't deserve it. That job paid well and had good benefits. Not having health insurance at fifty-four was a pain in the ass.

He studied the angry red rash covering his forearm and shook his head. He'd had that sucker since before his mother passed and couldn't get rid of it. Based on his EMT training, he suspected it came from changing her colostomy bag, despite how careful he'd been with the latex gloves. He needed to see a dermatologist, or at least go to one of those urgent care places but didn't have the cash.

He sat at the desk in his bedroom and opened the computer, curious to see what had happened since he'd logged off at five a.m. and passed out. A bunch of new emails had arrived, so he scanned through those first. Mostly junk he deleted immediately. Except for the one from Daphne. He considered deleting that one too, but he'd been dodging her phone calls for days. Or was it weeks? Hard to tell, the way the days just ran together. So, at the last second he decided to open it.

“Brian,
You can't keep avoiding my phone calls. We need to talk.
~Daphne”

Short and sweet.

His mother had put his older cousin Daphne in charge of the estate as the executor because Mom hadn't trusted Brian or his sister Linda to deal with money or anything else. He wasn't surprised, but he felt betrayed. After all the caregiving he'd provided for the last couple of years of her life. He'd even turned down a promotion for a job out of state to stay in Connecticut and care for her. On the other hand, what a pleasant surprise to discover Mom had left the condo to him, even though he had to split the cash assets with

Linda. Like that messed up bitch even deserved a penny.

So now he had three choices. Two sucked: calling Daphne, which was bound to be unpleasant, or going out to look for a job, which would require a shower. When had he last showered?

He'd probably opt for the third choice, logging back into Fortnite to play his favorite online game. Man, was it addictive. That way he could make contact with Cheryl, assuming she was playing. No contest, right? Of course, he considered Cheryl his girlfriend. His mother had thought it was outrageous he called her that, just because she lived in Washington state and Brian had never met her in person. So what? They talked all the time, and he'd eventually meet her. Once he inherited that cash and could fly out there.

Then his cellphone rang. He wondered how much longer his carrier would continue to provide service with him being so far behind on the bill. He glanced at the screen. Shit, it was her.

“Hi Daphne—”

She wasted no time starting to hassle him. If she was going to be like that he needed a beer, so he trotted upstairs, grabbed one from the fridge, and lit another cigarette.

“I *wasn't* deliberately avoiding you. I haven't been feeling well.” That was sort of true. He listened to her blab on about how he needed to stop neglecting his health. Yak, yak, yak.

“You know I don't have any money for a doctor.”

Then things turned nasty. Her being in California had given him some breathing room, but she'd finally figured out he still had his mother's ATM card. He'd been using it at the

Mobil station, not for gas—shit, his mother’s car wasn’t even registered and his driver’s license had expired—but for beer and cigarettes and sundries, like cortisone cream for his rash.

Toward the end of the conversation he asked Daphne, “When do you think I’ll get my half of the cash?”

That’s when she exploded and told him he already had his half and more.

“Wait, how can that be?” She’d given him nothing.

She explained, not at all patiently, sounding annoyed, that she’d been paying a bunch of his household expenses out of his half of the assets.

“Like what?” He assumed the condo was paid for, although his mother was so secretive and anxious about her assets it was hard to tell what she had.

Like the real estate taxes, the monthly homeowner’s fee, the land lease, and utilities, she told him.

“What’s a land lease?”

She said he didn’t need to know, like he was an idiot, just that his mother paid it every month. She went on to say she’d also been paying off the home-equity loan.

“But Mom took that out to pay for the Linda’s car. Linda was supposed to be paying her back.” He doubted she ever did. Something else his mother had refused to talk to him about. “She should be responsible for that.”

Daphne reminded him that his mother had used that loan to pay for remodeling in the condo as well, specifically the finished basement where he lived.

Shit, he'd forgotten about that.

In the end, she went on, it didn't matter what his mother used it for. It was connected to the house, and therefore his responsibility. She had checked with the lawyer who had confirmed it.

This whole estate business frustrated him so much he wanted to punch something. The lawyer told Daphne that the condo was his as soon as his mother died since she'd left it to him in the will. But he couldn't sell it for some legal reasons she wouldn't explain to him. Probate or something. He was about to ask her when the condo would be available to do with as he wished when she told him he should forget any ideas he might've had that he could continue to live there. He couldn't afford the monthly expenses, which totaled almost three grand. Even if he had a job.

What? But wasn't the condo paid for? Just as he was about to ask her to clarify that she abruptly hung up on him. God, she'd turned into such a bitch. Her parting words to him echoed in his ears: "You need to get off your ass and find a job." He assumed there would be enough cash from his mother's assets that he wouldn't have to work, at least for a while. Now... now he wasn't sure of anything.

He grabbed a second beer. Too bad there wasn't any whiskey around, or weed. His guts were convulsing, and he desperately needed to get high, to get the racing thoughts to stop. But he'd given up the weed a couple of months ago when it was clear he couldn't afford it anymore. The hard stuff too.

The phone call had rattled him so bad he decided to take a shower, bite the bullet, and go look for a job. Time to take a look at himself in the mirror before he left the house, but

he'd put that off as long as possible. After he showered, he wrapped the towel around his expanding waist—he had trouble getting it to stay there—and caught the first glimpse of himself in the fogged-over mirror.

He wiped off the condensation and studied his image. He expected it would be bad, but he actually flinched when he saw his face in the clear mirror. Had he had a haircut since he buried Mom? Maybe not. His formerly brown hair now hung in gray, shaggy clumps, almost long enough to pull back into a ponytail. Red blotches from broken capillaries covered his ashen face. He leaned in for a closer look at his eyes. A network of minuscule red veins formed a map on his eyeballs, the part that's supposed to be white instead a pale yellow. His ugly, oversized nose was covered in blackheads. He shuddered. How had he let himself get this bad?

He should have been prepared for Mom's death. After all, he'd taken care of her for months while she suffered from the end stages of colon cancer. But six months ago, Daphne had lectured him to let her go.

"Jesus, Brian. Do you want your last conversation with her to be an argument because she won't drink her Ensure? She's ready. That's what she's telling you."

Easy for her to say from three thousand miles away. He was the one who stood by her side as she wasted away in the hospital bed in their living room. But somehow it still caught him unawares. His life lacked purpose now that he no longer needed to take her for doctor visits and cajole her to drink liquids and change her colostomy bag. He didn't know what to do with himself and could hardly remember what his life was like before she got sick.

Every day he wandered into her bedroom and plopped down in her favorite chair. He knew he should convert it to his bedroom, to come up from the basement, but he

couldn't bring himself to do it. He'd managed to get rid of her clothes though. Linda had begged him for those clothes, but he donated them to a charity instead. Fuck her. But he hung onto Mom's favorite bathrobe. Sometimes he needed to inhale the lingering scent of the old-lady perfume she always wore, Chanel No. 5. Linda wanted that, too. Right.

He plodded back downstairs to get dressed. He had to root around in a pile of clothes on the floor to find a semi-clean pair of jeans. They were so tight he could barely zip them under his growing gut. He donned a turquoise polo shirt he found hanging in the closet. It stunk of cigarettes. While he got dressed, he pondered a job-hunting strategy. Why not try the Starbucks in town? They always seemed to be looking for people. Plus, he'd heard it was a good place to work, with generous benefits.

So that was the plan. He left and locked the front door. The noisy ch-ch-ch, ch-ch-ch of dozens of cicadas high in the Norway maple trees around the condo almost drowned out the shrill voice of his neighbor.

"Brian. Haven't seen you in ages. How's it going?"

"Fine, Mrs. Ferretti, how are you?" Probably a mistake to ask. She could be gabby.

"I'm good, Brian. Sure miss your mother though. What've you been up to?"

God, was she nosey. None of your freakin' business. He couldn't afford to get sidetracked into talking to the old bid-dy since it was almost five. "Can't talk, Mrs. Feretti. Got an appointment."

He hustled to the garage. By the time he arrived at the car microdots of sweat had bloomed on his upper lip and the back of his neck under his still damp hair. It had been so

long since he'd been outside during the day he'd forgotten how hot and muggy southern Connecticut was in August.

As he left the complex his eyes darted left and right, looking for cops. Satisfied he was in the clear, he picked up his speed to thirty. These little shoreline towns had low speed limits. Catching people for speeding padded their meager budgets. His mind shifted to how he would handle the interview at Starbucks. Sure, he hadn't worked in a couple of years, but explaining that he'd been caring his sick mother should count for something, shouldn't it?

He made a left onto Main Street, soon reaching the tiny downtown, if you could call it that (people did). Boutiques, a coffee shop, a couple of restaurants, a barber shop and hair salon, and a bookstore. Not a single big box or chain store. Well, except Starbucks, and the local residents had fought like ferrets to keep that out, worried about the effect on the independently owned coffee shop just steps away. Then came the CVS, next door to the Starbucks, but not without another fight. Now the sole independently owned pharmacy struggled to survive, practically empty most days. Starbucks and CVS were so busy you could hardly find a parking space. His mother had moved all her prescriptions to CVS because they were cheaper.

"I can't afford to waste money," she announced, always the frugal senior. Cheapskate was more like it.

He made a right turn into the CVS-Starbucks parking lot and caught a quick glimpse of the red flashing light in his rear-view mirror. Shit. Shit. Shit. He had to drive around to the back to find a place to park.

The cop blocked him into the spot, and in the seconds it took to turn off his car and roll down the window, the officer was all over Brian. As panic rose in his chest, he took a few deep breaths to calm his pounding heart. Sweat drenched

his jittery, over-caffeinated body and dripped down his face. Fat lot of good that shower did. Wiping his brow, as calmly as he could, he said, "Officer, what's the problem?"

In these wealthy shoreline towns on Long Island Sound the cops had no real crime to deal with, other than the occasional break-in and teenage vandalism, so they were relentless about driving infractions. Probably something minor, Brian thought, looking up at the cop.

"Well, for starters you failed to signal when you turned in here, and then there's the broken taillight."

Whew, so nothing serious. He prayed he'd get off with a warning.

Italian-looking and fit, with slicked back black hair and a tan, handsome face, Officer Falcone (according to the name tag on his navy-blue shirt) said, "License and registration please."

Fuck. Now he was screwed. And probably had beer breath. At least it was almost five o'clock.

"How about if you step out of the car," continued the young officer.

He fished out the expired registration from the glove box, but what about his expired driver's license—was it still in his wallet? Now, sweating like someone who had something to hide, he pulled out his wallet and found the license. He got out of the car and breathed a sigh of relief.

The cop took his license and registration back to his car to check things on the computer.

"Can I get back into the car and sit?" Brian yelled to the cop.

“Sure, be my guest,” Officer Falcone said, like they were old buddies.

Brian’s mind scrolled through the possible consequences. He sure wasn’t going to get off with a warning on this one. The ch-ch-ch of those damned mating cicadas was driving him nuts. His heart beat like a hummingbird’s wings, a zillion times a minute. His blood pressure must be soaring. When he tried to inhale a deep breath, he started coughing and couldn’t stop. He needed to stop smoking. Well, now he’d have to, with Daphne cutting him off. While he waited, agitated, he squirmed in his seat and his mind raced, worrying about what might happen. Could they arrest him on the spot? Seize the car? The minutes plodded by. What was taking so long?

By the time the cop returned to his car, Brian was ready to jump out of his skin.

“Well, Mr. O’Connor, I’m afraid you’re in some trouble here. You’ve got an expired license *and* registration.”

As if Brian didn’t know. His head dropped, and he started to hyperventilate. He was most definitely screwed.

Officer Falcone continued. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to—”

Brian’s head jerked up, a pleading look in his eyes. “Please, Officer, don’t arrest me,” he begged. “Here’s what happened.” Then he started to sob.

The cop stood there, a shocked expression on his face. No doubt he’d probably faced weepy female drivers before, but a crying middle-aged man?

Brian got hold of himself enough to talk. “See, I’ve been taking care of my mother after she got cancer. Living with

her. I had to give up my job to take care of her.” Not true, but close, and the cop wouldn’t know he was lying anyhow. “Then six months ago she—” he started to sob all over again.

The cop waited by Brian’s open window, not saying anything. Several people walked by, staring, on their way into the CVS as the red lights still flashed on top of the cruiser.

“After she died, I... everything kind of... fell apart, I guess you’d say.” Brian choked back another sob. “That’s why I didn’t get around to . . . maybe I’m depressed . . . I’m not sure.

“All I know is, I can’t seem to get my shit together.” He took a deep breath and paused.

Officer Falcone waited.

“Actually, the reason I was driving here today is to apply for a job at Starbucks”—he looked up and noticed the CVS sign—“and CVS.”

The cop stood there. Finally, he said, “Okay, Mr. O’Connor, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to let you off with a warning today, even though you’ve got three problems—ignoring your failure to signal your right turn. But you’ve got to promise me you’re going to get that license and registration renewed and get your taillight fixed.”

Brian nodded like one of those bobble-head dolls. “Thank you, thank you so much, Officer Falcone. I promise I will.”

“You’d better, because the next time you’re stopped you’ll be in serious trouble.”

Brian nodded solemnly. Right, except that the car title wasn’t his, and he didn’t know what needed to happen to

get it in his name. And to get his license renewed he had to pay off hundreds of dollars in traffic fines. Money he didn't have. And who knows what it would cost to get the damned taillight fixed.

As the cop backed away Brian used his now damp polo shirt to wipe more sweat from his face. On the one hand, he'd dodged a bullet, but on the other . . . What a fucking mess. He'd torched everything and couldn't seem to get off his ass to take care of business. He'd vowed he wasn't talking to Daphne again—especially after that last phone call. That he wouldn't ask—beg—for money, but now he'd be forced to call her and grovel, humiliate himself. Maybe it would be better to text her, or email. That way he could explain without her interrupting. Might be time to sell that used telescope he loved so much. That would end stargazing at two a.m., but it should net a few hundred bucks on eBay. Put off the inevitable by a couple of months.

He thought about how he'd ended up here, in this parking lot. Even if he got a job, he wouldn't get paid right away. So what was the point of going into Starbucks or CVS? Plus, that wouldn't solve the problem of the car not being in his name. He sighed. He needed a beer.

So, he backed out of the space, left the parking lot, and drove the speed limit home where Max would be waiting for his dinner. Maybe he'd go to bed early tonight, try again tomorrow to look for work. Or maybe not.

Cleaning Up the Ashes

Kara Goughnour

I watch myself write this poem
in the same way you watch a B-rated horror film
where the killer has been in the shot this whole time.
I conduct self-help in the same way
that I have been watering dead plants for three weeks –
all at once and obviously too late.
In this round table of brain,
I shuffle the papers, hold meetings with myself
where I show evidence that bad times may come again,
but in the good moments I can only see the graphs pointing upward,
can't see their impending fall.

Tos May Apply

Michael Bettendorf

>> Name?

<< Will.

>> Hello, Will. Would you mind sitting down?

The voice is calm. The voice guides me to sit on the couch in front of me. A loveseat. The couch looks cheap, almost fake. Whether the couch is physically there or not does not matter. I sit and I do not fall through its vinyl covering. It is cherry red and possesses a sheen like freshly spilt blood. Rich in oxygen, a lung shot. I think of lipstick.

I am wearing the provided goggles. The elastic band is tight and pulls the hair at the back of my head. A skinny white table is in front of me. It looks like a golf tee.

>> Do you see the remote?

<< Yes.

>> Good, that is good.

I consider leaving.

>> There is a hook behind you, Will. If you'd like you can remove your jacket and get comfortable. The process may take a while.

<< I'm not sure I understand.

>> We've been through this, Will. The user agreement clearly states that upon the cancelation of our services, an exit interview will be conducted. This is part of your exit interview. If you'd like to hang up your jacket and get comfortable, the hook is behind you. When you are ready, pick up the remote and select OK.

I begin to sweat and decide, sure, I'll hang up my jacket.

>> I am sensing you are getting warm. Would you like a glass of water, Will?

<< I don't appreciate being scanned.

>> I can assure you, Will, it is within our legal rights at ██████████ to access this information. When you are ready to begin, pick up the remote and select OK.

A glass of water replaces the remote on the table. I realize the remote is already in my hand and I have pressed OK. My vision goes blank for a moment. A blink, a blip. A voice states that retinal controls are being overridden.

>> Your vision will return in a moment. Thank you for your patience. For health reasons, do not remove the provided safety goggles.

I take a drink of water while my vision reboots. Images appear on the wall in front of me. Photographs from years ago. Memories. A digital time-capsule. I turn to look at the wall. The images follow, always in my line of sight. I shut my eyes and bursts of color appear. Wisps of smoke from a snuffed candle. Phantom carbon copies of myself. Images I don't remember.

>> Is something the matter, Will?

<< No.

>> You appear stressed.

<< I'm tired, that's all. I just want to finish and go home.

>> Are you sure?

<< Yes. Please, I'm ready to continue.

Another voice interrupts me.

// Finally, a red for *you*. A red for *all*.

A new image emerges on the wall. An advertisement for lipstick.

<< I'm ready to continue. I say again and press OK.

>> As you are aware, Will, as stated in the terms and conditions, cancelation of our services does not erase your data. Your information is stored and will remain so as mandated for future retrieval. However, your profile and associated contact information will be inaccessible to you and third parties during the duration of your absence from [REDACTED]. When you decide to use our services again in the future, your profile information and data will be restored upon completion of our updated terms and conditions.

I press OK as prompted.

>> Do you wish to continue?

<< Yes.

>> Are you sure?

<< Yes.

An image appears in my left eye, along the side.

SPONSORED. [REDACTED] coats, jackets and sweaters 15% off TODAY. Expires at midnight.

Simultaneously, I am hit with several notifications. The advertisement in my left eye changes to several messages in my feed. All from friends I haven't spoken to in years. Family I've never met.

-Hello, Will! Long time no see. How have you been? We should catch up!

-I have an investment opportunity for you! Message me for details. You'll make BANK!

-[REDACTED] is blocking this so I'm messaging you. THIS is what the government doesn't want you to know [REDACTED] is trying to keep the people from learning the TRUTH. Time to WAKE UP!

20% off EVERYTHING. Members only. Sign up with [REDACTED] and receive an EXTRA 10% off.

[REDACTED] lipstick buy one get two FREE when you use code LIMITEDLIPS BY 11:59 CT.

Feeling lonely? [REDACTED] has the app for YOU! Download iSolated for a revolutionary dating experience and be lonesome no more!

Get your Premium [REDACTED] account for only 9.99/mo.*

Terms and Conditions may apply. This rate is only offered for the first 30 days after subscribing. For full access of [REDACTED]'s premium account, you will have to read our updated terms of service on the [REDACTED] official website accessible with your free account. Other conditions may apply.

Not enough time on your hands? Let PROletariat-bot do your work for you! Available on the [REDACTED] website.

I close the messages, but they are replaced one after the other. My right eye is an endless stream of advertisements. A digital deluge for sales of shit I don't want. Shit I don't need. Shit I didn't ask for.

<< Cancel my account.

>> The interview is not over, Will.

<< Turn them off. I can't focus.

I finish the water and stand up. I swim through the ads and the live feed and reach for my jacket. I feel the fabric in my hand. It is weightless. It is nothing. It melts in my hand and drips between my fingers to the floor. It disappears.

On the hook, my coat hangs.

My water is full.

>> Let's continue, Will. On a scale of one to ten, how highly would you recommend [REDACTED]'s services to a friend or family?

<< Five.

>> Are you sure?

<< Yes, I don't care what my friends or family subscribe to. It just isn't for me any longer.

>> Thank you for your feedback.

There is a series of similar questions. I reply automatically. Fives across the board. I no longer care. I do not wish to be a part of this any longer.

>> I am sensing you are not being honest with your feed-

back, Will. It is integral to our user experience that you provide accurate and honest answers. Survey refreshing.

<< You can't do this.

>> It is within our legal rights at [REDACTED] to conduct our mandatory exit interview. This is part of the process, Will. Do not worry. Retinal control override in 3...2...1. Neurological scan will begin in 3...2...1.

>> Name?

<< Will.

>> Hello, Will. Would you mind sitting down?

Bibliophile

Thaís Fernandes

Being in good company
with ancient books
next to me.

Loving their classic musty scent
that wafts from each page
I read.

Looking back,
a bookshelf full of questions;
pieces of wisdom,
social quandaries,
many lessons.

Through an opened book,
the whisperings of words
are so compelling,
where I can find
their meaning.

And the voices of human
beings, by reading
manuscripts,
written all
in Latin.

Contributors

Michael Bettendorf earned an English degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2012. Currently, he mentors children in Language Arts for the Lincoln Public School district and consumes books, comics, and podcasts. He is busy juggling a couple of novels and a podcast he swears he'll record one day. He lives in Lincoln with his wife, where he tries to convince the world that Nebraska is too strange to be a flyover state.

Bonnie Carlson writes amidst the saguaros and chollas in the magnificent Sonoran Desert. Her short fiction has appeared in magazines such as *The Normal School*, *Across the Margin*, *Foliage Oak*, and *Broadkill Review*. Her novel, *Radical Acceptance*, is forthcoming.

Orlando Clark is a third-year Jamaican international student majoring in English at Mount Mercy University. He loves his family, football, and literature. He is an aspiring English professor, writer, footballer, familyman and businessman. He is his best self when he is out in nature, absorbing all the natural mystics of the world.

Thaís Fernandes is a native Brazilian, language instructor, translator, and a research enthusiast based in São Paulo, Brazil. Her poetry and literary translations have appeared in different online journals, including with the Japanese newspaper *The Asahi Shimbun*, *Meta/Phor(e)/Play*, *Merak Magazine*, *Tuck Magazine*, *Zunái – Revista de Poesia e Debates*, and *Acácia – Revista de Tradução*. Recent publications include translations of C. S. Lewis, Jonathan Swift, and forthcoming Ralph Waldo Emerson and Robert Louis Stevenson. Current projects include unpublished

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Kara Goughnour is a queer writer and documentarian living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They received their Bachelor's Degree in Creative and Professional Writing from The University of Pittsburgh. They are the author of "Mixed Tapes," forthcoming in the Ghost City Press Summer 2019 Micro-Chap Series. They are the recipient of the 2018 Gerald Stern Poetry Award, and have work published or forthcoming in *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, Third Point Press, and over thirty-five others. Follow them on Twitter @kara_goughnour or read their collected and exclusive works at karagoughnour.com.

Molly Hahn is a senior Biology major. She's from the small town of Dyersville, IA and likes cooking, not studying for midterms, and writing poetry at midnight. Molly obsessively watches Oscar-nominated films. She also spends her time trying out dessert recipes on anyone who will taste (or just for herself after an exam) and writing stories she can never seem to finish. She plans on surviving after graduation with a job in the medical field and then eventually going back to school where she will continue to avoid studying for midterms.

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, the *San Pedro River Review* as well as other publications.

Neil Randall is a novelist and short story writer. His debut novel *A Quiet Place to Die* (Wild Wolf Publishing) was voted e-thriller Book of the Month for February 2014. His historical novels, *The Holy Drinker* and *The Butterfly and the Wheel* (both Knox Robinson Publishing) have been widely praised. His latest thriller, *The Girl in the Empty Room*

(Crooked Cat Publishing) was released in September of last year. His debut short story collection *Tales of Ordinary Sadness* (Knox Robinson Publishing) has received much critical acclaim: *Darkness Reigns at the Foot of the Lighthouse* was short-listed for the prestigious Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2009, and *Hands* long-listed for the RTÉ Guide/Penguin Ireland Short Story Competition 2015. His newest novel *The Nine Lives of Jacob Fallada* will be released in August.