Howard Skrill's *Anna Pierrepont Series* explores the role of public monuments in the erasure of public and private memory and recently the erasure in the US of public monuments themselves. Works from the series have been published standing alone and incorporated into pictorial essays in literary and academic publications worldwide. Numerous works from the series have also been incorporated into exhibitions in Virginia, New York City and New Jersey in 2019 and will be the subject of a one person museum exhibition in 2020 in Connecticut. Howard is a long time resident of Brooklyn, New York along with his wife Mary. Brooklyn is where many of the images in the series were brought into being plein air.

Rebecca Pyle is in many journals, including *Hawai'i Review, New England Review,* and *William and Mary Review* and *Permafrost.* She has lived in Utah the past decade or two, and she is also a writer. See rebeccapyleartist.com
Contributors

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Timothy Dodd is from Mink Shoals, WV. His poetry has appeared in The Literary Review, Modern Poetry Quarterly Review, Pacific REVIEW, Ellipsis Literature and Art Review, and elsewhere. His book of short stories, Fissures, and Other Stories, was recently published by Bottom Dog Press. Also a visual artist, Tim’s most recent solo exhibition, “Come Here, Nervousness,” was held at Art Underground in Manila, Philippines, and his oil paintings can also be sampled on his Instagram page, @timothybdoddartwork. He is currently completing his MFA in creative writing at the University of Texas El Paso.

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Nathan Spoon is an autistic poet with low academic fluency whose poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Poetry, American Poetry Review, Mensa, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, The Secret, Oxford Poetry, South Carolina Review, and elsewhere. His debut collection, Doomsday Bunker, was published in 2017. He is co-editor of Querently.

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Liam Strong is a Pushcart Prize nominated queer writer and studies English at University of Wisconsin-Superior. They are the former editor of NNW Magazine. You can find their work in Unünstliche Archetype, Danvers Review, Clementine Unbound, Monday Night, IDK Magazine, The Maynard, Muddy River Poetry Review, and The 32BB Review.

Fiction

Adam Luebke’s short fiction has appeared in The Antinich Review, TSR: The Southampton Review, Flyway, and Valley Voices among others, as well as being listed as a finalist in Glimmer Train’s Fiction Open and Family Matters contests. He holds an MFA from Otis College of Art & Design and teaches English literature courses. He currently lives in South Dakota.

Isaac W Sauer works as a business analyst in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. He received his Bachelor’s degree from Eastern University in 2013 with studies in literature, politics, and philosophy. He has previously published in the Turk’s Head Review, Belle Ombré, and Affinity Cadah.

Flash Fiction

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Phillip Sterling is the author of a book of fiction, In Which Brief Stories Are Told, two collections of poetry, And Then Snow, Multiplied Storeys, and four chapbook-length series of poems: Significant Others, Quatrains, Abstraction, And for All This, Theme from Life Royale. His new book, Amateur Husbandry, is a series of micro-fiction narrated by the iconographic partner of a yellow horse, was released from Mayapple Press in November 2019.

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In those celestial explosions, one might think the night itself is tired, weary of looking down on men, women at their tables spitting words their oil burned and dried saying he cuts fingers every Wednesday evening, practically steals elegant wines — at good prices. Meat first, scraped away under invented lights. Expectations more canned than raw only starting the twinkle is that wintergreen Lifesaver crunched in his jaw not a second-hand comet once ridiculed behind glass. We are broken chemical bonds flickering for a change praying to unite once more create new stars in a dying galaxy.

Triboluminescence
By Timothy Dodd

Rathalla Review | 7
Librarian, Philosophy of a

By Liam Strong

i. What’s For Lunch, by Carle, Eric (JE CAR)

A child brushes against my shin, carrying a slew of Daniel Tiger books from the Favorite Characters section. I’d grown up witnessing firsthand the chaos of a Burger King indoor playground every Friday afternoon once my school’s half-day finished. Over a decade later, I find a similar chaos walking through the stacks of the Youth Services department at the Traverse Area District Library (TADL), in Traverse City, Michigan. Chaos under the demeanor of silence, more or less controlled. The librarians don’t shush kids anymore; the parents do it for them. Kids run. They scream, they bawl, they read. Undeniably, I was among those same ranks as a child. But I saw how the library grew. Not so much how I grew from one department to the next, rather that once I learned something, the unknown became tangibly known.

When you’re young, you adapt to familiarity, especially at the library. Like any establishment, the library hires new employees, but in the youth services department, your submission to forget becomes liminal. When you’re a child, the counter separating you from the librarian seems monolithic, though they were, and are, gentle giants behind the desk.

During a typical Sunday on Woodmere Avenue, you’d find Christopher Speare, children’s librarian, ambling about the youth services department. I shouldn’t say ambling; he’s rather quick. A short, lean man, tightly fit into jeans, tennis shoes, and usually a colorful button-up, Christopher knows where everything is. Your kid wants a graphic novel that doesn’t have any dialogue? You got it. Your kid can’t remember the title or author of a novel, but know it may have involved a dog? Either Love That Dog or Old Yeller, but, if you don’t want them to cry, check out the former.

Next to his desktop computer station, Christopher keeps two drinks: water for hydration (obviously), and a full quart glass bottle containing what looks to be a puree of leafy greens, lemonade, and dirt. Since nobody can usually conjecture a trustworthy claim, it’s better not to guess, and just ask. You might receive a series of answers, in any combination: yerba mate, kombucha, heirloom tomatoes, spinach, kale (subtract any dirt), mango, even herbs and spices. All organic. Christopher gestures to the bottles around his desk. “These are my concoctions,” he says. Since so much of a librarian’s work involves sitting behind a desk, Christopher circumvents self-vegetation by running and bicycling often. Having been a vegan for as long as he’s been working in libraries—30 years—Christopher is possibly the most agile (yet one of the oldest) librarians in the youth services department.

ii. The Wind in the Willows, by Grahame, Kenneth (J FIC GRA)

It’s fair to say, though, that Christopher intends to stay young. He agrees, likening himself to Peter Pan, imploring that he “never wanted to go to school or grow up.” In fact, it’s difficult now to look at him, his spastic hair jutting in tufts of fading red-blonde, his gift of energetic movement, his impeccable posture, and even think of the word “old.” He’s young. He’s younger than me, actually, regardless of being decades his junior. The methodology of his youthful philosophy is evident in Christopher’s mannerisms. When a fellow reference librarian had walked past, she recounted how easy going he is. The reference librarian, Vicki, squinted at Christopher with a peculiar sort of deception; they’ve been working together for the whole 30 years he has been at TADL (Christopher calls these the “halcyon days”). Vicki says, “Oh, he gets along with everyone—he’s a busybody that way, and is always willing to help. But he’s also goofy, like to clown around. And he can be difficult. Did he make the cricket noise for you?”

“The what?” I say, flicking my attention to Christopher, asking for audio proof of this with my eyes. Apparently, as Vicki claims, he can perfectly mimic the violin chirps of a cricket.

He declined.
to his wife, Petra, who frequently volunteers for library.

Before he found himself at TADL, Christopher worked in the restaurant business as the manager of a bar. He doesn’t seem to look on those times fondly. “If I had been managing a restaurant, I would have had the time to spend with Petra. But I was running the show, and that’s not something that I really relish. But I’m doing something right as a people, as humans. For the most part, at least.”

In 1989, Christopher was friends with a circulation librarian who encouraged him to apply for a position at TADL. After starting at the circulation desk, working front-and-center with patrons in the biggest public library in Northwest Michigan, just one out of a district of six public libraries supported by the district-wide millage. From there, Christopher moved to the Sight & Sound department, where he was told to find a new vocation.

Boasting, pointing at a bookshelf, but really pointing through it. “You could be across the country and I could still feel you.”

For a time, Christopher practiced shamanism. For another, Buddhism. He briefly mentioned crystals and metaphysics, yet warned me that even he didn’t want to answer questions about that, “Because, really, who wants to hear me talk about that? I’m speaking on your behalf there—you don’t want me to.”

In its simplest form, the joke acts as a question, though not like a poorly executed Jerry Seinfeld bit: “You know how there are elevators that take you up? Well, where are the down-evators?” (A pause ensues at this point. If the child places into the latter category, as many do, he will explain that, variably, what goes up, inevitably, must also go down.

In the end, an overwhelming simplicity has centralized the philosophy Christopher holds so close. “Born again Christians might hate me,” he suggests. “But if my wife and I didn’t agree on spirituality, I probably wouldn’t have this job right now. Believe what you want. Love is everything. That being said, this doesn’t really teach you how to be a librarian.” I wanted so much to dwell on just the word spirituality. In terms of the Dewey Decimal System, spirituality might range from 200 to 299, encompassing many religions (though Christianity often shoves inclusivity and pluralism from the bookends).

As he puts it, “95% of people do right 95% of the time.” Perhaps this is a very humanitarian belief. Or utilitarian, Kantian? Definitely not Kantian. Deterministic, abhorrent, nothing makes any sense. But in some bizarre equation of truth, to Christopher, we’re doing something right as a people, as humans. For the most part, at least.

The reality is that our language, though catalyzed by reading, can only do so much. Perhaps that’s what’s missing from knowing someone without knowing them at all whatsoever. Any of the children’s librarians could speak to this, too; they’ve all seen children grow up to be people that might not resemble the innocence and rapport of their younger selves. Timidly, Child-me would stare up at the youth services desk at a poofy-haired man, someone whose smile and chortle resounded through the shelves.

I wanted my parents to divorce as a child. All of my friends had divorced parents, and I wanted to be just like my friends, so I could harbor some semblance of cool. I was a terrible reader, which wields plenty of irony when I tell people that fact nowadays. My father taught me a hand-me-down trick from my grandfather, both of whom were avid readers of science fiction and mystery novels. He proposed that I read, while reading, should act like a typewriter carriage, “scanning” for the most important parts of a page of a text. As soon as I finished a line, the carriage would jolt back and scroll onto the next line, without really retaining the entirety of what I was reading. The consequence made a somewhat good reader of me in the meantime, but once I hit high school, I was plowing through classics. In the end, my father’s scanning just made me a quick reader, rather than a negligent one with vaguely uninformed elementary book reports.

The interim of my upbringing offered, what I considered heavily later as an adult, a sort of disdain for being a child. Since I loathed growing up, I can’t stand to see kids possibly suffering through the same desire to escape. Escape what, I wasn’t even sure of: whether it was emotional abuse, or just simply time immuring me to my age and body. Time is too often wasted, but then again, I’m pretty slothly, so who’s to say?

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After our brief exchange, I searched the stacks for books I read as a child, little inklings of nostalgia, little pieces of a spirit I’ve grown out of. Or forgotten, buried down deep into dust. In the Fiction Series section, the complete Redwall collection by Brian Jacques. In the
Juvenile Fiction section, obscured by the adjacent shelves sandwiched by Rick Riordan and J.K. Rowling, the
Deltora Quest series by Emily Rodda, which look like they haven’t been checked out in years. And on their own
shelf in the Graphic Novels section, every Calvin and Hobbes book that I used to buy with my allowance at the
Scholastic book fairs at my elementary. There are about six copies of Weirdos From Another Planet!, all of which have
seen their fair share of wear—the spines flimsy, creased, the covers curling outward.

When you work in a library for years, then leave, a part of you feels missing. It’s not the dismissed fees (though
those are an added bonus), not the quietude, but rather the memories of the search. You’ll find something new
quite often. In a library as huge as this, you get lost in, what may just be my love for the fantastical, a thirst for
knowledge. That thirst for knowledge wouldn’t be without the life that urges us. I’m compelled by internal and
external debate, not just with existence, but with myself, which often seems like a bigger question mark than even
that of the universe.

I walked into the Youth Services department antagonizing the love I once had for my childhood books, but it
wasn’t the books’ faults. If I am anything like Christopher Speare, it’s that I am every age I have always been. Or, to
some extent, an age I’m currently living that I’ll never be ready for. Seeing Christopher at work reminds me of the
listless interest that drove my family to the library every single Sunday of my youth. That, regardless of knowing
what I wanted, I would never leave empty handed, that if my body wasn’t ready to grow out of itself, then surely,
my mind would. That, even in stories of unreal worlds, joy is nothing different than what I felt holding a new
book. The receipt machine would print its coiled slip, and for the next two weeks, that joy was mine.
Rivulets
By Thad DeVassie

I dreamt of an end I never meant to dream. But it arrived, vivid as life itself, my mother’s life, once reclusive and hidden, taking me by the hand, guiding me downstream toward a hundred rivulets, each racing after untold possibilities, some accompanied by the sound of lutes, others with men playing trombones who were filled with marching-band enthusiasm on the banks. You ushered me past modest and measured ones, those still plodding with serene purpose.

I could not speak, couldn’t question with words, but your dementia, that cripper of discernment, was not native here. You witnessed deep concern and said,

*This is my path*

it being the tiny rivulet that doesn’t reconnect to any other body. It runs quiet to dry, rivulet to creek bed to marsh and rock and flora and thick vegetation, where silence becomes the field guide in unchartered territory. These rivulets were neural pathways, a topography map of the brain, its synaptic frings and misfrings.

*Listen carefully*

you said, never losing grip of my hand, and I swear I faintly heard trombones coming from the other side of an outcropping of rocks as if calling us to a reunion of sorts that we both longed for.
Rocket Science

By Nathan Spoon

Children are running through illuminated darkness
on the night before the launch. Meanwhile, a door
opens showing the familiar face of a friend while
the status of her showerhead is singing and long pages
are drifting through mainland mist. Bread fills the bodies
of haunted rovers dotting an imagined surface. Light,
although no one believes while seeing it, has curtains
glowing as pygmy mouse lemurs, clinging to fingers, smile
for consumers on social media. Nothing is more hellish
than the heart of another. Now as the tea kettle is whistling
on the cabin’s old gas stove, the blue-green flame beneath
it exhibits enough power to spread beyond every frame.
As perfect snow gathers on pine boughs in the deepest night,
this proves any books we write together will be a fiery boost.
Nightshift
By Isaac W Suaer

“I don’t really know how to describe it.”

“Well, could you try? This place—you have to be open with us.”

“Fine.” The man got to his feet. “Alright.”

He was an average-looking person, a little bit husky, but average height. The most noticeable thing about him was the pooling black about his eyes. The rest of his pale, greasy face was almost consumed by it. And though he was only in his early thirties, his voice rasped like that of an older man.

“I know most of you must think it, just by looking at me, but I’m clean. I have been for years. I’m up nights now for this new job. That’s why—” He pointed at his face. “I guess I’m not used to it yet.”

He wiped his sleeve over his forehead, then squeezed his nose for a moment. Some violent emotion was rattling around under his words; a vague anger was lumped there like a bruise, pulsing.

“I’ve been clean, but something is happening to me. I can’t really describe it. It’s like I’m an ice cube melting in a glass of water. At some point, I’ll be gone. But at the same time, I’ll still be here—just changed. It’s like, I don’t know, I’m fading into the background.”

“Have you been feeling depressed?”

“No,” he said. “It’s not that. It feels like I’m changing.”

Work was right afterward.

He tapped a little scribble made on one of the machines for good luck.

Most of the night was just that—lucky. Lucky if none of the machines stopped working, lucky if he didn’t have to call someone. Waking up his boss was painful.

“Can’t you junkies ever get it right?” Mr. Patterson yelled into the phone. “I hire you for a simple job, but every little thing you end up calling and bothering me. One more call and I’ll send you back to that trash town you came from. You can get as doped up as you want on your own time when you’re unemployed.”

No one said ‘dope’ anymore. The generation difference was showing. That was the last time he called.

Now it was better to solve problems and talk in the morning with the next crew, or just write a note about them.

He tightened a ball bearing and took a step back, clicking the button. The machine ran smoothly again. Still a little bumpy, but it was running.

“Maybe we should unionize,” he murmured to the nearby machine press. His heavy voice had humor in it, but it still held that strange suppressed anger.

With the next cigarette, the streets had gone quiet. A few squirrels ran about the grass patch under the picnic table bench outside the door.

But that wouldn’t work. The different machines were all industrial, welded into the floor or bolted onto the walls.

“I don’t know. It’s like I’m turning into something else; changing, but that next stage, that next thing, is also me. I can’t explain it. It’s like a dream. All the emotions and feelings are there, are right here, but you can’t say it to someone who doesn’t feel it.”

That wasn’t a good enough answer. His parole officer said so, said that he was avoiding something, that it almost sounded like he was using again.

They would probably do another drug test next week. But honestly, he hadn’t used in almost two years.
With a rag, he wiped some oil off his hands. He was clean.
The cleanser burned his nostrils.
He wheeled the bucket around with the mop handle, its other end stuck in the pool of cleanser and water. It splashed on the floor as it went, the water bobbing about in the bucket.
He squeezed his nostrils and almost blew into his hand but stopped.

The smell of the cleanser reeked, bleaching his nostrils. He was clean.

“I didn’t hire your junky ass to call me. I need my shift done this time. Take your time,” Mr. Patterson said when they first met. “Take your time. People get everything done too quickly and then you end up sitting on your ass watching the hours click by.”

He tapped the cigarette on the corner of the brick building.

The coin clinked, spinning up and falling down.

“Don’t let him catch you,” the night foreman said, showing the new employee around the shop. “He seemed like a nice enough guy,” the night foreman said.

The coin clinked—spinning up into the gutter.

The last bit of unextinguished red smoke.

He went to inhale from the cigarette. Unfiltered thing.

The murmur of his dark voice changed nothing.

“Take your time. People do—maybe smoke another cigarette.”

The foreman seemed surprisingly calm, pulling the plug and waving his gigantic paw to move the smoke. “Gone, but still there. Somehow, it’s still there.”

An hour from now, the morning crew would come in for their shift. And tomorrow would begin. And another tomorrow after that.

“Mr. Patterson keeps buying these run-down machines. It hasn’t gone far. Just got to keep busy,” the big man said. “Maybe we’ll get some more.”

Mr. Patterson was the only one—his lips. He was stuck. How long had he been there? Years going by here. Then what? What was the next step? Was there a future here—anywhere—ever?

A year from now would he still be working here—through each night of each tomorrow? And spending year after year in this dark place?

The streets were empty now. The quiet adjacent buildings loomed in the dark hours of the morning. The shadows fell above the street lamps surrounding the factory.

He flicked the butt toward the road. The last bit of unextinguished red spun about in the air and fell into the gutter.

He went again through the iron door and stuck the hinge open.

He was clean. How long had he searched for a job after taking that plea deal? Each time it went fine, sometimes even well, until they looked up his name on the internet. Until they did a background check.

He looked about in the glass. Soon, it would all be gone.

The coin clinked—spinning up into the air, and falling down into his palm.

“He seemed like a nice enough guy,” the night foreman said.

Word about the job would spread, and they would feel the need to come in for that shift. And tomorrow would begin. And another tomorrow after that.

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The ice cube was splitting, cracked around in the glass. Soon, it would all be gone. 

The ice cube was splitting, cracked down the side and dissolving away. Only sheets of cold slush still washed about in the glass. Soon, it would all be water. Soon, it would all be gone. Gone, but still there.

Mr. Patterson was the only one—a man. He was clean. How long had he been here?

Though he might not. It was like the last bit of ice cube was clicking around in his glass, fractured and dissolving.

Not much left at all. Another six months until probation would end. And he could drink again then. Though he might not. It was like the last bit of ice cube was clicking around in his glass, fractured and dissolving.

How long until it all melted away?

And was there any more left that could still be called him?

He tapped the cigarette on the corner of the brick building.

The coin clinked, spinning up and falling down.

He went again through the iron door and stuck the hinge open.

He was clean. How long had he searched for a job after taking that plea deal? Each time it went fine, sometimes even well, until they looked up his name on the internet. Until they did a background check.

He took his lighter out again and clicked and clicked.

The coin clinked—spinning up into the air, and falling down into his palm.

“Can’t go to sleep.”

“Isn’t it a sleep,” Mr. Patterson said the first time. “I hired you to work, and if you don’t, I’ll hire someone else who will.”

But there wasn’t anything left to do—maybe smoke another cigarette.

“Don’t let him catch you,” the night foreman said when they first met. “Take your time. People get everything done too quickly and then you end up sitting on your ass watching the hours click by.”

The minute hand on the clock clicked in the office.

A deafening crash came out of the machine in the center of the shop. A cinder block. Fire and rock.

The street lamps flickered.

How much effort could still be called him?

How long until it all melted away?

And was there any more left that could still be called him?

He wedged the wood against the hinge again and went outside for a smoke.

He wheeled the bucket around with the mop handle, its other end stuck in the gut. He mopped the floors clean.

When they reached the machine, they were still smoking. Who the hell was he, anyway?

“Why do you smoke?”

“Who the hell do you think I am? Don’t let him catch you,” the night foreman said.

The coin clinked, spinning up and falling down.

He went again through the iron door and stuck the hinge open.

A machine in the center of the shop began to cough a bit and the foreman stopped to listen to it for a moment. But the spring went back to normal after a few tries.

“Just got to keep busy,” the big man said, seeming to sense the thought. “Make it a game, bring a hobby. You’d think your phone would be enough, but it isn’t. Got to pace yourself, people get everything done, but then—”

A deafening crash came out of the machine in the center of the shop.

The same machine that had been coughing now was pluming smoke, hanging loudly in sequence when it failed.

“Damn thing,” the foreman shouted. “Mr. Patterson keeps buying these run-down machines. It hasn’t gone far. Just got a full night without smoking half a dozen times.”

When they reached the machine, they were still smoking. Who the hell was he, anyway?

The foreman seemed surprisingly calm, pulling the plug and waving his gigantic paw to move the smoke before opening up one of the walls.

“It’s the worst,” he grunted, “when it starts smoking just after you’ve mopped the floors clean. The squirrely man that followed him around nodded. It didn’t seem like very much to do.

“Just got to keep busy,” the big man said, seeming to sense the thought. “Make it a game, bring a hobby. You’d think your phone would be enough, but it isn’t. Got to pace yourself, people get everything done, but then—”

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A deafening crash came out of the machine in the center of the shop. The same machine that had been coughing now was pluming smoke, hanging loudly in sequence when it failed.
I was 23 and an aspiring poet when I decided to drive nights for Red Cab in Brookline. I figured it would be safer than hacking in neighboring Boston because most jobs were radioed to us and the town was tidy. Brookline had urban streets with shops and quaint old dives, blue-collar triple-decker neighborhoods, bland suburban outskirts, and manicured enclaves of dignified mansions for Brahmins and the nouveau riche. But jobs also took me to Boston’s ghettos, the “adult-entertainment” Combat Zone, and across the metropolis of 1973.
I told her sad story to my next fares—three jolly 40ish employers were terrible people, and she could easily get and they’re going to throw me out. What will I do?” she walked out of that cold, rainy fall night. “I got pregnant housemaid, employed in the Greek Revival mansion she about 20, with pale reddish hair, she too was an Irish tirades. It struck me: he horrid woman to abuse him for his imaginary offenses? How could this mild white-haired gent stand that like chalk on a blackboard. She barely took a breath. You can’t be bothered!” Her loud shrill voice screaked “You say you’re going to do dat, but you don’t! Oh no! You can’t be bothered!” Her loud shrill voice screamed like chalk on a blackboard. She barely took a breath. “I never once saw Dave, the 3-to-11 p.m. dispatcher, but pictured him as a cool cat in his mid-30s with a greaser haircut. On my first night, after dropping off a fare, I picked up the radio mike and called in, “358, Cleveland Circle,” to give him my location. I thought my transmission would be automatically blocked if Dave was talking, but it blasted him while he was trying to speak. “Get off the road, 358!” he bellowed. Getting yelled at and trying to navigate a maze of unfamiliar dark streets made me feel like a chump. I considered quitting. But Dave promptly forgot about my misdeed, and I began to figure out the local geography. I soon liked the freedom to roam freely in the night to try to get the best fares. Though sometimes irascible, Dave had a soft spot for rookie drivers who were lost. His commentary was ironic and witty, and I traded a little banter with him.

At 11 p.m., a grumpy old guy came on. He sounded a bit like Johnny Most, the raspy, chain-smoking radio announcer for the Boston Celtics, but without the flair. On weekends, I often kept going until 2 or 3 a.m., so I had to deal with him. One night he was so rude to another driver, I picked up the mike and muttered, “Fuck you.” “Who said that?” he roared. “I’ll come out there and break your neck!” he threatened. I burst out laughing. The woman giggled a little. “Stay cool,” he said, giving me a big pimp-sized tip. I stared at the girl’s lovely long chocolate legs as the two strutted into the winter night.

On a few Sunday evenings, I drove two quiet young women, one white, one black, from their apartment to another driver, I picked up the mike and muttered, “Fuck you.” “Who said that?” he roared. “I’ll come out there and break your neck!” He lit up a joint, sucked on it and passed it up to me. He said, “I’m a pimp, man! I don’t try to hide it.” I burst out laughing. The woman giggled a little. “Stay cool,” he said, giving me a big pimp-sized tip. I stared at the girl’s lovely long chocolate legs as the two strutted into the winter night.

With luck, I could ping-pong among gay bars. When I dropped off a guy at The 1270, a bustling mostly gay bar near Fenway Park, four black guys in their late 20s or early 30s flagged me down. They yanked in high, screechy fake-woman voices that hurt my ears, drove me nuts. “Is she going to go by Mass Avenue?” one in back sweetly asked his pal in the front seat. “She? That jolted me. But I felt oddly flattered; I was a sweet young thing to them, I guess. Each time I dropped one guy nuts. “Is she going to go by Mass Avenue?” one in back sweetly asked his pal in the front seat. “She? That

“I’m going to get some sticky on my dicky tonight!” the short guy grinned, heading for a hot date or maybe a paid companion.

She was pretty, dark-haired, reserved, and in her early 20s. We chatted a little. I had almost worked up the nerve to ask her for her phone number when she said: stop here. A leather-jacketed middle-aged man came out of an apartment building and got in. Her pimp.

We drove to a third Brookline apartment, where another young woman got in. We headed downtown, the girls silent and glum.

“T’ey rob you blind!” she said in her brogue, she berated cabbies the entire ten-minute drive to her home in working-class Jamaica Plain. I barely restrained from telling her to go to hell. We arrived, she paid. I gave her change, and to my astonishment she handed me a 50-cent tip (almost $3 today). I thanked her, and she said, “Good night, dear.”

About 20, with pale reddish hair, she too was an Irish housemaid, employed in the Greek Revival mansion she walked out of that cold, rainy fall night. “I got pregnant and they’re going to throw me out. What will I do?” she asked back sweetly asked his pal in the front seat. “She? That

“Wait till they see me! They won’t believe it!” said the tall young woman with a luxuriant mane of reddish-blond curls. Thrilled and giddy, she was heading to her high-school reunion at a downtown hotel. Ten years ago, she was a mouse. Look at her now: outrageous!

Her flashy outfit wasn’t quite an advertisement, but she mentioned her “independent lifestyle,” or something like that, and I started to catch on. I asked her what she did.

“Well, it’s a service…to mankind,” she said with arch precision and laughed.

The black guy in a leather jacket, platform shoes and tight pants accompanying a tall, elegant black woman in a short tight skirt flagged me down on Boylston Street. It was illegal for Brookline cabbies to pick up fares from Boston streets, so I checked for cops and then pulled over. He told me their destination, and I said I’d do it for three bucks off the meter. That way, I’d pocket the whole fare instead of giving 55 percent of it to the cab company. I did this occasionally, like all the drivers. He lit up a joint, sucked on it and passed it up to me. After a few deep drags, I was pleasantly stoned, and so were my passengers. “Just take one look at me and you know what I am,” he said. “I’m a pimp, man! I don’t try to hide it.” I burst out laughing. The woman giggled a little. “Stay cool,” he said, giving me a big pimp-sized tip. I stared at the girl’s lovely long chocolate legs as the two strutted into the winter night.

“We belong to the service—then to mankind!” she said with arch precision and laughed.

The old man’s caretaker, a Jamaican woman in her 50s, immediately attacked him in a harsh accent for all the things he should have done but had not and would not. “You say you’re going to do dat, but you don’t! Oh no! You can’t be bothered!” Her loud shrill voice screeched like chalk on a blackboard. She barely took a breath. How could this mild white-haired gent stand that screeching torture day after day? Why did he pay this horrid woman to abuse him for his imaginary offenses? In the mirror, I saw him smile weakly after one of her tirades. It struck me: he liked the abuse and even needed it. She paid attention to him.

The scrappy old Irishwoman, a maid, descended from the brick Chestnut Hill mansion and got in. I threw the flag to start the meter and sped into the night. “Cab drivers are known as crooks and lowlifes all over Europe. T’ey rob you blind!” she said in her brogue, she berated cabbies the entire ten-minute drive to her home in working-class Jamaica Plain. I barely restrained from telling her to go to hell. We arrived, she paid. I gave her change, and to my astonishment she handed me a 50-cent tip (almost $3 today). I thanked her, and she said, “Good night, dear.”

About 20, with pale reddish hair, she too was an Irish housemaid, employed in the Greek Revival mansion she walked out of that cold, rainy fall night. “I got pregnant and they’re going to throw me out. What will I do?” she sobbed, tears streaming down her face. I said her employers were terrible people, and she could easily get another job. Her tale enraged me and broke my heart. How I wished I could have said or done something more consoling or more useful.

I told her sad story to my next fares—three jolly 40ish blue-collar guys, who oddly enough, were Irish too.
A pasty chunky guy about 50 in glasses, plaid pants and a dark nylon windbreaker was waiting for me near the trolley platform. He’d parked his car in the lot, took the train to the dog track, and when he got back his car was gone, he said. He seemed in a fog. Losing betting stubs rained out of his pants pockets as he walked toward the cab. He told me to drive him to the Brookline police station so he could report the car theft.

Once there, surprise! He couldn’t pay me because he had lost every cent at the track. He said he’d pay me if I drove him home when he was done. Pissed off, I told the cop at the window, who sympathized but told me in Brookline it wasn’t a crime to stiff a cab driver. I didn’t believe his story. Losing all his money had put him in state of psychic shock, and the tale about the stolen car was a face-saving expedient, I concluded. (My psychologizing was nonsense. His car must have been stolen or, I bet, repossessed.) I decided to wait until he was done with the police so I could get paid after all the time I’d wasted. On the way to his suburban neighborhood several miles away, I gave him crap for anything.

We arrived. “Wait here,” he said. He shuffled up the sidewalk, and I did, shaken and appalled that the guard company didn’t believe his story. Losing all his money had put him in state of psychic shock, and the tale about the stolen car was a face-saving expedient, I concluded. (My psychologizing was nonsense. His car must have been stolen or, I bet, repossessed.) I decided to wait until he was done with the police so I could get paid after all the time I’d wasted. On the way to his suburban neighborhood several miles away, I gave him crap for anything.

The tall, beefy black man in his 30s whose bulk pressed against his white uniform shirt was a security guard who had just finished his shift at a discount store. His fare came to $2.90, and he gave me $3. No one ever asked for 10 cents back, so I didn’t offer him change.

Uncharacteristically, I tried to give it back, saying I didn’t want an advance tip, but he insisted. “Believe me, you’ll earn it. My sister-in-law is a real pain in the ass.”

“I’m Jackie Wilson,” he gently explained that he had had several big hits and mentioned “Higher and Higher,” and “Lonely Teardrops.”

“Come to my show tomorrow. Tell them you’re my guest, and they’ll let you in. Bring your girlfriend,” Jackie said. I thanked him and said I’d go, but on Saturday, I drove instead. Two years later, Wilson had a heart attack on stage, suffered brain damage and remained in a coma until his death in 1984. I wish I’d gone to his show.

I picked up a big shopping filled with Chinese food from a Brookline Village restaurant and delivered it to a stately old apartment building on broad Commonwealth Avenue in Boston’s Back Bay. Derek Sanderson, the Boston Bruins’ rakish forward, answered the door. Ramrod straight, compact, with a handlebar mustache, the Turk wore fancy pajamas and a silk bathrobe. Mr. Cool. I saw two babes and another guy in the living room. Was the Chinese food a prelude or postlude to an orgy? Or did Turk just like lounging in PJs? The food and cab fare came to about $22. Derek gave me two $20 bills, hesitated a moment, frowned coolly and told me to keep it—$18 was the biggest tip I ever got, a lot of dough then.

The lady of the house, a blonde with a Swedish accent, wanted to make tuna salad but had a problem. “We don’t have any capers!” she fussed. It was a big deal to her, news to me. I even suggested she skip the capers. The next time I made tuna salad, I added capers.

On a Saturday night, I picked up two fashionable 30-ish couples at the Brookline movie house, drove them to a late-night dell and then to one couple’s condo in an old brownstone. “Would you like to come up for a drink?” the man asked. A bit odd, but why not? In their elegant large apartment, feeling on display, I sat a little awkwardly sipping a glass of champagne, eating fancy cheese and crackers and I, told them I was a poet.

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The tall, beefy black man in his 30s whose bulk pressed against his white uniform shirt was a security guard who had just finished his shift at a discount store. His fare came to $2.90, and he gave me $3. No one ever asked for 10 cents back, so I didn’t offer him change.

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A young woman then tottered out, with her baby under one arm and a six-pack of beer under the other. She told me to take her to Somerville, about six miles away. She put the sleeping baby next to her on the seat, opened a 16-ounce Bud and started sucking on it, eyes at half-mast. “Have a beer,” she said and handed me an open bottle. I said no thanks, but I had to take it because she would have dropped it otherwise. I took a couple of sips and wedged the bottle against the seatback. We drove over the Charles River and into Cambridge. “Have a beer,” she said, handing me another bottle. I wedged both bottles into the bench seat and prayed they wouldn’t tip over.

A little past Central Square, I looked in the mirror. She was gone. At a light, I turned around and saw her sprawled unconscious on the seat next to her sleeping baby. I pulled over, got out and shook her shoulder and told her to wake up. It was like trying to rouse concrete. Desperate because she hadn’t given me her address, I asked a young couple walking by for help. “You better take her to the police,” the woman said. “There’s a police station in Davis Square right up the street.”

I went into the station. A gray-haired policeman came out, opened the cab door, grabbed her shoulder, yelled “Hey, wake up!” and shook her very hard, jarring her awake. Now the cop smelled beer and spotted the open bottles on the front seat. “What’s this? Are you drinking?” I told him how she kept opening beer bottles and handing them to me. I couldn’t stop her. He gave me a hard, skeptical look, but said nothing.

Now she was able to direct me to her apartment. We stood on the sidewalk as she swayed and woozily rummaged for money in her pocketbook. Then—plop! “You. Dropped. Your. Baby!” I screamed.

“Awe, leave me alone,” she said.

A nightmare. Her baby lay on an icy snowbank in the black night, not making a sound. Broken arm, brain damage, dead! But its blanket and winter clothes had muffled its fall. The baby was unharmed. I carried it to the woman’s first-floor apartment, which was spacious and clean. No sign of a partner. She went into her bedroom, and after few minutes of fumbling came out with a $10 bill. I told her to stop drinking and left, hoping the baby would be all right.

Cab driving was a stopgap. I needed a career, but what? On a warm, wet fall evening, I was driving and racking my brain when I had an epiphany: become a librarian! It was like the sun burning through the clouds. I was tingling with excitement that I’d found a profession that would leave me with time and energy for writing. I’d always loved hanging around in libraries, so why not get paid for it? My beloved writing teacher at Boston

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University, the poet George Starbuck, had worked as a librarian for a while. I told my next fare, a young Chinese-American woman, about my revelation and plan to get a master’s degree in library science. “Do you really think the work would be interesting?” she asked. I told her it was just an expedient to support my writing, but she wasn’t convinced. (I should have listened to her.) But my next fare, a woman in her early 30s, thought it was a great idea. At Harvard, where she worked, librarians were well paid.

That night in late January 1974 was going to be my next-to-last night of hacking after ten months of it. I was starting library school soon. Plus, a couple of Red Cab drivers had been held up in Boston recently, and that seemed like an omen to quit.

Dave sent me to pick up a takeout order at the same Chinese restaurant Turk Sanderson had patronized. I paid the cashier $23 (about $130 today) for a big shopping bag stuffed with warm, aromatic cardboard boxes. The slip read 371 South Huntington Ave. – a street lined with four-story brick apartment buildings just over the Boston line. There was no 371, so I entered the vestibule of 373, hoping my customer lived there. I was peering at the names on the mailboxes when a guy in a long dark wool coat swooped in, pointed a long knife at me and said, “Give me that package!” I stepped forward holding the bag at arm’s length by the handle and gingerly gave it to the longhaired brigand, who looked about 30. I almost felt like asking, “what about my wallet?” He took the food and vanished into the night.

I pictured him and his buddies, or maybe his wife and their kids—starving hippies in any case—feasting on sweet-and-sour pork, egg rolls, chow mein and fried rice. He must just have been hungry; otherwise, he would have demanded money. I reported the theft to Dave, took one more job, and I was done. Why push my luck?

A year later, I was a degreed librarian. But the job market was lousy, and my first professional gig was as a maximum-security prison. I was there eight months until I got a saner job as a reference librarian in Concord, New Hampshire. But I found the work mostly tedious, and meanwhile, my muse had fled, and I wasn’t able to write poems I liked anymore. After a few years, I moved back to Boston, took some communications courses and became a writer and publicist. On my own time, I wrote many articles and some humor and essays, but I didn’t write poetry with determination again until I reached my 60s.

Ode to my Grandmother’s Gravel Pit

By Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

violet barbed weeds defend the remaining soil from further human intrusion

while blackberries scramble down the ridge

misting yellowjackets with blush wine

this is kingdom killdeer even when spring ice sloshes like saliva

snuff under glass their morse trills transmitted by gritty breezes or

when the solstice dawn plops out orange fluorescence like a dropped robin egg

evacuators and loaders quake and limber as colossal mud daubers
crisp greenbacks kept grandmother’s lungs from a smoke implosion

they were never worth the excessive strain of convalescence
A will chase the souls of the living, B of the dead. C wears pigtails, which D would have dipped into his desk’s ink well if they’d gone to a one-room school back in the day, or if E hadn’t learned to make furniture from laminates, and F (in boredom) to remove the screws. G will become an astronaut. H will farm in the tradition of his German ancestors, until years of drought undo him and I buys him out, repurposing the barns as quaint, assisted-living developments. J, whose family once owned farm stock as well, blames global warming, which K, serving as consultant to L’s re-election campaign, calls a “bunch of hooey.” M does not wear underclothes, as N knows first-hand, having bought the knowledge with an apple appropriated from a neighbor’s orchard. O eats cold pizza for lunch. P will learn to steal a horse (and for that infraction be sent to detention, where he will, for certain privileges, prostitute himself to Q.) R will walk on the moon. S will die beneath the wheels of a Great Northern freight train, her death determined “accidental,” by T, the county’s first female medical examiner, whose wife, U, an Episcopal priest, will someday pen a best-selling how-to on coping with same-sex divorce. V is the schoolroom aide [in present time]. W stokes the woodstove when necessary. X is pregnant, yet is certain to miscarry before her fifteenth birthday (like the time before). Y is undocumented. Z, annoyed—totally—by the whole business of education, longs to be an entertainer in Vegas; yet he will drop out in his first year of secondary school, apprentice himself to a butcher, and, for more seasons than he can count, spend each November turning deer into venison, much in the way of a magician.
The Yard Creature

By Adam Luebke

When Edward Haney glanced out the kitchen window, he noticed the north shelterbelt had crept closer to the house during the night. The trees had encroached onto the lawn by at least twelve feet. Worse yet, there was scratching behind the wall of his bedroom. That’s what had woken him.

Outside, the sun was already warming up the grass, and the birds sang like every other summer morning. Lugging himself across the yard, Haney kept a hand on his revolver and an eye on the west trees as he knelt to peer under the first row of dogwoods. Behind them was a row of poplars and then maples. The grass was clearly marked with lines from the mower, and further under the blossoms and branches were the tall patches the mower never reached. Somehow, he thought, the whole work had shifted closer.

He’d mown those patches since he was seven years old. As a boy, he’d rushed the mowing, leaving strips of grass that maddened his mother to no end, just so he could get back inside to read one of the mystery novels he enjoyed. Too bad he couldn’t read anymore. There wasn’t enough peacefulness for it, what with all the activity going on in the house. He couldn’t even get a decent night’s sleep because every time he drifted off, his mother would yammer away downstairs. Then aunt Gloria would get rolling. Their cigarette smoke drifted upstairs through the vent and under the locked door, making him cough and his eyes itch. He worried they’d someday burn down the house.

Back inside, Haney stared out the window. Nobody would believe the trees had moved. Just yesterday he’d cut the grass and didn’t notice anything abnormal. Something told him it was all connected with the light across the road. Anything that bright and massive had to exert its own gravitational force. But he figured he’d’ve seen a buckle in the soil or some sign of a shift.

When a pickup turned into the yard, Haney tucked the pistol deep into his pocket and hurried to the office. The truck pulled around the gravel loop and stopped in front of the house. From behind the curtain, he watched Sally teeter up the sidewalk. He hadn’t seen her for weeks. When he peeked out again, the yard creature was loping toward the pickup from the west trees. It bolted on all fours but could just as easily run on two legs. It had claws and dark hair like a bear, but was thinner, more agile, like a monkey.

The doorbell was ringing. Haney untucked his pistol and reached to open the window.

The creature leaped into the back of the faded green truck. Its claws scraped against the metal. Sally didn’t seem to notice the screeching noises. She was always in her own head. She glanced up and saw him, the curtain in front of his face.

Haney buried the pistol in his pocket and hurried to the door.

“This why do you do that?” Sally demanded as she stepped inside.

Haney latched the screen and locked the door behind her. Luckily the creature hadn’t sprung on her; she’d never be able to escape. Not with her limp. Sally had fallen off the haycart as a girl and the wheel had run over her knee. She bobbed when she walked, but he liked that, and also how she kept her hair in a ponytail that poked out the hole in the back of her baseball cap.

“It gets old, all that peek-a-boo stuff when I stop by.”
Sally climbed the three steps and walked into the kitchen. “I’ll take coffee if there’s any left.”

He poured two mugs. “Has your yard shifted at all?” he asked.

Sally was looking through his garbage, carefully peeking beneath a greasy plastic container with dried cheese stuck to its sides.

“There’s something with the gravity,” he said. “It’s squeezing the Earth like a rubber ball. Who knows how long we’ll be able to keep living here.”

“I hope you’re not living off microwaveable food,” she said. “I see a lot of empty containers in here.” She sat at the table and scratched at the side of the mug. “This one’s dirty.”

He filled another for her.

“God, you look bad,” she said, pushing the dirty mug to the middle of the table. “Your eyes are red. You’re pale as a sheet. Of course, you didn’t go in like I told you to.” She stared at his right eye, then his left. “You never do.”

He sipped the coffee.

“Why not? You promised you would this time.”

Haney flinched and looked over his shoulder. “I haven’t seen them for a few weeks now.”

“Ah, maybe they migrated for the summer.”

He shook his head. “I heard scratching this morning. They’re getting resistant to chemicals.”

“How big are they, exactly?”

Haney held up his hands about a foot apart. “Some bigger.”

“Oh Edward, get off it. You’ve got to stop talking bullshit to people. They think you’re nuts. You want people to think you’re crazy? Jeremy told me the things you said to him at the store. He said you rattled on for over half an hour. I mean, your mother chases you up the stairs? You can hear her whispering and clicking her teeth out in the hallway at night?”

He tried to stifle the shudder that ran through him.

“And what about this bright light out in the field that’s supposed to be some kind of walkway to heaven?” Sally asked, pushing her hat up on her forehead an inch. “I don’t know if you think it’s funny, or this stuff gets a rise out of people and you like that, but you’ve got to cut it out.” She slid her mug from one hand to the other.

“What do you do all day, anyway?”

“Mow the lawn,” he said. “Take a walk on Wednesdays.”

Haney reloaded the gun and went outside. Sure enough, the tire met rocks and squealed when they caught the pavement. The creature rolled to its feet and hobbled off into the trees as the pickup roared down the road.

Sally swore under her breath. “It’s been two years. I think it’s time to move on. I’m pretty sure I was at her funeral, and you were there as well.” She held up her fingers. “I swear, Edward, I’m this close to calling some help for you.”

“You better not,” Haney said, nearly tipping over his mug.

“If I tell them what you said to Jeremy Schwartz, they’ll come out here with a van,” she said, talking over him, “and scoop you up so quick.”

“I’m not hurting anybody.”

“This close,” she said. “Because I honestly thought things were better. But I hear a little of what you told this person, and then that person, and now I’m not so sure.” Sally rubbed her neck and let out a sigh. “They’ve improved things since twenty years ago. The meds aren’t harsh like they used to be. But I swear to God I’m this close. You don’t have nobody else but me to care about you.”

Haney stared into his coffee mug until he felt her eyes lift off him.

She plucked a napkin from the holder and wiped under her arms. She limped to the porch. Haney followed, tempted to grab her ponytail. “Call me if you need anything,” she said.

Haney closed the door behind her and hurried to the office. The creature had disappeared. He scanned the west trees. He hadn’t stepped back there for two years because of that menace. Then he noticed it, hiding flat in the truck’s bed. All he could see were its claws, clinging to the edge. If he pumped enough lead through the side, he could wound it.

Sally’s old truck roared to life. He went to the kitchen and opened the window. The truck whined its way into view, along the gravel driveway, with little puffs of dust blowing out behind the tires. The creature was standing, crouched in the back, balancing its weight and staring at him with that dead gaze dogs had when they ate.

He aimed the pistol at its shaggy head. It was the first time he’d had a clear shot. When Sally stopped to look for cars, he squeezed off a round. Then another. The creature sprang out of the box and pitched onto the lawn. Sally must’ve finally seen it because she hit the gas. The tires met rocks and squealed when they caught the pavement. The creature rolled to its feet and hobbled off into the trees as the pickup roared down the road.

Haney reloaded the gun and went outside. Sure enough, a tiny patch of blood darkened the grass.

He sat on the deck, warming under the sun, pretty sure the creature wouldn’t be back. Memories of Sally troubled him instead. They’d divorced twenty years ago, but the time with her was clearer to him than what he’d eaten yesterday. She always said she left because they couldn’t get pregnant. The doctor found nothing wrong with her, but Haney wouldn’t step one foot into those death buildings. He’d seen the news specials about what doctors did to patients. Loaded them up with too much anesthesia. Let them die to use their organs. They certainly couldn’t save his daddy. So, Haney decided
if God didn’t want him to have kids, then no doctor could cure that. Sally had never gotten married again. She lived five miles north on a farm and raised chickens, goats, and alpacas. Haney drove by sometimes, but that was before the insects migrated in. Now, he hardly left the house. Somehow his mother had kept them out his whole life so he never knew they could grow so huge. They didn’t get that big outside.

“Probably cause the birds eat them before they get that big,” Jeremy Schwartz had said in the store the other day.

Haney had asked him if he’d ever seen beetles bigger than footballs. He felt like Schwartz didn’t really understand, even though it was a simple question. “They might be growing behind the walls,” Haney added, “but I can’t figure how they find their way out.”

“You could raise them like cattle,” Schwartz said. “Have a whole beetle farm. People come from miles ‘round and pay big money to see them.”

Schwartz seemed eager to get to the checkout. He’d walked away with Haney still talking. There were some things that just shouldn’t be mentioned out loud, and they’d gotten back into her truck.

A few weeks later, the murmurs turned into whispers, “Maybe it’s from all the stress we’ve had between us lately.” They decided to let it go and see if it went away. A few weeks later, the murmurs turned into whispers, and they had heard voices in another room. They said things like, “Good if she’d die. Wish she’d die. Hope she chokes.”

When he told Sally, she’d hauled him to the clinic the next week. It was the first and last time. He expected to see a whitecoat, but instead a man wearing a brown vest and a bowtie with a cartoon character assigned him one round white tablet every morning, gradually working up to two. “And you think I’m looney,” Haney said after they’d gotten back into her truck.

Sure enough, the whispers stopped with the white pill. Mr. Bowtie suggested over the phone about adding a new pill to calm the dreams. Sally said yes. Haney refused.

The whispers returned. He told Sally they were gone, even though they’d worsened, taunting him and saying vile things about his mother, sometimes fantasizing about torturing her with a hot iron or ripping out her toenails. Sally moved out shortly after, blaming it on the not having kids thing.

He was relieved when she left. He was sick with stress having them both in the same house. Toward the end, Sally started throwing out some of their older things. He yelled at her for too long. When he thought he heard footsteps, he ran from a charging goat, and other times he ran from a charging elephant. One night he’d escape the bigger animals, and the next he’d be trampled or shredded. With the smaller animals, he beat at them until he woke up to Sally screaming beside him, trying to catch his flying wrists.

He flushed the pills. Mr. Bowtie suggested over the phone about adding a new pill to calm the dreams. Sally said yes. Haney refused.

The whispers returned. He told Sally they were gone, even though they’d worsened, taunting him and saying vile things about his mother, sometimes fantasizing about torturing her with a hot iron or ripping out her toenails. Sally moved out shortly after, blaming it on the not having kids thing.

By the time the whispers happened, Haney was almost eager for the distraction. At first, it was just a breathing sound over his right shoulder. Almost like a polite cough into a palm. When the cough turned into murmurs, he asked Sally one night if she heard it, too. She’d been to nursing school and had a degree. He figured she might know something. After giving him a long look, she said, “Maybe it’s from all the stress we’ve had between us lately.” They decided to let it go and see if it went away.

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A little while later, the murmurs turned into whispers, and they had heard voices in another room. They said things like, “Good if she’d die. Wish she’d die. Hope she chokes.”

When he told Sally, she’d hauled him to the clinic the next week. It was the first and last time. He expected to see a whitecoat, but instead a man wearing a brown vest and a bowtie with a cartoon character assigned him one round white tablet every morning, gradually working up to two. “And you think I’m looney,” Haney said after they’d gotten back into her truck.

Sure enough, the whispers stopped with the white pill, but he started wondering if what he’d been hearing wasn’t true. He knew it wasn’t the perfect arrangement for Sally, but nobody baked better than his mother. It also wasn’t practical to buy another farm. He didn’t want to lose the farm, nor his mother. He loved that big, creaky house with the crowded attic and the crumbling cement basement. Sally refused to speak to him for over a week. She slept in another room and, night after night, when he returned from work, he found she’d already eaten supper and didn’t even acknowledge he was home. She even started sniping at his mother.

Haney had asked him if he’d ever seen beetles bigger than footballs. He felt like Schwartz didn’t really understand, even though it was a simple question. “They might be growing behind the walls,” Haney added, “but I can’t figure how they find their way out.”

“You could raise them like cattle,” Schwartz said. “Have a whole beetle farm. People come from miles ‘round and pay big money to see them.”

Schwartz seemed eager to get to the checkout. He’d walked away with Haney still talking. There were some things that just shouldn’t be mentioned out loud, and they’d gotten back into her truck.

A few weeks later, the murmurs turned into whispers, “Maybe it’s from all the stress we’ve had between us lately.” They decided to let it go and see if it went away. A few weeks later, the murmurs turned into whispers, and they had heard voices in another room. They said things like, “Good if she’d die. Wish she’d die. Hope she chokes.”

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Sure enough, the whispers stopped with the white pill, but he started wondering if what he’d been hearing wasn’t true. He knew it wasn’t the perfect arrangement for Sally, but nobody baked better than his mother. It also wasn’t practical to buy another farm. He didn’t want to lose all that much money at the rubber plant, and he couldn’t let his mother shrivel up by herself. Plus, all his memories were there. Even the shed was full of Daddy’s tools still arranged in the same way that September day they’d found him inside.

The wind picked up. Haney leaned forward on the chair and glanced out at the trees and the fluttering leaves. He listened for a moment, then moved the chair into the shade.

Soon after, before he’d even worked up to the second pill, the night sweats began. Then the dreams. In them, he fought wild animals—sometimes a raccoon, or a tomatc, and other times he ran from a charging elephant. One night he’d escape the bigger animals, and the next he’d be trampled or shredded. With the smaller animals, he beat at them until he woke up to Sally screaming beside him, trying to catch his flying wrists.

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He was relieved when she left. He was sick with stress having them both in the same house. Toward the end, Sally started throwing out some of their older things. The frying pan that had always hung above Daddy’s recliner disappeared one morning. Haney couldn’t forgive that. His mother’s ceramic angels had flown away another morning, only later found in a box in the attic with chips in their wings. “The final straw was the bathroom floor mat. “It’s filthy and older than we are,” she said. It was worn and frayed, but it was still soft, and they’d used it since Haney was a boy. He yelled at her so viciously when he caught her standing beside the burning barrel with it that his mother shuffled outside with her robe partially open, stooped and gripping her walker, and told him to can it.

“It’s her home too, now,” Mother said before shuffling back inside.

But he liked the way he and his mother lived before Sally better.

After she left, the whispers quieted down, confirming his suspicions. It was her thoughts he heard. Sally’s. Somehow, she’d realized he was hearing them. It was no wonder she was always pushing the doctor on him, hoping to strip him of his extra sense.

She probably figured it out after he’d quizzed her randomly, gauging her answers. Do you ever dream of Mother being hurt? Have you ever thought of pulling out someone’s toenails? It wasn’t his issue at all – he’d been tuned to her mind. As startling as the thoughts were, it was necessary then to keep tabs on Sally’s mental state. She had a lot of demons that she didn’t even know about.

On the deck, he cried. He always did when thinking of her for too long. When he thought he heard footsteps, he went in. It was dangerous to sit outside with blurry vision. Even with the gun, he wasn’t any good if he couldn’t see. But the creature ended up not showing itself all morning. Hopefully it was off bleeding to death in somebody else’s shelterbelt.

Haney went for a drive. His mood lifted. He drove slowly along the gravel roads, checking the soybean fields. He moseyed to town, taking note of whose pickups were at the bar. On his way back, a mile from the homestead, he parked his truck next to the creek.
and opened the windows to smell the air. Through the ravine in the corn field, he could see his house. Just as he was about to crank up the window and drive back, he noticed a police cruiser pull out of the yard and streak north until it disappeared behind some trees.

With pistol in hand, Haney drove into the yard slowly. He toured out to the edge of the west trees and back before parking the truck in the shed. Something told him his mother and Aunt Gloria would be smoking in the kitchen and drinking coffee, but when he stepped inside, the house was quiet. There were three mugs on the table. She’d had company. But why was the cop there? Had there been trouble?

Late in the afternoon, Haney gazed out the window. The corn was shoulder high and it wasn’t even three weeks past Fourth of July. Some years the farmer, Bob Gackle, planted soybeans, but during the corn years later in the summer, the tall green stalks and tassels blocked in the farm. The sun was still high, but the light wasn’t visible. He had an inkling it would show that evening, but he suppressed the building excitement to avoid false hopes.

After an early dinner he plucked out of the freezer, the light sparkled, a wink for those who watched. The light had softened—it was closing, and still there. Maybe it wouldn’t show up again. But he knew it was there for him, that it was his chance. He had a kind of vision.

Sally. She was crying. Her voice was lost for a moment. “I shouldn’t have called them. I was scared. But why’d you do it? You could’ve killed me.”

Her voice was barely audible. Haney stretched the phone cord as far as it would go so he could see through the window. The light twinkled, getting closer.

“I told them I didn’t want to press charges, but they’re moving forward on their own. They found the bullet hole in the box. Behind the driver’s seat.” She paused, breathing into the phone. “So don’t tell me you didn’t do it, Edward. Don’t you dare tell me you didn’t.” Her voice broke off. “But why’d you do it?”

Haney licked his lips.

“Was it something I said?”

The brilliant light gleamed beyond the field, the part of it behind the corn a green luster, glowing. “Can you see the light?” he asked. “It’s like a second sun.”

“What?”

“Maybe we’ll never have darkness again,” he said.

“Can I see what?” she asked.

“Look east. From your place, southeast. You should be able to see it right out your window.”

“See what?” Her voice was muffled.

“Go up on the roof,” he said. “I’m sure the news will be all over this. I’m not sure how many more times it’ll show up.”

“Why are we talking about? Ed, for heaven’s sake!”

The light sparkled, a wink for those who watched. He hung up and dialed the local news station, about sixty miles away, but then set the phone in its cradle. No time to waste.

Haney stepped outside, where the crickets and frogs were in full volume, and stumbled across the yard. The gun bounced heavy in his pocket. He stayed alert, even if the yard creature was wounded. The light mirrored the setting sun, except it was a warm white instead of orange. It caught everything in its glare. Every tip of grass. Every pebble of the gravel drive. Every leaf of the boxelder tree shone green just like Haney’s thumb shone red when he put it over a flashlight.

Haney crossed the road and waded into the waist-high grass. His foot caught the edge of a gopher’s mound and he tumbled to the bottom of the ditch. He got up, brushing off his pants and rubbing his wrists. The pistol wasn’t in his pocket. He retraced his steps up the ditch back to the gopher’s mound. There was a deep gash where his foot had snagged the soil. Lowering to his knees, he combed the grass all the way down, brushing it aside with his hands. A garter snake, barely thicker than a pencil, slithered over his fingers. He jerked back his arm and the snake disappeared.

The light wouldn’t hold there forever. It would close like a door shutting slowly on a lit room. He didn’t want to miss it. He wanted very badly to be in that room, wherever it would lead him, whoever was already in there. Maybe it wouldn’t show up again. But he knew it was there for him, that it was his chance. He had nothing left on the farm. His mother had shivered down to a skeleton and Sally, threatened by his gift, wanted him on drugs or now, arrested.

He pressed on into the corn field without the pistol. The sharp leaves caught against his face and neck. It was dark in there. The light was dimming. He understood it was more of a spiritual light, and not physical like the sun. Which was maybe why Sally hadn’t noticed it. Maybe it wasn’t visible to everyone. It was for those with the right kind of vision.

Plant after plant, he swept the leaves from his face and pushed ahead. When he bent over, his back seized up. He stopped, stood still, and heard his heart beating. A breeze fluttered the corn. He held his breath and listened. Somewhere in the distance, a thrumming sound. The tinkling of crisp leaves and the snapping of green stalks. Footsteps, patterning, not heavy. Light and moving fast.

Haney put his arms out and ran. The stalks whooshed by. The leaves sliced at his cheeks and wrists. A drop of blood trickled down his forehead. The row ended suddenly, and he fell into the ravine on his elbows and chin, into the spiny weeds and switchgrass. He scrambled to his feet, rubbing his hands and looking to the sky. The light had softened—it was closing, and still a long way off. Over, away, across the next field, receding past the line of trees. He reached out, nearly crying. There was no way he’d make it, and besides, the thrum of footsteps was close behind him. He could hear its panting even above his own heartbeat.

Haney fell to the grass, cowering as low as he could, and waited for the creature to come springing out of the corn to take him.
Blowing the Dark Open

By Bina Ruchi Perino

The moon, a silver tag
on earth’s collar, shines

on my dog. I bend down
to fold her into my arms.

We’re pressed together,
skull to skull, her claws

clutching to me. I desire
everlasting with an open

mouth, raise her curling
body above my face, slide

her into the soft column
of my throat. Her apple

head hangs by threads
of vein and spine I gag

and swallow. She melts
into light inside of me,

filling and flowing out.

After Matt Rasmussen
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