



MiCrow #2 Archives

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Jessamyn Johnston Smyth's writing has appeared in American Letters and Commentary, Red Rock Review (forthcoming), Nth Position, Abalone Moon, qarrtsiluni, and other journals and anthologies. She won listing in Best American Short Stories/100 Distinguished Stories of 2005, and has received a Pushcart Prize nomination, a Bread Loaf Writer's Conference grant, a Vermont Community Foundation Artist Grant, and a writing grant from Change, Incorporated. Jessamyn has just finished a collection written during a year spent in the forest, and is working on placing Green Mountain Prose Poem. She has several other books in progress.

Amy Wiggins grew up on a soggy island near Seattle. She went away to Chicago for college, saw that it was flat, and returned to Seattle. She now works as a nanny and consultant.

Kristin Fouquet captures images from her beloved city of New Orleans. She has a collection of short stories available now through Rank Strangers Press.

Lynn Kinsey lives on a thirty-thousand-acre Colorado ranch (owned by a rich businessman from Texas) with her cowboy husband, three small children, two cats, 10 fish (one almost dead five still alive), and five horses. She is an avid reader, writer, and loves being a recluse. She is working towards her MFA in creative writing so she can buy her own thirty-thousand-acre ranch some day. "Social interaction for me is chatting with the cashier at Wal-Mart once a month."

Sarah R. Bloom is a fine art photographer living outside Philadelphia, Pa. with her daughter and a husband she imported from England. Her work has appeared in and around the Philadelphia area including The Art of the State show in Harrisburg in 2008. She began taking self-portraits in August of 2006 and began a project to take a daily self-portrait for a year (she did it for two years), and has cultivated the self-portrait as her primary (but by no means only) format for communicating her art. Sarah's website, "Sad and Beautiful World," is @ www.sadandbeautiful.com

Richard Godwin's story "Chemical" is due to be published shortly in hard copy in the anthology "Back in 5 Minutes" by Little Episodes Publishers, which will be on sale at bookshops and also through Amazon. His play "The Cure-All," in which a group of confidence tricksters use the New Age to fleece their venal customers, has been produced on the London stage and his stories have been published in various magazines. You can find them at A Twist of Noir, Disenthralled, Gloom Cupboard, Word Catalyst, Future Earth, Danse Macabre, and South Jersey Underground, among others. You can follow Richard online @ <http://twitter.com/stanzazone>.

Len Kuntz lives on a lake in rural Washington State with an eagle and three pesky beavers. His short fiction appears in over forty lit journals at also at lenkuntz.blogspot.com. He's currently at work on a novel.

Lucian Stanculescu's work can be found @ <http://negativefeedback.deviantart.com/>

Christoffer Habter's work can be found @ <http://habter.deviantart.com/>

Michael J. Solender spends too much time wishing he knew then what he knows now. He blogs here: <http://notfromhereareyou.blogspot.com/>

Chad Redden currently lives in Indianapolis, Indiana where he attends IUPUI. His blog is Box of Rocks <http://chadredden.blogspot.com>.

Wayne Scheer's "Revealing Moments" is available as a free download at <http://pearnoir.com/thumbscrews.htm>

Tomas Moniz lives, writes, and plays in northern California.

Andrew Bowen's work has appeared or is forthcoming in Prick of the Spindle, Nanoism, elimae, The Legendary, decomP, Wrong Tree Review, Metazen, Pic Fic, and Bartleby-Snopes. He is founder of Divine Dirt Quarterly.

Matt Mok lives in New Hampshire, but spent his formative years in Queens, New York. He is a freelance goblin bounty hunter who spends his spare time free-climbing bell towers, running with wolf packs, and fabricating fantastic lies about himself.

Susan Gee blogs at concreteandflowers.blogspot.com.

William Lange lives in Minnesota, where he studies Creative Writing, at Concordia University.

Louise Norlie's publications have appeared in Sein und Werden, decomP, otoliths and elsewhere. Her writing will also be included in the Quantum Genre on the Planet of the Arts anthology from Crossing Chaos Enigmatic Ink. Meanwhile, she has been putting in her time in a bureaucratic cubicle where she shuffles papers and pushes buttons deep within the belly of a large building. Visit her apathetically maintained blog at louise-norlie.blogspot.com.

Tres Crow has been writing for nearly his whole life and has recently had three of his stories published, in Down in the Dirt, AscentAspirations, and on Metalsucks.net. He is also the author of the blog Dog Eat Crow World.

Paul D. Brazill was born in Hartlepool, England and lives in Bydgoszcz, Poland. He has had stories in A Twist Of Noir, Beat To A Pulp, Blink Ink and other such classy joints. He can be found stalking <http://pdbrazill.blogspot.com>.

Miss Alister's mind is erased every night. Each day begins with a recorded briefing of her particulars. She records her retrogression at www.missalister.wordpress.com.

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Archives

Taking Half
by Lynn Kinsey

Half of it had vanished when she got back. No apologies. The other half—stored in a dirty garage with cockroaches and big black water bugs feeding on it, making their home there, reading her bank statements with laughter. Family. When one leaves them the utmost personal things, the eyes shouldn't speak back, 'Sure, I'll take care of it,' when they lie. The half that is gone, broken into fourths, eighths, even sixteenths, sitting in their homes, making new friends with their furniture. The glass coffee table adorning her mother's living room had forgotten he was hers.

It had been beautiful sitting in her old apartment—clean and covered with beautiful picture books; now it was covered in thick layers of dust, dog hair, and the occasional piece of poop. Half. It is like half of a life. Half of everything she had worked so hard to attain. A quarter sold, a quarter borrowed, the other half rotting. Half of her memories, with brown, sickly throbbing eggs waiting to hatch.

Their eyes—they lied. They picked her up from the airport—no, it wasn't that way. They didn't come to the

airport. She called. No one answered. 8:47 pm. She called again—different number—the aunt said it was too icy and they didn't want to risk a wreck. Standing there, frozen but hot with fever, not believing what she was hearing. Family. She stood there, looking at the airport cart filled with things that weren't broken up by half. All she had left. She looked at the man; he smiled. She felt dizzy.

“Can I get your bags, M'am?” he asked with a head full of blindingly white teeth and a Nigerian accent. He would drive her forty-five miles to...can't remember. Where is home? If half is gone, and the other half is rotting, where is home? No apartment—she should never have gone. They didn't understand, and it was a risk they weren't willing to take. The fake smiles and hugs. The conversation that only mattered to them. She was a stranger now. They didn't know her anymore. They didn't want to *really* know her. They were comfortable with her things, at least half of them—and they only wanted half of her.

Fevered thoughts wandered back to the woman on the carefully scrubbed sidewalk. She had liked the dog.

“Wie süß,” the smiling old woman said in a thick accent as she pointed at the little dog.

“Danke! Sie heist Bese,” she thanked the woman, mustering up her best German.

“Ah! Sie sind nicht Deutche?” the old woman inquired, unsure of where she was from.

“Nein, ich bin Amerikanerin, aus Texas,” she offered with big Texas pride.

Old squiggly eyebrows, lids, and eyes slowly drooped to a scowl as she turned on her heel and walked away. Half of her breath went with the old woman, leaving an awkward shame in its stead.

The little dog sniffed at the grass, and then up at the air as the woman was almost out of sight. It looked up at her, innocently.

The other half of her soul.

The Beginning of Ever After

By Annabelle Baptista

Fran tried to think in practicalities, about what to do once it....regarding work. The rain danced around until it caught up to the continuous stream of her thoughts.

“So much for happy endings,” she shouted as she tore down the street.

After a mile, she slowed her pace, Provident hospital, now, out of sight. A coffee shop materialized further down on the right with a large neon star. She decided to go in and wait out the downpour.

It wasn't like it was something anyone could observe. Even her brain grappled to grasp the implosion of molecular cells. There would always be before the rubber cords full of latex powder. Before the whirl of the blood test machine. She attempted to put on a mask; adjust her vision, stiffen her upper lip, which ached from trembling, while she cried and screamed, but all that had been washed away. In the rain, she looked like everyone else.

Inside, she ordered a Chai tea and took it upstairs, where the ancient heater clanked as loud as a prisoner with a

tin cup. She ignored it and took her seat. Lost in thought she rubbed the stenciled star on the flimsy paper cup. Everyone was either tuned in or online. Rain existed as mere ambience. When she looked up, a dishwater-eyed chocolate man in golfing plaids was staring. He smiled, and she felt electrified by his slightly crooked teeth. She could not pull her eyes away, as he halved the distance between them.

"You know everyone thinks they are alone, but they aren't really," he said, his finger tapping the corner of the table.

"I know, but I actually enjoy it," Fran said, feeling as if her diagnoses were written on her face. Her words were hollow, but she hoped they would get rid of him.

"You don't have to talk, just listen."

His wiry goatee sparkled with oil, his lips were cherry red, and the whites of his eyes looked painted in. She wondered if he were real as he talked about the secrets of the stars. He spoke for about twenty minutes, he was still standing when a waiter came over and asked her if she were being disturbed. She caught her breath and said, "No", but the spell was broken.

Embarrassed, she fumbled in her coin purse, "Here, here's a dollar", as an afterthought, she said, "It's all I have."

He smiled and pushed the money aside, "It's not all you have."

Then he went back to the table where he had been sitting, and retrieved the paper mache hat propped on the chair.

"We are all composed of stars, that is your power. You are made of stars," he said, flourishing his arms to the room, and then he was gone. Everyone now was chattering, snickering, attempting to make eye contact.

Fran rubbed the cup's stenciled star. Her voice cracked and her eyes became liquid as she whispered, "Thank-you."

Something Old, Something New

by Matt Mok

Sarah's feet were sore, bare, and dirty. The pumps that had made her slow and uncomfortable had been discarded a few blocks back. She would rest, if only for a few minutes. The ancient sofa felt like a plush pillow, enveloping her in comfort as she sank into its folds.

"See anything you like?"

She looked up, hadn't even noticed the man until now. He smiled and gestured towards the items displayed on the foldout tables. He did not seem to notice or care that she was not wearing typical yard sale attire. The fabric and lace of her virginal white dress was stained with sweat and grass, ruined, never to be worn again.

"Do you like the sofa?" he asked. "Fifty dollars. You'll have to haul it yourself though. Do you have a truck?"

Sarah shook her head. "I like it though."

"Maybe something else then."

Sarah got up and followed him to the tables even though she had no money. Strolling between the mini-aisles of secondhand wares, she stopped at the sight of a blender and picked it up. It was a metallic silver, spartan and shimmering, liked the one they selected in their registry.

"That one's fifteen," the man said.

There was a sound of tires on gravel. Sarah looked behind her to see the stretch limo, decorated in balloons and streamers, pulling over onto the side of the road.

"Crap."

She placed the blender down. "Thanks for the seat," she said to the man, smiling, hiked up her dress and ran. The grass under her toes felt wet, the ground cold. Sarah was still exhausted, the tight bodice cutting off her circulation when she needed it the most, but as she ran she felt something stir inside of her--something that she hadn't felt in a very long time.

It felt like freedom.

Needing the Crew

by Susan Gee

Sam looked out across the empty stage and into the auditorium. He popped a piece of liquorish in his mouth, and chewed. The room was spotless and cold. In an hour it would filled with sweaty carcasses cavorting around, arms out stretched adoringly.

Sam had been a roadie for five years. He had seen it all. Last month he'd been stuck on a job with a bunch of amateurs and sycophants. He had kept his head down and got through it. This crew were alright though. When you were living in each other pockets and breathing in each other's farts every night, it helped to get along.

This was the part that Sam hated, the hanging around. He liked to be busy. He liked the fact that he hadn't slept properly for 2 weeks. When he hit the pillow it was like being shot through the head with a gun, out cold.

It was when he was waiting around that his mind started racing. He thought about Sophie. She'd said he was running away. But the job was probably what attracted her to him; the so-called glamorous life. Sam didn't ask to have a baby, he said to himself. He was still with her. They were still officially together. He had not left her; I am a good person, he thought as he gave an involuntary shiver.

Sam could hear the caterers lugging some cases of bottles down the corridor. The noise of their feet and the clinking of the glass dissolved into the thick walls of the auditorium. Sam looked out onto the blank white room. He thought he could hear the snuffling of a baby, the gentle click of its tongue, and melodious mumbling of its soft voice. Sam looked around at the floor underneath the empty chairs. The gentle swish of the baby grew louder along the floor. The taste of the liquorish in his mouth was sharp and pungent, as a bead of sweat trickle down his back.

The quietness of the room seemed to implode. Sam felt like the air was pushing down from above. The air felt thick like marmalade, Sam took sharp breaths to get some air. A door slammed behind stage and echoed around the room. Then a tiny squeal like a pin pulling out of balloon, the tiny cry of a baby. Somewhere underneath the endless rows of chairs that stretched in front of him like grave-stones he heard the padding of hands and feet.

“Sound check in fifteen mate?” Jim shouted from behind the drums.

“Yeah,” Sam said turning around and looking at him.

“You alright mate? You look like you’ve seen a ghost?” Jim asked.

“Yeah, we’re all good here. Ready to go,” Sam replied with a frozen grin.

Sam pulled out the mobile phone out of his pocket. Five bars. He dialled.

“Sam? I thought you weren’t allowed to phone?” Sophie said excitedly.

“Well, they changed the rule.” He replied.

“It’s Daddy on the phone!” she squealed loudly. “We’ve missed you,” she added quietly.

“Yeah. I, just phoning to say I’ve got a few days off next week. I could get the train,” Sam said, scratching his chin.

“Oh Sam! I’m so happy. He’s changed Sam. We can’t wait to see you.” Her voice squealed down the phone.

“Yeah ok. I’ve got to go.” He said switching off the phone and taking a deep breath.

Sam looked around at the empty auditorium. There was no sound. The double doors grinned at him as he adjusted the microphone.

Sunflowers

by Jessamyn Johnston Smyth

A beautiful couple appears on your doorstep bearing sunflowers for you to plant, for no reason. They look fresh from the Garden; haloes of light surround them. The man’s laugh draws hummingbirds, your dog finds him delicious. The woman is leggy and graceful, yellow crowned and abundant with seed. They only stay a little while—they have a truck full of flowers to deliver—but they leave imprints in your chairs.

Breathing Deeply

by Amy Wiggins

He brought out the worst in her.

“This is hard, Gary. I feel terrible but I have to tell you. At the wedding in Portland last week I kissed a groomsman. We were both drunk but that doesn’t excuse it.” Claire hoped that Gary would break up with her.

“I thought the wedding was in Vancouver.” Gary craned his neck, looking for an accident on the congested highway ahead.

“No Portland. We’re going to my family reunion in Vancouver in August.” Suddenly Claire remembered what they were talking about. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes I heard you.” His tone was dangerous and she awaited his next words eagerly.

“Remember when you got the flu last year and missed my office Christmas party? I hooked up with the receptionist that night. We were drunk too.”

“You hooked up with Kim?” Kim permed her hair and wore dark lip liner. Her dress that night was undoubtedly tight and nylon, and the thought of Gary’s hands in her big tacky hair while Claire watched Oprah reruns and vomited Sprite was infuriating. “Why Kim?”

“God Claire, I don’t know, it was a long time ago.” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel along to the Beach Boys as though nothing had happened. She wanted to kill him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why did you kiss the groomsman?”

“Fuck you Gary.” She was ready to fight.

Gary and Claire had met in a bar. Even intoxicated Claire wasn’t particularly impressed: Gary was shorter than the men she usually dated and his glasses didn’t fit his face. But why not, she thought, enjoying the unsteadiness of the barstool. She laughed at his stories and touched a long scratch on his arm gently. He told her about taking his new kitten to the vet to get fixed, and she said she’d never seen one break before. It was a bad joke, and when he laughed anyway she knew for sure that he liked her.

The air conditioning in Gary’s car was broken. Claire was sweating and Gary’s face was lobster red, which made her hate him even more. “Jesus Claire you cheated on me last week and I can’t be upset?”

“You cheated on me at Christmas with an ugly whore. A fat ugly whore.” She hoped the comment was emasculating; she wanted to hurt him before they reconciled. She wished they were in a kitchen so she could throw a plate at the wall.

“You wanted to break up.”

“And you gave me that ugly purple scarf. I bet Kim picked it out.”

“You wouldn’t talk to me. Here’s the problem.” They crawled past a red Taurus that had crashed into the guardrail and two police cars with their lights flashing. Traffic picked up.

When Gary had offered to walk Claire home from the bar that night, she accepted. It was a warm night and they held hands. “Look at the stars,” she said. “There’s the Big Dipper.” When they came to her door he put his arms around her waist. Oh great, she thought, but it was too late. When he kissed her she kissed him back, breathing deeply and holding his stubbly face in her hands.

He called her two days later. She agreed to dinner apprehensively, but Gary told her she was beautiful and made bad puns like her dad. She reminded herself that she could always end things if she ever met someone else.

Gary parked in front of Claire’s apartment.

“Kim’s a slut,” she said, to emphasize her point one more time. If they were in the kitchen she would slowly put down her last plate.

“I know.” Gary touched her shoulder cautiously and she leaned toward him over the gearshift. He was a good guy. She put her hands on his flushed cheeks, pulled him in closer, and kissed him.

Options

by Jeffrey S. Callico

He could go ahead and die or he could stay alive and die later. He could sit in his chair and think about dying and wonder what it would be like or he could watch the television and its plethora of nothingness and wonder what it would be like if it died instead and left him alive without television. Would he die from lack of televised life? Would he survive the potentially horrible onslaught of his living state being invaded by the extreme nothingness that the lack of television would effect inside him? If he died right now would that fucking television switch to all its available channels or simply turn itself off without saying another word? There's no real answer for this; there's no answer for anything.

The Book of Jokes & Stories

by Ben Loory

Two men get together to write a book. After a while, they get into a fight.

You always turn everything into a joke, one says. Why can't you ever just write a story?

Are you kidding? says the joke-man. Why can't you just write a joke?

The story-writer glares at him in silence.

Wait a minute, he suddenly says, wait a god damn minute! I think I might actually see a way around it.

Oh yeah? says the joke-man. And what way would that be?

No more writing together! comes the answer. From now on, we write apart-- we write a book called Jokes & Stories. You write one half, I the other, then we put 'em together.

It's perfect! yells the joke-man. What a great idea! I can't believe I didn't think of it before!

Then you'll do it? says the story-writer.

Of course! the joke-man says. This is exactly the collaboration I've been looking for!

So the two go off and work alone, for many, many months, and then one day they meet back at the office. They walk in, and shake hands, and exchange manuscripts, and then they sit and read for hours and hours.

One man laughs and laughs; the other cries and cries.

It's wonderful! they both say. It's perfect!

They send it to the publisher, who rushes it to print.

Everybody loves the book.

No one knows both halves are the same.

Carpe Scrotum

by Mike Whitney

"Future not bad at all," Half man, half machine Mongo glanced over his shoulder and ducked as the attacking pterodactyl swooped low, missing a clean-and-jerk loin cloth snatch by inches. "Beats past big time. Past like this suck most of time, either bored or scared out of loin cloth."

The pterodactyl was circling, looking for another run, even without the element of surprise. Mongo flipped him the bird, which was a first both for flipping the bird as well as flipping the bird at a bird, moreover, a bird whose name in Greek means "winged finger." Mongo grunted at the hat trick: a finger extended meaning the "bird" at a bird or winged reptile whose name means "winged finger". Lost in self admiration for his chip-enhanced word play, the Cro-Magnon.exe stared at the endless horizon and watched in awe as the sun climbed across the sky.

Finally, from the cave came Bev's voice, tinged with impatience, "Mongo, still waiting on fire here! You want food? HUNT!"

Mongo felt a sudden intense desire to speak sharply to Bev while shaking her a little, but his brain chip implant subverted the emotion with an erotic virtual squeeze of his genitals accompanied by a female voice purring in his ear, "Carpe scrotum, Mongo!"

The flap of wings behind him, and the arriving pterodactyl, talons extended, came to a sudden stop and fell to the ground as the Cro-Borg whipped around with his club and caught the reptile a perfect shot across the head and beak. Lunch for two, some now, some for later.

either/or

by Tomas Moniz

It's already raining. The forecast calls for rain to chuck down for days. It's a hard rain. Heavy and constant. My coffee is weak. Scrimping on beans. Too broke to buy more. Cut the scoops in half, you taught me. You argued it's better like that, better than my theory of using the grounds twice. Once used, something can't be used again, you proffered. I tested it. You're true. I need to leave soon to work, but today is my deadline. Can I go on living like this? Broke's not the problem; the problem is everything else. Small rooms. The comingled smell of you and I, acrid, biting. Entangled bikes in the hallway. I stand, sipping, looking at the hallway leading to the front-door. If there were a fire, there'd be no way out. Two bikes don't fit in small spaces. I taught you that. But when you have no other choice, you have nothing else to do, so you do what you know is wrong. I'm exhausted of doing that. That's surviving, not living. I choke down the coffee. I've never been able to find the balance between just a splash of cream or a dash of sugar. Get it wrong, it's too creamy. Or worse, too sweet. I know what I need to do, but I don't want to. I know that something once used can't be used again, and small spaces are meant for only one thing. I draw the conclusions. I face the facts. I put the coffee mug down. I bundle up. Grab my keys, wallet, phone. I put them all in the front pouch of my hoodie and squirm into my vinyl raincoat. Joggle my bike from yours with two shakes and a push of the pedals. I slink out the door. I say nothing to you about leaving. Down two flights of stairs, out on to Genoa. I usually bike the side streets. Avoid the main ones like MLK or Shattuck. But today, fuck it. I trudge through the wet street and ride hard over the speed bumps and hit MLK. I already squish rain in my socks. I bike madly taking up the whole lane. Cars beep, some cut close to my body, others give me a wide berth. I feel arrogant, defiant. I cut a figure, sitting up straight on the bike. Spread my arms. Let the rain slosh and sluice me. Let it come. I stop. It's now or never. I will call you now. I will tell you the things I learned and the meanings I found. I reach for my phone. I flip it up. And find a dead black screen. I shake it. I punch the on button. The off button. Repeat again and again. I put it back. I can't decide: either go forward or return home. I know there is something to learn. I know you'd have an idea as to what it is. But this time, I will come to my own conclusions.

MemScape, 3rd Generation

by Tres Crow

There they are on the grass, Father and Baby. Light tinkles down through leaves and speckles the grass, the blanket, Baby's face. Above there are cotton-ball clouds, the type that used to make Father so happy he'd feel like a water balloon bobbing from the faucet, filled with all those thoughts that now seemed so naïve and youthful, to him. But he doesn't see the clouds, only feels them in the breaks of sunlight.

He sees Baby and looks sorrowful, worried. Baby sees Father too; he sees his eyes and his mouth, nose and beard, which make up Father. His Father. Love is the word for his feelings but only because there are no better words. Even now there are no better words for love than 100 years ago, or 100 years before that when Keats tried so hard to invent more. But Baby's love is more like a warm sheet covering head to toe, inside and outside, a comfort and safety so thorough that Baby writhes and kicks with the pleasure of it, when Father looks at him, when he sees him. His Father.

And he sees him, and reaches out a hand to touch Baby's cheek. One more time. It is soft and cool from the slight breeze of the afternoon, he knows because he remembers. Baby grins wide, his teeth like jack-o-lanterns, his fists clenching and unclenching with the ecstasy and the pleasure of being, which fills him. Father reaches out his hand to touch. One last time. He knows what comes next.

The scene wobbles. Splotches of missing pixels bloom across Baby's face then expand, dark stars chewing away the world. The third dimension flattens and Father is pulled from the MS3g into the darkness of his flat.

Outside there are no cotton-ball clouds; there is only rain spitting against the glass. He is alone; no memory can take that away from him. It's been two years, which is not long enough to forget. He presses play again and then they are there on the grass, Father and Baby, and he reaches out one more time.

Linda's First Day

by Louise Norlie

Her parents called her Linda and when her mother dressed her and took her to school the children called out her name, Linda...look, it's Linda...there's Linda...in the same way they loved to give names to the goldfish, the stuffed clown, and what color things were. When bringing her to school her mother never stopped holding her hand. Here's Linda, her mother whispered to the teacher although her mother knew she could hear everything. Her mother tried to hide the movements of her lips with the back of her hand. My sweet little Linda, her mother meanwhile said, stroking her hair with long hard fingers. The girl felt it was a conspiracy of sorts, one in which only she could break the spell. But she didn't know how.

In the cafeteria the children rolled the new knowledge with their tongues: see down there, there's Linda at the end of the bench, Linda's here among us. While she ate she thought that this is Linda eating, and when she sat in her chair at the little tables for five, pressing down her crayon until it imprinted a solid waxy shine, she thought that here was Linda in the place of a student. The other children had names, but none as arbitrary as hers. Could things even be called Linda? The clock, the floor, the walls – might they be a Linda in disguise?

At night she couldn't breathe and her clothes were heavy. She peeled them off like banana skins. There was only the dimmest light to go by. Her reflection was reddish in the mirror, shadowed with hovering glints of grey. She put trembling hands over her face, covering it but still leaving open a crack to see. It was so horrible to see Linda peering through her eyes. And worse than anything, Linda knew that she knew.

Half-Apple

by Richard Godwin.

He knew he had been there. Like a smell. Redolent of roses only he knew.

Where though? Where this botany of the Soul?

But how to find him?

He told his key worker Claire how he knew the house, knew there was a pond with a statue of Hermes in a small garden at the back.

“That was breaking and entering, Mike, and you really frightened the old lady.”

What had first struck her was the mother’s shape and the gait of her walk. And the hands, thick, plump, coarse hands quite unlike Mike’s.

She asked Peter what he made of Mike’s strange obsession.

“That he’s only a half person? You’re outside your remit.”

“What if Mike’s right?”

“That he had a twin brother?”

“Yes.”

“It’s got nothing to do with us. He has a very fragile mental condition.”

Michael hated his mother’s questions.

“Why are you so thin, Michael?”

“Just am.”

* * *

That night, when she put his tray in front of him, he spat out his first mouthful as soon as she had left the room and scraped the rest of it into the plastic bag he had earlier stuffed into his pocket.

And afterwards, in the still silence still talking, he heard it.

“I was here.”

He would go back.

And all was how it had been forever.

Turning slowly, watching every creak in the darkened hallway he passed them, the two pillars, two identical darkly sculpted lion’s heads as he ascended the stairs, the two large mirrors.

He stopped there for a while, all time frozen.

Broken only by the heavy slow consoling hand of the grandfather clock in the hallway downstairs, stroking his mind.

And so he found it. The room. His room. Empty. Bed, chairs, all things intact. Were they preserving it for his return?

He fed on this and left.

“Why don’t you look at me, Michael?” she said, so often, so slyly.

“I don’t want to.”

It hung there in the disconnectedness of how they spoke, between them like a caul over their heads. But not hers.

She did not look at him, either, he thought.

Even the word seemed strange to him at times, like a stone he could not chew, like some thorn in his food.

“Mother.”

The images were more intense now. Not his. But he knew them. Knew this secret form of communication no one had taught him.

The key lay in the house, whose every creak and smell acted like an echo to who he was. He was becoming him. Himself. And always had been.

“Find me,” he said, “find me.”

He rolled on thoughtwise the silver light of moonshine guided him up the stairs so he smelt blood. Of whose?

“Infantile splitting, adolescent withdrawal, possible hallucinations, do you know what you’re dealing with, Claire?”

“I know what I feel when—”

“The kid’s borderline schizophrenic and you are certainly not helping him with all this. I want you off this case.”

At the top of the stairs he saw her.

She froze when he entered her field of vision. Froze as the past took hold.

“What are you doing here?”

“Looking for him.”

She led him back downstairs and into the large room on the right. Pictures of him.

Mike started to sweat. Small shooting sensations burst across him and fled outwards hotly, leaving trails of perspiration on him.

“You were separated at birth. Your mother couldn’t have you—either of you.”

“My mother?”

“Not her—no! Not her!”

He waited for her to continue, sensing he was on the verge of witnessing the disclosure his sanity had always demanded.

All around him him. The other one. Him again. He felt momentarily whole before the old hollowness returned. What had he lost?

He wanted to wail.

“She—that woman. I’m sorry, I know she brought you up. She adopted you. “This,” going over to a draw, rummaging, making him wait, making him lean physically in time in his waiting till he could feel himself creaking at the seams, then “this is your birth mother,” handing him a small picture of a woman’s face. “I’m sorry, that’s all I’ve got.”

The connection was immediate.

A young face, unworldly but scarred somehow. Pale sapphire eyes. A look he knew and recognised.

“You mustn’t blame her. She was just a girl. Beautiful. Such delicate hands. Could never have coped with you.”

“What was my brother called?”

“James.”

“Where is he?”

“Michael, please.”

“What?”

“He’s dead.”

“When?”

“A year ago. On the South Coast.”

Around the time it started. The year they had holidayed there.

“How did he—?”

“He,” she paused, “fell. From a cliff. It would have been instant. You should speak to your—mother. She saw you both, when she adopted you. She pointed at you. I remember what she said, ‘That one is perfect, there’s something wrong with the other on’.”

He told Claire.

When she began her search at the records office, she hoped it would lead her to a dead-end. But she found it: a second birth certificate proving, once and for all, that Abigail Stuart, Mike’s birth mother, had indeed given birth to twins: identical weights.

She phoned Mrs Cox and mentioned Mrs Pommeray to her.

“She knew of James. Don’t trust her, don’t believe a word she says.”

She went back.

They sat in the veiled darkness.

The hands again, turning slowly. Eyes avoiding her.

“What do you want?” she said.

“I need to find out if Michael is delusional, in which case he needs treatment, or whether there is indeed some truth to what he is claiming.”

There was no answer.

The tea tasted of almonds.

She watched the hands, motionless. One placed upon the other. Waiting.

“Do you know, Mrs Pommeray, if Michael had a twin at birth?”

“No.”

She returned home, followed by the hands, plump and lazy, moving slowly in her mind, her stomach knotted.

She threw up blood at her flat where she failed to get to the telephone to warn Michael.

He knew he had little time.

"I've made your supper, Michael," she told him, stopping him at the door.

"I'm going out."

A full unbroken and perfect moon shone overhead.

He walked away down the road inside himself.

Walked towards his other half.

A Good Deed

By Wayne Scheer

Hector lay on the sidewalk, covered in blood. He opened his eyes and felt dizzy and nauseous, but surprisingly little pain. His heart pounded and he tried to call out, but he only managed coughing sounds.

"Stay still, buddy," a male voice spoke. "I chased away that crazy homeless bastard and called 911. You're gonna be okay."

Hector tried remembering what had happened. Something about recycled cans and newspapers. And a knife. Nothing made sense. He struggled to get up, but the same voice put a hand on his shoulder.

"Easy there," the man said.

Hector wanted to knock the hand away, but he didn't have the strength. He fell back on the ground.

The next thing he knew, he was being put on a stretcher and carried into an ambulance. He hurt more now, stabbing pains in his side and leg. "You're lucky." He heard a different voice. "The wounds are superficial. But you lost a lot of blood."

"Wife," Hector mumbled.

"Officer Greenfield notified your wife, Mr. Garza. She'll meet us at the hospital. He's still at the scene taking statements."

His clothes were torn open, exposing white bandages. An IV drip was attached to his arm. The pain subsided a bit. Blankets were placed over him.

He tried talking, but his tongue wouldn't move. He remembered a sleeping man jolting up and attacking him with a knife. Why couldn't he remember more? Where was his wife?

Hector tried taking an inventory of his life, recalling his name, address, telephone number, his wife's name, her cellphone number. He remembered where he worked, the phone number and extension of his office, his secretary's name. Today is Saturday, he thought, September 21. He had two children, Barry and Emily, nine and seven. His life came back to him, but how he ended up on the sidewalk bleeding remained unclear.

"You're doing just fine, Mr. Garza. We're almost there."

The ambulance pulled into the hospital and he was wheeled towards glass doors that opened as he approached. Just like on television. People shouted orders. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, his wife was holding his hand. He could see her tears. "I love you," she said.

"I...love...you," he whispered, surprised he could move his tongue.

It all came back to him in a flash. He was driving to the recycling center when he saw a homeless man sleeping beside a shopping cart full of cans. He thought he'd do the man a favor and leave the bags of cans and papers for him. The man jumped up, thinking he was stealing his cart.

"No!" he shouted, when he saw the knife.

But none of it mattered now as he squeezed his wife's hand.

The Glass Girls of Juarez

by Chad Redden

Pepe comes from neighborhood in El Paso where you can see lights of Juarez creep across the border fence at night. When he lived there, he used to go across the border into Juarez to an old meat packing building that had been remodeled. The building became a series of hallways with closet sized rooms along them. If the doors were unlocked you could go into the rooms, but there was only enough space to stand. The rest of the closet sized room was a glass wall covered with a shade. There was a box you put quarters in. Once you put a quarter into the box, a woman on the other side of the glass would raise the shade up a little for a minute per quarter.

Pepe told me, "You put twenty-five cents for the legs, wey, twenty-five cents for the ass, twenty -five cents for the breasts, another twenty-five cents and wey, they put themselves against the glass while you put yourself against the glass." He laughed and then said, "I will take you there, wey, we will take the large sacks of quarters... you will like it."

"Hey, wey, this one time," Pepe told me, "I went to that building, found this one room and went inside. I put in a four quarters and I saw this girl...her face...she was just one eye and a nose. She tried to hide her missing parts with long hair. I just kept putting the quarters in wey...all the quarters...I couldn't stop looking."

Ham and Ryan

by Paul D. Brazill

The words of a Bessie Smith song stumbled through Ham's brain as he stripped to the waist in the morning dew and started to dig. With little effort, he hurled Ryan's scrawny corpse into the grave and then paused for a moment to light a cigar and reflect on the day's events.

As ham watched the spectres of smoke drift upwards he considered his predicament. The money that he'd taken from his former partner's moleskin wallet was a nice little bonus and not to be sneezed at, but he was still none the wiser as to where Ryan had stashed the rest of the loot from the bank job.

This, he mused as he picked up the rusty shovel, was one of those rare moments where it was, indeed, difficult to decide whether the glass was half full or half empty.

The end.

The Sound

By Meghan Lamb

Helen wakes to a piercing sound. She straightens in her chair and rubs against the rifle. The barrel's cold and smooth against her cheek. For a moment, she pretends it's porcelain, looking at the plate upon the mantle. Blue willow china Mother gave her for the wedding. Her husband placed it in its wooden frame beside the mirror, hoping to remind her of her Eastern home. He didn't come so far to keep an empty house.

He tried to give her something to protect. He bought glass windows and a quilt to hang against the door. He taught her how to hold the gun before he left, bending her hands around the base with his own. His own rough hands around hers felt like wooden roots that made the weapon safe. It seemed a part of him just as the plate was part of her. But now, without his hands, it feels heavy, still feels foreign, and if someone entered she'd be too afraid to use it.

That sound is not the wind. Tonight the wind is silent. Its moaning coils under crevices, sheltering itself in every space that will receive it. The prairie soil is pregnant with the wind sound. When she listens, she can almost feel it rattling below.

Her ears gape open, gathering what warmth they can. She hears the dying embers and the breathing of the dog that sleeps beside her. His own ears flick contentedly. She pats his head, imagining the sound comes from a wolf. It's growing louder now. It has almost reached the door.

She thinks, be ready, and she shifts the gun into position. It presses hard against her shoulder, and she feels as though she's being held in place. But then, she hears a knock upon the door. "Helen, can you open for me? My arms are full."

She opens the door to receive her husband. He carries a bundle of burlap bags. "Enough to last til the end of winter," he says. She smiles, but not as broadly as she'd like to. Something's changed about him. He seems much larger than before. His eyes seem darker. When he kisses her, his beard is cold and damp with sweat. His hair is also longer. She'd cut to just below his ears before he left, and now it almost blends into his chin.

"You look a fright," she tells him, meaning just to tease about his beard. But real fear reveals itself in her voice.

Outside, the sound seems to have faded. Perhaps it too has found a shelter underground. She feels something shiver from within the walls, rising as though ready to attack.

His Last Tour

By Michael J. Solender

His last tour lasted 14 months. He promised his mom and his wife he'd come back in one piece and he did. All the parts were in working order and his little girl even recognized him at the homecoming at the base.

They didn't see what he'd left over there, it wasn't immediately apparent.

His buddy's hand on his shoulder one minute and his guts in his lap in the next. The little Iraqi kids whose makeshift pushcart found the IED before his unit could sweep the road. The families who lived in squalor, begging him for food. He left all that there on his last tour.

Each day over there didn't transpire without taking a small piece of him with it. Every day, another chunk of his soul. He could feel himself being hollowed out, bit by bit, eaten alive by this ugly wars silent termites.

He may have looked like he was whole when he came back, but he felt like he was only half the man he once was.

Smith & Wesson

by William Lange

We are all made the same. Some of us are just built for a different purpose. The ones closest to us often finish in the same place in life. My brother and I grew up wanting to be in the military. We were the youngest of all of our family members. Our great-grandfather was in the First World War.

He never made it back home.

We figure he is somewhere in a filled in trench, forgotten by everybody except for us. His son, our grandfather shared the same fate. We assume that he is in the murky waters close to the Beaches of Normandy.

No one knows exactly where.

He never made it back home.

Our uncle was in the Vietnam War. He and my dad were separated, my uncle was sent out without my dad. His job was to kill the enemy and did so, but it cost him his life and now lies somewhere in the Vietnamese forest.

He did what he was made for.

He never made it back home.

My dad spent years waiting in the dark until he was called to action, sent to the Middle East. His officers wondered if he was too old to go overseas. Before they could decide, his serviced were needed and he was shipped away. Like his brother and father, he was destined to be left on foreign soil.

He never made it home.

My brother and I were made for war. We were bigger faster and stronger than anyone else. There were high expectations of us. We were the new model. Compared to our grandfather, my brother and I were twice the size and twice as efficient. Few things could stop us. Once the war with Afghanistan began, we knew we would get our chance to do what we had been made for.

When the shipment order came in, we knew it was only a matter of time before we would lie to rest like our elders or have the chance at coming back. We arrived in solid numbers. We were dropped with a parachuted in the middle of the desert. We waited all night to be picked up. With my brother next to me, we rode for miles. As the sun rose, we got ready to go out. There was a feeling that today would be the day we were made for. The years of testing and refining would pay off now. Back on the road, my brother and I were prepared for battle. The car stopped, and a sandy breeze blew by. We knew our destiny would soon play out. One by one, we were carried out of the car. Locked and loaded, we would soon fine if we really were better than the ones that came before us. With my brother by my side, we looked straight at the enemy. A deafening bang, and my brother was gone.

He never made it home

I knew I would be next...another deafening bang.

Drowning

by Andrew Bowen

I found Mathew face down, cold and ridged like a plastic doll. I had overslept because he never cried—never told me he was hungry. Rodney had to peel my arms from around my son so the paramedics could take him in a blaze of flashing red and white lights.

Rodney and I arrived at the hospital five minutes after they called it. Mathew had drowned in his blankets. I barely remember slapping the doctor's face.

The air is humid with the whimpers and tears of the congregation. I stare at Mathew's blue coffin. Sunlight ignites against the chrome. My eyes burn from sleepless nights. Rodney hooks his fingers around mine. I can't squeeze back.

Mathew would grin at me, all gums and downy glow, and cackle at nothing in particular. My insides fluttered every time he looked at me, as if a tiny stone had plunked into my soul and sent waves through me. He couldn't crawl yet, so he flailed on his stomach as if trying to swim over the carpet.

The minister's voice jars me. "Rest assured, Mathew had a guardian angel on his shoulder that night..." I close my eyes and swallow a knot expanding in my throat. I imagine an angel standing on Mathew's shoulder, pressing him into the sheets as he gasped for air, whispering sweet, holy nothings about a god too bright to see. He continues. "And now, Mathew is in heaven with our lord—an angel himself, with wings to glide above pain, worry, sorrow..."

He looks down at me. His face crumples beneath a sympathetic smile. I can't force one in return so I look away.

I glance out the window as light pours in and watch the clouds. All I see are bed sheets flowing in the wind.

My fingers curl and my nails cut into my palms. I struggle to breathe and suck in air like a series of rapid hiccups.

I picture Mathew thrashing for breath inside heaven's clouds, still unable to swim.

Mother of Pearl

by Len Kuntz

Sometimes I think I am impossible, indecent, dead, holding my breath so long like this under the tub, my husband coming into use the toilet one last time, to pluck an errant whisker whirling high up on his cheek, maybe casting a glance down at me on his way out, maybe not, who knows, I don't, he doesn't, no one does.

When I was a girl I used to dream I could swim underwater for hours, gliding all reptilian in my slime-skinned suit. Or I would dream I could fly, start of flapping first, hit the roof edge and stumble a bit but catch a burst of staccato wind and be cast heavenward. When the baby suckled my breasts I told her these type of tales, my dreams which were void of nightmares then, and she would gurgle and coo, and her warm bun of a body pressed against mine made me weak-kneed and pale, such a torture this generosity in my arms, a burden to raise it right and unmolested in a world so broken, frail and untoward. As it turned out, I worried for nothing.

After. After the first time I took one, my husband shattered the vanity mirror and screamed, "Why the bath!? Why that!?"

He has not been home in several weeks and is here only now to collect his things. I am stone to him. Worse, I am a leper. I am too-strong stench.

The lawyers come around, never together though. I have three of them. "Why so many?" my mother asks.

"Because."

"How will you afford this?"

"You don't understand," I say, and she leaves it at that, because Mother knows this is one thing I'm correct about. She will no longer meet my eyes in full and instead we move doe-si-doe, toy parts to a rickety crib mobile.

They say addictions are meant as shovels, filling up the void that is empty. Before I knew it, I was swimming in drink, floating, paddling, stroking, going under and up, chin turned in a river of topaz whiskey that would shrivel my guts, my taste buds, corrode my throat and thoughts until bliss and bloat became pagan ordeals.

I did not mean to kill anyone but myself.

What do I think? If I can hold my breath long enough, will I dissolve? Will I slide through the drain like strands of hair or worms and serpents?

I will not die, because that would not be fair. I have to survive so I can suffer.

A hand grabs my throat and pulls my head, dripping and gasping, from the air.

Mother's face is rash red.

"For Pete's sake, it was an accident," she says.

But she doesn't believe that load of crap anymore than I do.

I towel off. Even my body is betraying me, deserting me. My ribs are a xylophone, my breasts are pocket flaps with faded mother of pearl buttons, puckered and unused, unwanted, wasted, worthless.

The smell of dinner wafts into the room and assaults my stomach but when I go to heave, all that comes out is foul-smelling breath, not even air so much as toxic gas.

In the morning I drive. Miles and miles, blurs and trees and trucks and trains.

I stop at the old house on the hill. I knock on the door. The grandmother living there now seems started and suspicious, but I tell her I won't take long.

It's a shock to see the tree fort standing because I really didn't expect it. A pang, a penny-nicking-a-kettle pang, reverberates in me and I recognize it the way you do a fraud, this pang of hope.

Rainfall makes footing slippery so I'm cautious as I take my way up. Inside the fort, it smells like waterlogged wood, pine, sap. I can see the ground through the slits in the boards.

In the corner is where I would imagine and invent. My dad called me a tomboy, a rare compliment. He said I would never make much of myself because I was too greedy, which is why I was fat.

But I'm not fat now. Haven't been for years. Even pregnant, I kept most of my figure. Despite lapses I've made, I'm smart enough to know what greedy really means.

I listen as the wind dances limbs against the fort like they are sharing secrets or performing a séance.

I realize there's no going back and I understand that people can't fly, but for one last time I close my eyes and I let myself believe otherwise.

Zero,zero

by Miss Alister

I barged into the nasty bar bathroom, drink in hand, coming down off acid. It was one size fits all, just a dinky sink and a dirty toilet with a fucked up woman straddling it, staring at the wall. Her dull, brown hair was matted at the back of her head and straggling wild in front, like from a nightmare of a sleep. A moth-eaten tan sweater barely stretched across her kickball belly, was buttoned wrong, all bunched up under her tits. Tatty sky blue knit pants were stretched down around her ankles. My feet froze to the floor, my hand to the doorknob, my eyes to the sight of her.

The woman began slowly to swivel her head toward me on its x-axis. I was sure if her head didn't fly off and kill me on impact, the worms that leached out of it would slap around my legs and suck me down into the piss and dirt on the floor. My traitorous eyes wouldn't shut to hide me. I was forced to watch as her head kept turning toward me until it found my y-axis and locked there at zero,zero. I braced for a bad death.

Her face was unloaded, wiped blank of everything but dried pathways that had once held tears. She didn't move her head from zero,zero. Only her downcast lashes lifted, dragging up with them leaden eyes so dark there were no pupils. My skin turned to gooseflesh in their wake as they rolled up the front of me in their sockets—hounded, forgiving, pitiful, all-knowing—like Jesus at the ninth hour, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?! And when they fastened on my eyes, I relaxed into them, and I heard her say in a low, cigarette voice, "I just gave birth."

I felt my body sacrifice its weight with an infinite sigh. My drink glass slipped from my hand and bounced in the filth. Jack Daniels and ice washed over my feet and I let loose the doorknob like breaking from rehab. I moved toward the woman to embrace her as innocence, but stopped, now cold again with fear. "Where is your baby?" I whispered, suspicious.

The woman said nothing, only held me steady in the darkness of her eyes, regarding me impersonally. Then, without warning, she let me drop. And that's when I saw it, as I fell, between her thighs...

As blameless as a baby I floated, half dead and drowning in human tissue and bloody toilet water, questioning the price, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!

