

# The Song Between Our Stars

Volume 1 Number 2





# The Song Between Our Stars



The Song Between Our Stars was founded in 2020 as a way of documenting creative reactions to contemporary issues. It is independently published twice a year, by Pingo Souchét, in print and online. It is edited by a group of volunteers.

The initial focus on current events evolved into a fascination with moments in time and place. Preferences and turmoil define individuals, but perhaps one's greater facets are only realized while hearing others. Could better angels be found only while leaning-in to catch a whisper in the dark? Listening implies an unknown, it implies revelation. Listen with us.

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# CLASS MOMS

Valerie Viera

---

I grabbed a table by the window.  
She ordered an iced latte, rushed over with  
Cheek kisses, and sat down.  
There was a party to plan.

Then she glanced side to side  
leaned over my coffee  
took a big breath and  
whispered:  
My mother choked to death  
on peanut butter  
in a nursing home  
And now I have anxiety.

I leaned in heavily with sympathy,  
That must have been horrible.

Then I said  
My father was a pedophile  
So my oldest brother shot himself  
My sister twitches, stutters, cuts, can't keep a job  
And my younger brother, he's in jail  
My middle brother,  
We don't talk

Desperate for relief,  
She asked, "what about your mother?"  
I said, my mother tells people  
I joined a cult

As if on cue, the barista called her name  
And she jolted from her seat,  
nearly knocked the table over  
and I knew I'd overdone it

*Sometimes the dam needs draining  
A controlled flood  
A gush that drowns the yard  
But saves the house*

She sat down again, this time  
slowly, looking seasick.  
She pulled out her pen and pad.  
I sat up straight and rearranged my mug.

There was a party to plan  
Emails to send, paper plates and napkins  
Juice and water and cupcakes  
And teachers always appreciate gift cards



**Hot Tub Drain San Ysidro Ranch, Montecito**  
Lawrence Bridges





**Great Mountains** Ernst Perdriel



# Lilac Simple Syrup for Chloe

Joel Long

---

Winter lasted nine months. The moon got stuck on new, let its light shine to no one, absorbed in its travel. The sun stayed south, churning a ditch where Orpheus grieved, song digging a channel through the planet. Now, your eyes open, and lilacs bloom. You clip pounds of blossoms, pour them in baskets and take them to home where your bed is still unmade from winter. You begin to pinch tiny flowers from stems, throat of each, feathered fragrant, that sweetness whose shadow drifts a hundred miles down. It knows the song escape. When the god wants you, there's nothing left to do but turn flower, brief one, lilac, the name the name of its color—no other will do. These weeks after long winter, cool clusters—milk breath of purple—last this long, a flash really, a tea of fragrance. Your fingers remember winter in every cell, remember grief, each flower plucked, know the water lifts the flowers to clean them, perfume boats each, sailing nowhere inside the blue bowl. You know winter's gone, but you need to taste it, simmer water with white sugar until sugar dissolves, spoon lilac blossoms into water until they collapse, steeped in heat and sugar, give scent away to flavor. When it cools, you drink it, accept for now that you stay, know beautiful things have sorrow stitched underneath, this flower designed with sadness in the heart of it. You make it sweet so you can taste it.

# The Concept of a Monsoon Fish

Jennifer Kim

---

Your father was a mathematician, famous for his knowledge of chaos theory. It took him everywhere in the world, except home. Although, he certainly made a point of coming home for your birthdays, always bringing along some new fascinating book and giving you a tender kiss on your forehead. Everything about your birthday was perfect – too perfect to exist, you supposed, because he was never there the next morning.

But you believed in what your father told you – that seemingly dynamical systems were governed by underlying principles and that because the initial condition of your existence was half his love for you, he would always find his way back to you.

My aunt, who was my legal guardian, was sorely in need of money and often worked as a caretaker. She was recommended to your father through a friend's friend to become your caretaker, and I came along with the deal. My aunt was hired, fairly early on, when you were nine and I was ten, to become your nanny, or as you insisted on calling her, "Nana."

You annoyed me from the very first day. Wanting to emulate your father, you kept putting the word "conceptually" before everything you said.

"Conceptually, should we have breakfast?"

"Conceptually, should I wear the yellow jacket or the blue one?"

"Conceptually, have the cookies been overbaked at this point?"

"It's not conceptual," I always replied crossly. "It's real. Shut up and decide."

It irked me that you and your father both lived in some strange glass world where every consequence could be explained by a "concept." The way I'd lived so far, and the way I'd seen my aunt scrape a living together out of nothing (without a single favorable "initial condition" in her background) seared into my mind that only real and tangible consequences mattered. Whatever "concept" you decided to apply to it was irrelevant, once the regrettable deed was already done.

.....

The first time your father missed your birthday, it was your fourteenth birthday. After waiting around near the phone, Nana finally swatted you away, telling you, "If your birthday's so important to you, child, celebrate it. Do something. Stop waiting."

You came and found me sitting on the porch, carelessly filling out my homework with wrong answers. Sitting

beside me, you pointed to one of my responses and corrected me.

I looked up at you with irritated eyes.

Noticing my mood, you stopped at once and withdrew your hand.

But after only a moment, you couldn't help except ask me, "What do you think happened? Conceptually, I mean. Do you think I did something wrong? Or maybe his flight got cancelled?"

"I've no idea," I said truthfully.

"Well, he doesn't have to show up at the exact same time every year for it to count," you replied. "My birthday's an entire twenty-four hours, after all. Thirty, if I fall asleep at the right time."

You allowed yourself a small, victorious smile. You liked the way that the answer to forgiving your father might possibly lie in your own cognitive ability to stretch time.

I turned away from you, not wanting to see the foolish hope in your eyes. I already knew that concepts would not get you through your father's absence. Concepts exist in a dream world, the kind-of world you felt whenever your father came back home for you. But without that fragile sense of tenderness, what use is there for concepts?

"You're not seriously going to turn in your homework

like this, are you?" you asked me, uncomfortable with my silence. "You're going to get the worst marks in your year."

I closed my eyes, feeling a savage feeling of satisfaction at feeling you slowly, if not softly, sinking into quiet desolation besides me.

.....

Six hours later, your eyes were blazing mad as you declared, "I would like a birthday cake. Ideally, I would like it brought to me. But that's not going to happen. So, let's go."

"It's your birthday. You go get it," I told you, with my face pressed against the couch. We were both on the couch in the living room. I'd fallen asleep next to you, as you sat on the couch and waited, ignoring Nana's impatient pleas with you to find something "useful" to do, instead of moping around all day.

"It's my birthday, so conceptually, someone else should be buying it for me. Nana would never approve, so it's got to be you." When I still didn't reply, you impatiently grabbed a pillow and chucked it at my head.

I groaned when the pillow made contact with the back of my head. "Damn it, leave me alone," I grumbled.

"I'll pay you five dollars," you offered.

I paused. Then, I got up from the couch.

.....

It was monsoon season. We should have known better than to go out without an umbrella.

As it was, by the time we were walking back, we could no longer press forward without being swept away, so we quickly scurried underneath a nearby willow tree.

Waiting for the rain to stop, we rested against the damp tree trunk, with its bark sticking incessantly against our wool sweaters. Raindrops streamed off the long willow leaves around us, and the slender cascading waterfalls threw light in iridescent shades everywhere.

You were holding your box with a birthday cake, though the paper box was despairingly soggy. Most likely, the frosting on the cake had melted off, too. However, you didn't have it in you to check at the moment. You simply stood there, staring out at the rain, thinking. Your thoughts had shifted from wondering why your father hadn't come to a deeper wondering about why you cared so much about your father, about your birthday, about everything, in the first place. After all, why should it matter? It was your birthday no matter what. Who cared if some man who only came once a year, and became more and more a stranger with every passing year, didn't come today? It wouldn't—or at least, shouldn't—affect the other three hundred and sixty-four days in the year, so why should it affect this one?

A warm and humid breeze, blown through the lips of

the goddess of salt and tears, blew through the willow tree. The air swirled around the trunk, finding it surprisingly difficult to escape the long, tangled willow leaves that wished to hold onto the wind.

The front strands of your hair fell in front of your face. You carefully balanced the box on one hand as you reached up to push your wet hair out of your eyes.

“Do you want me to hold the box?” I asked you.

You shook your head. Instead, still gazing out at the rain, you murmured, “Nana always says that I'm unlovable.”

“My aunt always says things like that,” I told her dismissively. “It's the only way she knows how to express herself.”

“Oh.”

There was a long pause, in which we were trying to figure out how to say something without admitting anything. Quite frankly, neither of us knew where to begin.

“Should we try our luck in getting back?” I asked you, starting to shiver.

When you didn't respond, I began to lead the way and step out from underneath the tree.

You reached out and grasped the shoulder of my shirt. “Wait,” you said.

Brow furrowed, I turned around and looked at you. None too kindly, I muttered, "What?"

It was in that moment, as we were standing under the tree and waiting for that wretched rain to stop, that you asked me, "Conceptually speaking, just conceptually, mind you - could you love me?"

I stared at you, not understanding the question. You weren't looking at me. I couldn't understand - why weren't you looking at me?

"Remember," you warned me, before I could reply, "it's my birthday." Your eyes were still downcast, but your hand on my sleeve was trembling.

I hesitated. Then, I said to you quietly, "Happy Birthday."

Glancing up at me in utter disappointment, your face scrunched up. Clearly, you were totally displeased by my impersonal answer.

"What kind-of answer- ?" you began, but just then, you dropped your cake.

"No!" you blurted out, distraught. Your reaction of complete indignation completely swallowed up the loveliness that had existed between us in that split second, and whatever slender possibilities created in that fragile and tender moment were definitively and forever lost.

I never quite understood what you were asking. After all, isn't all love experience? And so many years later, I don't see you around anymore, so I don't suppose I'll ever ask you what you meant by that. Still, I think back to that moment sometimes.

I always thought it was sad that you learned to ask for experience because your father let you down on your birthday, but, as things go, sadness lets you down soft and slow. More importantly, that was the first time that you had created a glass world all on your own, without relying on your father's presence to help you dream.

So, who's to say that the rain didn't bless you with a different kind-of love that day? If it was love, it was of the elusive sort, certainly - the type of feeling that might slip through your fingers over and over again like some mythical and uncatchable fish, but still, one that was blissfully and terrifyingly yours, and yours alone to keep with you no matter how many people told you that you were unlovable, no matter how many concepts proved empty and unprovable, and no matter how many birthdays you spent alone in your long and lonely run of life.



**Beach Scene** Alik Vetrof

# Lombardo's discourse

Jerome Berglund

---

My friend, it turns out, proves sagacious in jealously coveting and not allowing our neighbor to review the precious Tao I gave him earlier (citing 'being grabby' for his rationale), with its gorgeous black and white illustrations. He gifts her a different book on chakras instead, and she begins tearing out pages immediately. 'Look what she's doin' now!!' he mutters, motioning toward her. 'You made the right decision!' I whisper, concealing a snicker.



# Homecoming

Stephanie Johnson

---

Unremarkable hands  
poke out of  
navy polyester sleeves,  
a half inch too long;  
government standard issue.  
She swipes your passport  
in the reader, holds it up  
and compares it to your real self  
with the grace of having done this  
a thousand and one times in the last few  
hours.  
She asks where  
you were and for  
how long,  
when you reply “I was in -----  
for ten years” your eyes soften, remembering  
so very many things, your lips  
part as if to start telling Sharazade’s tales  
She shrugs.  
Looking at her terminal,  
she welcomes you home  
with indifference.

# Between Dreams

Cole McInerney

---

In the space  
separating our property  
from the new farm  
a few leagues away,  
the sound of a plodding  
western station  
travels easily  
in the middle of the night.

My partner asleep beside me  
on a partial pillow,  
half-smile and sweet snore,  
after agreeing earlier  
that we would not fight  
on our next train ride,  
after what transpired  
on our last.

I think about sleeping again,  
then think about rhubarb and  
retired men, and casinos and  
Jesus Christ and computer  
programming and Phil Hall and  
marriage and Montreal,  
and then stand and shuffle  
toward the open window.

At that screen  
I realize that there is  
no radio station  
playing from a new farm,  
but rather tens of thousands  
of bugs in the waistline grass,  
swarming and singing  
in a consistent pattern.

Now back in bed,  
I wonder how many  
radio stations have  
actually been bugs  
and then I feel you breathe,  
and so I breathe back,  
and you breathe in return.

# Shooting Stars

Donna Pucciani

---

How I speak to the dead is surely  
an embarrassment. I don't believe  
in ghosts, but when I tell my father  
I thought of his bookcase lately,  
the titles gather in my mind, with him  
collaged in their midst: The Magic Mountain.  
You Can't Go Home Again.

I talked to Bill today, fellow flutist  
in a bad local orchestra of our youth,  
who died in his recliner last November.  
I find myself asking a former colleague  
at a small Midwest university how  
retirement is going in a New England village,  
her sailboat, her church. She has sailed away  
with dementia. I still ask my old philosophy prof,  
who failed to answer my Christmas card,  
questions about epistemology,

phenomenology, how we know things,  
or pretend to know, how we never ask  
what is real before we speak to them,  
they who cross the sky like tails of the comets  
they once were.



# Urban Chimera

A. Farrier

---

The apartment is small—not quite New York small, more Midwest small—and has been dusty from the time he moved in. He sits at the foot of the mattress, watching the sun spill in from his open window and across the scratched hardwood floor.

There's a sigh, he looks over his shoulder at the brunette curled up in his sheets. She stretches her arms above her head before looking at him through half-lidded eyes and smiling: "Morning."

He crawls back up towards her. "Morning."

She opens her arms and he curls into them, closing his eyes.

"What happened to your tattoos?"

His eyes flick open. "What?"

"Your tattoos; I could have sworn you had more than this last night." She runs her finger down his forearm before shrugging. "I mean, there was a lot of liquor involved. I could have imagined it."

A dish breaks in the kitchen.

Her brows furrow and she sits up, pulling the sheets around her. "What was that?"

"Just the cat." He gets up. "I'll get it."

She snorts and curls her legs up to her chin. "You have a cat?"

"Not exactly. I'll be back in a moment."

When he opens the door, Tiger's whole face is in the sink, licking at his cereal bowl from yesterday morning. He slams the door shut and she looks up, hunkering low to the floor. Her butt wiggles from side to side, bouncing herself against the tile, ready to pounce.

"You can't even wait until we're out of the apartment? I don't have room for you—"

She lunges and in less than a second she's pinned him to the floor, licking his face.

He makes a choking sound and tries to push her off, but she's got either of his wrists pinned down, and his legs aren't much use.

From the bedroom: "What's going on out there?"

"Nothing!" He gets his hand loose and grips Tiger by her shoulder. There's a soft bronze light. He sits up and lets his eyes trace down his arm. Sure enough,

the tiger is back where she belongs, mid-stroll down his forearm. He smiles at her briefly before he starts to look over himself, trying to figure out what other images from his body have wandered off in the night.

Crow and Grizzly are present and accounted for.

Hummingbird? Missing, but not smart enough to go too far. He'll check the bowl of sugar water in a few minutes. It's probably there.

Giraffe and Rhino? Thank god, because those two getting out in his apartment would be kind of difficult to explain to the landlord. Rattlesnake was curled on the inside of his bicep. Cicada wings twitch against his back and he rolls his shoulders—Couldn't have those popping out.

He looks to see that Coral Snake had unwound from his fingers. Wasp on the back of his hand is missing, too. Both of them could be a pain—he just hopes the little escape artists hadn't gotten out of the apartment.

"Where's your cat?"

He startles and looks back to the kitchen. The brunette is standing there, sipping a glass of water, wearing his navy-blue flannel and her lacy purple panties.

"She's not my cat."

"Hm..." She finishes her glass. "Why are you sitting on

the floor?"

He stands, wiping his palms against his boxers. "No real reason."

"So, is this the part where you kick me out?" She pulls her hair back, securing it with elastic from her wrist. "Because you aren't getting this shirt back."

He sits his hand on the counter, smiling at her. "Aw, damn, I liked that one."

She laughs and saunters forward, pushing his chest playfully. "Hey, your tattoo..." She tips her head as she looks at it, tracing her fingers along Tiger's back. "It's back."

He looks at the counter near where she stood. Coral Snake slithers near her fingers.

"How about that?"

She stands on her tiptoes, sliding her hand further across the counter as she leans up to kiss him.

Coral Snake slithers and rears its head back. He dives for it, grabbing the creature. It dissolves in a soft bronze light. He feels the ink coil back around his fingers, weaving and settling in there.

"What? What is it?" She whirls her head to look.

“Just a bug.” He wipes his hand on the counter for affect. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

She shakes her head. “You’re so weird.”

He’s got to get her out of here. He still has three animals to find.

“Do you have a coffee maker?” She’s opens his fridge and stoops down to look inside it. “Or eggs? I can make breakfast.”

He hears buzzing. He looks around, trying to find the source.

“Or at least some bread for toast?” She’s still rummaging around the kitchen.

“Um, no. Need to get groceries. Coffee pot broke last month. The new one is in a box under the sink.”

She shakes her head, stooping low for the cabinet and pulling out a box. “Anybody ever tell you how much your single shows?”

“Nope.” He checks the sugar water bowl on top of the fridge. Hummingbird isn’t there.

She laughs while she sets up the coffee pot, washing it in the sink carefully before adding water then looking for filters, grounds, and a pair of mugs.

He goes to check the other bowl in the living room,

it isn’t there either, but he does find Wasp trying to escape; pounding itself angrily against a closed window.

Now it’s just a matter of getting ahold of it without pissing it off.

“You know.” She plops down on his couch, near the window. “You’re better looking than I thought you’d be.”

He’s about to reach for the wasp, but stops. “What?”

“Most of the guys I drunk-bone aren’t exactly the kind of guys you’d see on the cover of People Magazine.” She twirls the end of her ponytail. “I mean, you aren’t either, but you might be on the cover of Rolling Stone or something.”

He chuckles and leans back for the wasp. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You aren’t a musician or anything, are you?”

“Nope.”

“What did you say you did again?”

“I didn’t.” His brow furrows. If he doesn’t move fast, Wasp will get angry and that’s the last thing he needs.

“What are you doing now?” She sits up, pressing her knees into the couch before leaning over the back to look.



He wants to point out that she should be waiting for the coffee to brew or something, but it's too late. Wasp comes darting out and she ducks.

"Jesus!" She hisses. "You could have warned me."

He would apologize, but he's too busy chasing Wasp into the kitchen. He jumps before catching it in his hands. It gets a sting in before he feels the glow warm his palms and Wasp is back on his hand where it belongs.

"Did you kill it?" She asks, still curled on the couch, hands up against her chest from when she jumped.

"Yeah." He pulls his hands apart, making a show of dusting his hands into the trash, wincing when he brushes the sting.

"Did it sting you?" She gets up, crossing back into the kitchen. "Here, let me see."

And then she's taking his hand, holding it close to her face so she can see. She looks close, running her thumb over the sting.

"Well, the stingers not still in, which is good. Do you have any baking soda?"

"I think there's some in the freezer."

She nods and gets it. Makes a paste with it and some water before rubbing it over the sting. "Better?"

He nods because it does and the coffee pot dings.

"How did you know to do that?" He asks, watching as the baking soda paste starts to dry.

"How don't you?" The brunette pours their cups of coffee and pulls herself to sit up on the counter, swinging her legs as she takes a sip. "Your milk is expired, by the way."

"When?"

"Two or three days ago." She takes another sip and shrugs. "You really should go shopping."

He sighs, holding his cup with his not stung hand and taking a sip. "I know."

She drinks her coffee black, which is hot, but she is chatty. He's trying to figure out how to get her out of here without sounding like an asshole, but he can't exactly force her to chug piping hot coffee.

"I should probably get dressed and head out soon."

Oh, thank God.

"This was nice though." She smiled at him over the top of her mug before taking another sip.

"Yeah." He takes a sip. He hears the buzzing again but doesn't see Hummingbird.

She sets down her mug. “You don’t even remember my name, do you?”

He thinks about it a moment before she laughs.

“It’s okay. I don’t remember yours either.” She hops off the counter and starts rinsing her mug in the sink. He finishes off his coffee and she takes the mug to rinse his as well. She heads back towards the bedroom to pull on her clothes.

She comes out in ripped skinny jeans and a white t-shirt for a band he’s never heard of underneath his flannel. Her bra is neon green and blue—you can see it through her shirt.

“Did you know there’s a hummingbird in your bathroom?”

“What?”

“I didn’t think any lived around here, but yeah.” She twists her ponytail again. “A little green thing. I think it’s stuck up in the vent. You should help it out before it hurts itself.”

“Will do, thanks.”

“I’ve got to go to work now.” She leans up kissing the side of his neck before heading towards the door, ponytail swishing behind her.

She looks at him like she wants him to say something.

“See you around, Rolling Stone.” She says before the door shuts behind her.

It’s only quiet in the apartment for a moment before he hears the frantic fluttering of little Hummingbird stuck in his bathroom vent. He rounds the corner towards the bathroom and finds writing in purple lipstick across the mirror.

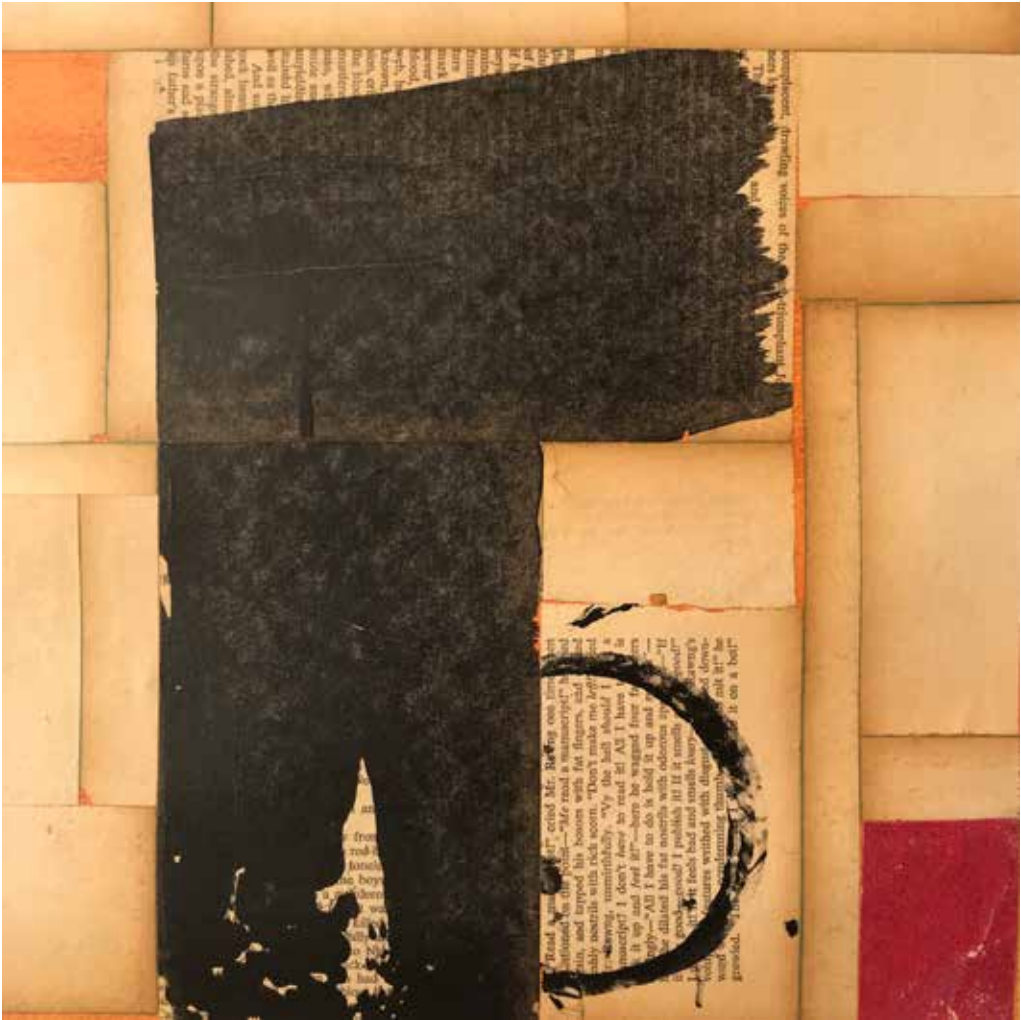
Again?

And a phone number.

A smile crosses his mouth before he climbs upon the counter, on his knees, and cups his hand around the little bird. There’s a flash of soft bronze light. He feels the bird sink back into the back of his hand, shining green feathers and spread open salmon wings.



**Indigo space 1** Ryoko Minamitani



Old Note Bruce Turk

# Chisisi and the Sphere

Julian Santiago Munoz

---

In the first book of Cicero's *De republica*, a brief mention is made of a certain tool of astronomy: the Archimedean sphere. It was a mechanical wonder granting the user the capacity to predict the movement of the stars. With this Archimedean sphere, a peasant would have been able to time his harvest by predicting the days of rain and eclipses. For, as Ptolemy wrote in the *Tetrabiblos*, the celestial movements of the planets and the stars affect the moods and seasons of the Earth.

The sphere is now lost, but there was a story I heard once in Ireland as I was visiting Glenstal Abbey near Limerick. It was the story of a Coptic Christian priest who arrived at the Benedictine monastery in the nineteenth century carrying with him a contraption which is now presumed to be the very same ancient instrument.

The monk's name was Chisisi of Cairo, an extraordinarily beautiful man with eyes the color of dark honey, a skin brown-olive from the Mediterranean sun and the touch of Persian blood. He had devoted himself to the Coptic branch of Christianity, but after having seen a baby laughing after his first baptism in a Catholic Church, he had been so delighted and touched that he decided to travel west to visit the lands of his Christian cousins.

It was on his journey through Lybia, where he had happened across a Muslim merchant of oddities and books, that the contraption caught his eye. The story was

told by a monk who sat with me on a bench in Glenstal Abbey after I had asked him about this rumor. He related that Chisisi had been transfixed by the wondrous machinery of the contraption.

It was so large that he had to carry it on his back like Atlas carrying the world, and every night of his journey he would set it up in front of him and study the movement of the stars and the planets before going to sleep. Chisisi knew, of course, as a child of the 19th century that the triumph of heliocentrism was total, but he was mesmerized by the level of detail and delicacy with which the geocentric contraption moved. The monks told me that the machine was perfect—or as one of them said, “Just and exact, like a clock.” The gears and the beams, the levers and the little fulcrums were fit with utter perfection. The spines of all who looked upon it would trickle with that soft electric sensation of comfort and tenderness which emerges when you look at something beautiful and angelic. It was almost as if by observing that so much care had gone into the making of this object, something of the dedication remained and was unleashed in the smooth motion of its many parts.

Not long after making port in Limerick, on the cold and windy southern coast of Ireland, he had walked up the green way to the arch between the two Norman towers that leads into the abbey with his contraption wrapped in

a woolen blanket on his back. A couple of the Benedictines had been huddled in a group outside the chapel talking together and when they saw the robed man, smelling of fish, his skin dark and his eyes as twilight and enticing as yellow opals, they encountered him and inquired as to his destination.

Chisisi did not know English so he responded in the little of the Latin he had studied long ago and which he expected these monks to know.

"I'm looking for your Western Christ," he said.

"Christ is one for all," one of the monks replied with a bit of pedantry.

Chisisi nodded but remained silent.

"Do you need assistance?" another said. And it was this second monk, whose name was Cillian O'Súilleabháin, who vested himself with the responsibility of taking care of the stranger that night. Chisisi accepted the offer to stay.

The story of a Latin-speaking Egyptian monk, a member of a Christian sect with still-raw ties to antiquity, had spread, and his celebrity accumulated with the aid of curiosity and rumor. Brother Cillian had put him in a small room in the corner of the dormitory building, which meant it was terribly cold at night, but Chisisi, by nature stoic and humble, did not complain. All evening, Chisisi would hear the whispering of monks who wanted to speak to him but who never had the courage to knock on his door. When it was time for Vespers, Chisisi would accompany the

monks and he would sit in the pews marveling at the Latin intonations.

The knowledge of a strange astronomical object in his possession was revealed after Cillian had entered his room the first night and seen the machine in the center of the room.

"*Stellae*," Chisisi had said and waved his hands forming an arch over his head. Stars. "*Stellae firmamentorum*." The stars of the heavens.

Chisisi crouched and rotated a little knob with two fingers. Every element of the machinery began to move in perfect synchronicity. The seven planets in their wandering paths, the stars of the zodiac and the neighboring constellations.

"*Eclipsis*," Chisisi said, and he moved the elements in such a way that the moon was linearly positioned between the Earth and Sun.

Cillian was fascinated by the instrument at once. The following day, he appeared very early in the morning before Lauds with the abbot. They marveled at the sphere and at Chisisi who seemed to them an improbable figure. The abbot offered to buy the machine, sensing that it could be of academic value, but Chisisi said that he had given up the sights of France and England for the object. He would not let go of it easily.

By the end of the second day of Chisisi's stay, the entire abbey had seen the sphere. Visitors began to barge into his room as Chisisi taught himself English with an English Bible and its Latin translation. They would excuse

themselves out of non-mandatory events like meditative walks through the backwoods of the abbey and say with twinkling, mischievous eyes that Brother Chisisi was hosting prayer sessions in Arabic. They said that they wanted to praise God in the language of Mohammed. And instead they would spend hours experimenting with the movement of the stars, huddled together on the floor like children in a nursery, seeing what would happen to Mars if Saturn was moved here three times or how many revolutions of the Sun would be necessary for the next realignment of the planets. (A number was given after hours and hours of rotations but it turned out to be in the third millennium, and thus the issue had become inapplicable and uninteresting.)

Brother Cillian, like his fellow monks, would spend many hours and days in the Egyptian's room gawking at the machine, though Cillian was less intrigued by the sphere than by the man.

Here, the monk who was telling me this story drew himself very close to me, so that I could smell his breath, clean and nearly odorless but for faint apple. He said that Cillian had fallen in love.

Brother Cillian was said to have been enthralled by Chisisi's eyes, which were ferocious, like a panther's in the twilight. Cillian would constantly attend to the Egyptian and he would return from his services red in his cheeks, his lips full of color.

The monk leaned back to his side of the bench, breathed in deeply the cold and wet Irish air, which, to me, felt

always a little painful at the tip of the nose, and carried a pure, arboreal fragrance, a smell not of flowers but of muddy leaf, an earthy subtle crystalline sweetness. He exhaled and in a wistful tone said, "Imagine! All those times he saw his body! *Ecce Homo!*" He smiled, tapped my knee, stood up and left.

The rest of the story was difficult to extract because the monks were ashamed, perhaps at the fact that something like that could occur in their beautiful and secluded home. I learned the rest of the story little by little, through unwilling, and indirect conversation. From Brother O'Hara, who was busy tending to a garden, I gleaned that Cillian changed. He would fall asleep mid-prayer and he would remove early from most functions. From Brother Toomet, I learned that Cillian was in the practice of constant ice baths after Vespers. Brother Leahy said at one point, months after the Egyptian's arrival, Cillian stopped taking the Egyptian's laundry up to his room, particularly on those Monday mornings when the Egyptian exercised in his underwear.

Everything else became public record. The Egyptian vanished and Cillian was found hanging in the Egyptian's room. Below him, the sphere lay broken and charred.

It's evident that some sort of quarrel must have occurred. Could Cillian, in frothing passion, have done something to the Egyptian? Kissed him perhaps? On the cheeks? Could their lips have met? Or was he forceful? He must have been rejected and so he burned and thrashed the sphere which Cillian saw as his rival for the Egyptian's



attention. Did the Egyptian flee from fear? Did Cillian commit suicide out of shame and repentance, resignation and weakness, or spite and revenge?

When the detectives arrived, they began a tangential investigation into the curious case of the sphere. The detectives saw how unusual the remains of the sphere were. It wasn't until they were taken to Dublin and a forensic investigator had called a professor of Classical and Medieval History at Trinity College, that the words "Archimedean sphere" were uttered. The professor rushed from his offices to the Gardaí station where the remains had been organized according to kind and type on a metal table. After hearing some of the monks' testimonies, and after repeated trips to the library's records of astronomical tools in the classical world, he declared that this may have been the fabled element spoken of in Cicero's *De republica*.

"The armillary sphere is essentially a three-dimensional chart," the professor said in a famous lecture after the case was closed. "A Ptolemaic armilla would have at its center the Earth. Around it, there would be brass and copper bands—or any precious metal depending on the luxury—at various angles from the equator of the Earth which would represent the Equinoctial, or the passage of the Sun; the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn; the Arctic and Antarctic Circles; and the colures which pass through the poles of the heavens at right angles. A regular armillary sphere would therefore be a very static object. It wouldn't be something you could manipulate. But this

mysterious object, which was found in a state of terrible disrepair was not an armillary sphere. It was the fabled Archimedean, first mentioned in the Republic of Cicero. It was designed to be 'manipulated.' As such it was a highly complicated and cerebral mechanical tool, marvelous, for the density and precision of its construction. That the object is irreproducible goes without saying. It seems that the circumstances of its destruction involved a jealousy of a most forbidden kind. It is yet another casualty in the battle between reason and passion."

The professor was lauded for his speculation and soon the mystery of the sphere overshadowed the drama which unfolded in the abbey and which the monks were eager to forget.

The case was closed though no Archimedean spheres have been found since then and the memory of the Egyptian man was lost.

I, on the other hand, one hundred years later, like to wonder about the many nights during which Cillian and Chisisi would sit in silence and during which Cillian would play with the contraption and Chisisi would read the English Bible and perhaps feel the other's stare and be thrilled and afraid like a child knowing love for the first time.



**Abstract 2021.015** Owen Brown

# Walking the Moonlit Roads

Michael Fallon

---

All night, on so many nights,  
I've been out walking the moonlit roads,  
River banks, bone white beaches  
With my father, my brother,  
Or one of my many lost friends.  
As we stroll together through the shadows,

What do we say to one another?  
Do I spill out all my loneliness,  
My losses, my fears, all my griefs,  
While we stride together down the cinder path  
Toward dawn

Where I sit up in my warm bedclothes,  
Cannot remember a word?  
Maybe the dead just listen  
Nod silently  
Dissolve into light



**Apart** Barbara Martin

# Woodpecker

Jeremiah Prenn

---

Four lengths from bird's bed,  
a ticking chirp.  
The stick-weed pencils been whittled and gutted, so the  
Woodpecker could do his own tongue-rolling.

Ee, the sound they make.

# Subject to Delay

Oz Hardwick

---

Airspace is closed, with padlocks on all wings, and we are grounded like lightning or naughty schoolkids. In one pocket I carry flint and tinder, in the other a shoelace of horse chestnuts, baked hard. Clouds stack up outside the no-fly zone and insects buzz an impatient double helix, charting the DNA of stasis. In one hand I carry the rain we've prayed for, in the other a salve bought from a fearful apothecary who opened her shop out of pity although it was a Sunday in a bygone century. All over the world, crowds gather to feel the weight of nothing pressing down on them like they've never known before, waiting for the sky to open. My left brain knows all the facts; my right brain doesn't trust them. At the end of a long corridor in a locked-down airport, there are vending machines for hot drinks, binoculars, and birdsong, but I'm out of loose change.



**Daipaidong** Carina Chang



# Friends

Martin Toman

---

When my brother Thomas was eleven he had an accident. We were out riding horses; I was on my father's horse, and he was on my mare. Thomas had wanted his own horse for years, but like me, he had to wait until he was twelve to be old enough to be given his own. My horse was smaller and calmer, and in the year I'd had her she'd never thrown me. Add to that I was far less likely to give Thomas a hiding than my father would if something happened to the animal he was riding.

We had been checking on the cattle at the far end of the property before the end of the day, and were riding back into the sunset. I heard a noise behind me and turned in the saddle to see my horse throw Thomas to the ground. My mare had shied at a stick that I guess she thought was a snake, and Thomas had gone flying. I wheeled my father's horse around to where my brother lay, thinking at the very worst he'd have a broken leg or collarbone. But Thomas hadn't made a sound when he hit the ground. He lay crumpled, his head tucked under his shoulder. I dismounted, ran over and turned him over.

Thomas' eyes were clear and open. He looked as if he was staring upward at the last of the golden light of

the day, enjoying the illumination as it passed. The edges of the horizon were already darkening around us, the azure taking on its midnight tinge, the clear blue retreating into night. I sometimes think that as the light left that day, so did the Thomas that I had known every day of his life. As the earth rotated, and the shining face of the sun shone somewhere else, some essential part of Thomas left.

Three days after the accident I went out on my mare. The horses had scattered across the farm when Thomas had been helicoptered from the hillside. I found them the next day, gently cropping at grass as if nothing had happened. I walked them back to the stable, cleaned them up, and put away their gear in the tack shed. My father had seen me leading them across the farm and had turned away. I never saw him ride a horse again. Thomas remained in ICU for weeks, in an induced coma with a ventilator doing his breathing for him, with my mother by his side, waiting for a change.

I rode my horse to where the accident had taken place, surveyed the scene. The grass and earth had been trampled by the traffic that came after the accident; tyre tracks, footprints, even the marks left by the

landing skids of the helicopter. It took me a while, but I found the stick that the mare had shied away from. It was about as thick as my thumb, bleached a pale brown by the sun. I held the stick in two hands and then slowly broke it against my knee. My horse looked at me, her liquid eyes casting my reflection.

Looking at the horse I felt something shift inside. Instead of trying to logically analyse the situation, another more primal part of me seemed to respond. Something deeper than understanding, an urge more reptilian and basic. I walked over to my horse and clasped her around the neck, tucked my head under hers. A strong equine smell enveloped my nose, her short brown hair, whorled and brushed over by my hands since I had owned her, was both soft and brittle under my fingers. I ran my hands across her neck, tracing her contours and lines. The horse, trusting me, relaxed under my touch. I held my fingertips to her jugular vein, and her heartbeat, controlled and strong, pulsed away to the beat of her great bloody heart. And all the while as I embraced her I could feel the weight of the pocket knife that I had brought with me in my back pocket. How simple would it be to open up the blade and plunge it into my mare's neck, puncturing the jugular. I could then watch this animal that had changed everything bleed out in the field, her red hoof prints just another set of marks to join the traffic that had passed where we stood.

But I didn't. For a while I held her, and then let go. I undid the bridle, took off the saddle and blanket, pushed her away. I carried the tack with me back to the home paddock, and my mare, not understanding the situation, followed me a few paces behind. I never rode her again.

When Thomas returned from the hospital six months later he was permanently bound to a wheel chair. The accident had damaged his brain and spinal cord. He had lost the ability to use his legs and his arms would flail about uselessly, regardless of the number of therapy sessions he attended in the city. The last complex sentence that Thomas ever completed was just before we'd left the cattle to ride home. He'd said: 'Let's get home before Friends is on'. In terms of a last sentence that's not up there with Oscar Wilde.

But this new Thomas could still speak, if you tried hard enough to understand what he was saying.

The first time I recognised this was when we were alone together one night watching Friends. My father was away with cattle sales, and my mother was somewhere else in the house. It had been almost a year since the accident, and as was my habit even before he had come off the horse, I talked my way through television shows. My family would hate it, but as we sat and watched I would provide an editorial on the characters and plot. A year prior Thomas would have

been telling me to shut up, but now he didn't have a choice but to put up with my analysis. In this episode Ross' character was performing his typical useless schtick, trying to attract Rachel. I laughed where you were meant to, and in a pause in the recorded audience laughter I heard a sound from Thomas that was different to the noises he typically made.

I leaned in to Thomas, turned the television volume down, and spoke: 'Thomas, what was that?'

Thomas' face was twisted in a rictus effort, his head tilted to one side. Then he made the noise again. This time I heard it clearly.

'Shut. Up.'

I looked at him, amazed. The flickering coloured light of the television illuminated the surface of his eyes, and for a fleeting moment there was laughter in them. Thomas' face twisted again. Drool trailed out of the corner of his mouth as he opened it.

'Fuck. You. Dick. Head.'

I started crying. My mother ran to see what was wrong.

After Thomas returned from hospital he began attending a different school to mine, although to call the institution where my brother attended a school would probably be a misnomer. I didn't realise it at the time, but we were incredibly lucky that there was a place my brother could go two or three days a week.

In those days we called it a special school. My mother would drive us to the bus stop about three kilometres down the road from our property, and we would wait in the car for our respective buses to arrive. His bus would always show up first, and I would help my mother and the driver load Thomas onto the vehicle through the backdoor platform to join his classmates; an assortment of kids with various disabilities who lived in the broader area. I would wait alone for my bus to arrive.

One morning a few months after Thomas started going to the special school my bus arrived early, just after Thomas'. I heard the hiss of its air brakes just as we were wheeling my brother onto his bus. The students from my school looked on. I saw their faces in the windows of the bus as I stood holding Thomas' bag, my mother dutifully wiping the saliva that perpetually ran down his chin, his skin red and raw from the constant wetness. When Thomas was aboard I grabbed my belongings and got on my own bus. What had happened was no secret, but my peers had not seen Thomas since the accident, never seen him as he was. Up until that day the timing of both buses hadn't intersected.

Even now, years later, I can remember the events of the next few minutes with absolute and forensic accuracy. When I walked onto the bus there was silence. The

usual morning clamour and chat had been replaced by a silence. It felt like every student was staring at me. I walked down the darkened aisle, and when I turned my head to look behind me, even the bus driver had craned his neck to watch me making my way to my usual seat. Once there I shut my eyes. I guess I hoped that by closing my eyes others would look away. When I opened them Michael, a boy in the grade two years above mine, was still staring in my direction. When he had my attention he smiled. With deliberate ease he took his water bottle out of his bag and twisted his face to resemble Thomas' scrunched and contorted expression. Rolling his eyes, he then tipped the bottle upwards, and let the water spill out the corner of his mouth like drool, the liquid splashing onto his blazer. There was laughter across the bus, and wiping his face, Michael joined the mirth. Still smiling, he turned away from me, his eyes still rolling around in their sockets to mimic my Thomas'.

Up until the horse had thrown Thomas I was the kind of person who would try to avoid confrontations, using words and wits to avoid fights. Even on the football field I would be able to ignore taunts and premeditated violence to focus on the game and my role in the team. But since Thomas' accident I had changed. I could no longer concentrate. I felt that there was a restless animal moving inside my body, tickling my internal organs and brain, trampling all over my nerves and

testing my ability to control myself. When Michael had imitated my brother in his distress, the animal inside me stopped moving. I could feel its weight in my chest, the strong and steady heartbeat of my rage pulsing like a pump under my ribs.

During the winter months my mother would make me a thermos of tea to drink on the bus ride to school. My thermos was an old fashioned steel cylinder that my father was given when he served in Vietnam. It was scraped and dented, both through my use and that of my father. When filled with liquid it was quite heavy.

After Michael had turned away I reached into my bag and pulled out the thermos. Then I stood and walked down the aisle of the bus. The floor of the bus didn't feel real under my feet. I felt as if I was acting out a dream. The only person who saw me approach was a boy named Chris, who was sitting next to Michael. There was till laughter in the air.

Chris, who ended up driving a car into a tree to kill himself a few years later, had half stood up by the time I reached their seat, his eyes wide open, registering his surprise. But before he could raise the alarm I brought my arms up above my head and swung the thermos down like an axe, striking Michael's skull with a cracking sound. The driver stamped on the brake pedal and everyone lunged forward with the delayed momentum. The shock of the blow reverberated

through my arms. Michael had fallen face down from his seat into the aisle. Blood was pouring from his head from where I hit him, and I saw that his ears were spurting blood. A girl one seat across from us screamed. Chris had stood up by now, and was raising his hands in self-defence when I ploughed into him. I managed to strike him in the temple with the thermos and knock him unconscious before two older students and the bus driver had disarmed me and wrestled me to the ground.

I was expelled from school and charged with assault occasioning grievous bodily harm. While I was eventually found guilty of a lesser charge, I escaped a conviction on the grounds of emotional distress and because of my age. As I had just turned fifteen, I was only one year past the threshold of criminal responsibility, so my level of culpability was considered to be diminished. Despite the ferocity of my attack, Michael eventually made a recovery of sorts, but could never play contact sport again as he would experience a concussion at the slightest physical contact. Looking back, my only regret of that morning is that I didn't commit a murder. The animal inside me had to be content with what I did.

Thomas, of course, never really recovered. In this twenties he died of septicaemia due to an infected pressure sore. However, when he was still in his

mid-teens a children's make-a-wish charity was able to arrange for him to be visited by a celebrity of his choice. Jennifer Aniston was in Australia filming a movie, and she was kind enough to drop by the farm and pose for photographs. Thomas, who by that stage was able to express himself more clearly, was able to cajole her into giving him a kiss on the cheek. She really was a good sport about it as the cameras rolled and clicked.

When I look at the photos now, and study Thomas' grimaced expression, one of his eyes is open, the other shut. There was Thomas, that little bastard, getting a kiss from Rachel Green, winking his way through the whole bloody thing.



**Moon Gate**  
Marsha Solomon

# Worldly Goods

Bruce Meyer

---

The storage facility was open twenty-four hours a day because physicians kept their records in the padlocked cells that reminded me of prisons I'd seen on television. Two in the morning had seemed a good idea when I began. I didn't want to be alone but the longer I shifted and hauled, my late aunt Shirley's left me, the more exhausted I felt and the more I was overcome by a feeling of disturbing the dead.

My aunt and I had never been close but I inherited her worldly goods. My mother often admitted she found her sister Shirley overbearing. My aunt insisted on being the keeper of my grandparent's belongings. She scooped up everything and hoarded it. When Shirley died it all went into storage... There was the sofa with traces of lily of the valley perfume that remained from Gran's afternoon naps.

As I struggled to shift a dresser, I realized hell is keeping other people's possessions long after they are dead. Shirley locked her mother away in the twelve-by-ten vault, entombing her like a Pharaoh for ruining her future.

Shirley never married and blamed my grandmother for chasing away suitors. I sat down in an overstuffed easy chair from the Thirties and wondered if I should be unpacking the dead and their troubles.

I closed my eyes and moved through the rooms of my grandmother's house. It had been a happy place for me. I remembered the things that weren't there – the claw-foot bathtub, the cast iron kitchen sink draining board.

I thought it would be nice to surprise my Mom with a photograph of the three of them. They were standing beside a lake, smiling, if I remembered the picture correctly. Happiness. A rare moment lost in time

I had been through dresser drawers and cedar chests and poked among the layers of two lives. I was ready to give up when I found what I was looking for in the buffet that still held my grandmother's silverware, tarnished from years in the dark stillness. I held the photo to the light.

They weren't as I remembered them.

Shirley was scowling at my grandmother. My mother was the only one smiling. The past hadn't been worth the trouble of finding it.

Dawn was coming.

I had to put everything back where it had been, including the ghosts. They cannot handle a new day and they fade the moment they are touched by sunlight.

# Taxidermy on Death Row

Clara McAuley

---

The first thing they teach you in law school / is how to operate a guillotine. / Shaves the heads of fresh infants, already in handcuffs, / still womb-hot, they wear a grown man's bracelets. / Next, they teach you to digest the American dream / chew it like tobacco and spit, / pave the streets with it. / Grab a jacklight and sit. / Shoulder trauma, packed like gunpowder into a rolled diploma / and be sure to wear gloves.

Graduate to the courthouse / where they're gerrymandering ethics, / a mantelpiece is ground between a jurors' jowls / as they wait like civilized hounds to tear apart a carcass with their mouths. / Eyes feast like cannibals / pick dignity from their teeth like gristle. / Who's hungry? / 'Cause grief won't satisfy a predatory belly. / You know, perjured justice is a glutton / revenge its cousin / digs three graves instead of one.

Now, in old age, they iron out men and walk across them, / in the smoking room, spoons of marrow with their thumbs / sit beneath the array of severed heads, mounted as taxidermy / warped like hide into theatre-leers, lidless stares sag into eye-bags like bandaged hammocks. / A man, exempt, throws jeers like darts / at a moral display of criminals/ and pretends his gavel's not another kind of murder weapon / cracks just like bullets.



# Where is it you wait?

Horia Pop

---

I wait on thresholds  
don't know what to do  
where to go

I wait on my bed, my friend,  
looking at the same ceiling for more than I can count  
I know what spiders think  
so don't ask me if I still got faith  
cause I can hear them walking at night

I wait on the little breaks  
I have on petty jobs  
small parenthesis of silences  
my hands on the wall  
my face down  
my eyes not there  
just not there

# Shelter In Place

Eren Harris

---

As if “shelter” were  
an intransitive verb  
something anyone  
can just do  
on the spot,  
on their own,  
as in “Leave me alone,  
I’m sheltering.”

Me, I’ve been sheltering forever.  
Turtling in when the going gets rough.  
I’ve got a whole nest up here,  
lined with soft things and stories  
where good wins out even  
when the good guys aren’t perfect  
and sometimes  
are hardly  
even good.

I’ve got cerebral castles,  
neural catacombs—  
and you’re telling me  
to shelter in place,  
as if  
I’ve ever survived  
any differently.

# Cryptography

Gavin Boyter

---

“...it’s not as if you never listen, it’s just that... well, I can’t rely on you to be listening. I always have to double-check. If I want to tell you anything important, I mean, like maybe we might go and talk to someone about our... issues... you know, in the bedroom? Or out of it, frankly... You just seem so distant sometimes, like you’re about to be carried off in a balloon. It’s like I married Richard Branson, except without the billions of pounds. See – you’re not even listening now!”

“What? Sorry, I was just....”

But there was no good answer to what I was just... Diana was right. I phase out. It’s not because she bores me. It’s just... well, there are a lot of competing subjects of interest. Like the ransomware attack at Hutchins and Bright, which I’m supposed to be devoting every waking moment to.

It’s costing the investment bank around £125,000 an hour to be shut out of their in-house trading platforms and internal servers. My company, Damocles Security, has been tasked with hacking the hackers, so to speak, breaking through the cryptographic barrier that the Brute Force attack has built around my client.

Right now, I can feel my phone buzzing in my pocket, and I can tell it’s Janice, H&B’s Head of IT calling me

for an update. I need time to think, I need to be left alone. Ideally in a quiet, cool, dark place and not in some glitzy restaurant I chose on a whim in a last-ditch attempt to impress Diana and save our marriage. It’s the kind of place that serves foam as a culinary feature, for Christ’s sake!

“...I suppose it makes perfect sense for somebody obsessed with cryptography to be totally opaque and impossible to decipher, but you could at least pretend to be paying attention.”

She’s really angry, although holding the volume down as we’re in public. I really ought to listen.

“I’m sorry, Di, it’s this contract. It’s a major job and they’re on my back for a solution. Okay, I’m ambitious, but I’m also up against a hard deadline. If I can’t fix this by 1pm tomorrow, their CEO has instructed his CFO to pay the ransom. Can you believe it? £1.4 million pounds to unlock their own servers. That’s totally unacceptable.”

“Is it as unacceptable as you asking me here because you want to ‘demonstrate how much I mean to you’ and then spending most of the meal studying your phone?”

She’s got a point. My phone has been burping out urgent

messages and emails for the last seventy minutes, even though it's 8:40pm and I put in eleven hours on the job today. Do they think my brain has unlimited resources? That said, I did put my phone away into my inside pocket ten minutes ago and I haven't taken it out since.

"I'm not looking at my phone."

"Not at this precise moment, but you're thinking about it. I can tell. You need to switch it off. In fact, give it here."

Diana sticks her hand out. I know that look – it says that my compliance is optional, but non-compliance will bring disastrous consequences. She's holding me to ransom. I dig out my phone and it starts to ring. I can't help but notice the name that pops up. Colin Bracewell, H&B's CEO. Shit, that's upping the ante.

"Give!"

I hand it over and Diana rejects the call and turns the iPhone off. She drops it into her handbag. I can't help thinking that Bracewell is terrified and might be about to give in to the criminals threatening to permanently eradicate his hard-earned business intelligence. I've told him that's not possible, but I could tell he didn't believe me.

"They won't be satisfied with that one payment," I say.

"What?" says Diana. I appear to have spoken my

thought aloud. "Are you still not listening to me?"

Crisis point; Diana is practically shaking with rage. I used to love her emotional nature, which contrasted so vividly with my own diffidence. We worked well as a team. I'd order the perfect wine for our meal, and Diana would complain when it was corked.

I also loved – no, strike that – still love – her smile, her girlish giggle, her kindness with my elderly parents, and her resignation when she finally accepted we couldn't have kids. There's a lot at stake here. Stake spelt S-T-A-K-E... and also S-T-E-A-K. Anagrams.

It couldn't be that simple, could it? I was looking for a mathematical solution – could it be a linguistic cipher, transposed into Hex? Old school?

"I'm listening. Sorry. You were going to tell me about the article you've been commissioned to write?"

The subject she brought up just before I began to drift. I'm hoping she'll just re-run that conversational routine and ignore the unpleasant subroutine we've been looping through for fourteen minutes.

"You really want to know?"

"I do," I say. And I actually do. I'm not ambivalent towards my wife, or our marriage. I want to focus on her, to concentrate on us. But there's something on the tip of my tongue, or emerging from a tangle of neurons. Something embryonic.

“Well, it’s about birdsong, and the latest theories about how, and exactly what, birds are communicating. I’m getting deep into the research on starlings, and their mimicry. They are amazing birds, able to mimic car alarms, train whistles, chainsaws, sirens, and loads of other birds. Some say it’s a kind of audio camouflage. Other scientists think it’s a mating display. Personally, I think they do it just because they can.”

I laugh, although I’m not exactly sure exactly why. Then it hits me. Mimicry and anagrams... Hallelujah and Eureka all at once! Hutchins and Bright may not have been hacked after all – it’s only necessary for blackmail purposes to make it seem that way.

“Gotta go to the loo,” I announce, loosening my shoelace under the table. I stand and shimmy around Diana, then pretend to notice the untied lace. I drop to tie it and surreptitiously ferret the phone from my wife’s handbag. Palming it I stand up and excuse myself. Diana’s eyes furrow, and her mouth is set in a grim little line, but I feel like I’m getting away with it.

When I return from the bathroom, having had a seven-minute call with Jasmine Bhattacharya, H&B’s head of IT Security, Diana is no longer at the table. Her handbag and scarf are no longer dangling over the back of the chair. Shit!

She’s over by the coat stand near the giant fish tanks, trying to untangle her raincoat from those of other

patrons, while a waiter buzzes around her, trying to help. I rush over.

“Diana! What are you doing?”

“Leaving,” she says, with a quaver in her voice that sends a shock of guilt through me.

“Don’t,” I plead. “I had a breakthrough. I won’t be so distracted now. I don’t need to think about it anymore.”

“And I don’t need to think about us anymore,” Diana replies, ambiguously. “If you’d wanted your phone, you could have asked.”

She yanks at her coat and the whole stand tilts precariously. I catch it just in time and prop it back in place as Diana flees. I have absolutely no idea whether to pursue her straight away or let her cool down for a while. I’m sure she’ll forgive me when I tell her I’ve just saved a FTSE 100 company several million pounds. Won’t she?

I should probably run after her. Or maybe not. I guess, if I give her some time, I can call Bracewell back. He should really hear it from me. It won’t take too long.

I duck out of the way of the waiters, sink behind an illuminated wall of tropical fish, and start dialing.



**Quarantine time** Kateryna Bortsova

# Phase 1

Cleo Rohn

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A woman is telling a stranger  
The wonders of nutritional yeast. Her name  
is Audra, the woman, and when the stranger speaks he  
calls her often by that name - well, Audra,  
I don't know, Audra - cradles the newly-learned  
syllables, a lifetime of shuttered days  
since any one of us held another  
name atop our tongues.

They have dogs, the stranger and Audra. They speak  
a park bench apart, an apocalyptic  
intimacy of intimacy. Easter Sunday in the corner park,  
and strangers confess like lovers. He admits  
his petty sins: the sugared cereal he pours  
every morning, the cigarette-between-cigarettes dance of  
days forced to be mundane. The afternoon  
crawls in infancy- the Governor has declared  
there is nowhere to be.

No one has mowed the grass for weeks.  
A million suns of dandelions are exploding  
On a hillside far too small to hold them. And I  
Wonder what parts of this will be the ones to outlive us:  
The stranger or Audra, cigarettes or nutritional  
yeast, precaution or irony, the cracked empty streets  
bleaching in the sun, the congregation of wind-  
chimes singing prayers in the park corner,  
the dogs fruitlessly pawing the fountain for  
water that will not come.

# Prairie dog lifting its tiny hands

Jordan James

---

I rummage through the stacks  
of National Geographic made stiff  
by decades of box-sitting, years  
of shelf-standing, searching  
for the photo that will send  
a signal deep into the black pit  
where my muse lives, undisturbed  
and angry for surface air.  
My partner urges me to write  
about people, about myself,  
to speak of things  
she thinks I've seen;  
heeding her advice, I direct  
my attention to the covers populated  
by humans: Sikh tightens  
his emerald turban, anthropomorphic  
scribblings of Mayan warriors,  
Jane Goodall, prairie dog  
lifting its tiny hands to the Lord.  
These eyes are drawn at the last  
second to the animal, the most  
unlike myself; and yet there  
it is, the only photograph  
of something searching for contact  
it will never understand.





**Hatching** Serge Lecomte

# Contributor Info

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## **Jerome Berglund**

Jerome Berglund has previously published poetry, short stories, and plays, in over thirty journals and anthologies during the course of the last several years. He is furthermore an established, award-winning fine art photographer, whose black and white pictures have been exhibited in galleries across New York, Minneapolis, and Santa Monica.

## **Kateryna Bortsova**

[bortsova6.wixsite.com/bortsova](http://bortsova6.wixsite.com/bortsova)

At present time Kateryna Bortsova is a painter – graphic artist with BFA in graphic arts and MFA. Works of Kateryna took part in many international exhibitions (Taiwan, Moscow, Munich, Spain, Italy, USA etc.). Also she win silver medal in the category “realism” in participation in “Factory of visual art”, New York, USA and 2015 Emirates Skywards Art of Travel competition, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Kateryna is always open for commission and you can view her work on Instagram: @katerynabortsova, or on her website.

## **Gavin Boyter**

[www.gavinboyter.com](http://www.gavinboyter.com)

Gavin is a Scottish writer and filmmaker living in London. He has published two travel memoirs about running ludicrously long distances, Downhill from Here and Running the Orient. The latter book charts his 2300 mile run from Paris to Istanbul, following the 1883 route of the Orient Express. Gavin’s stories have been published in Constellations, Blueing the Blade, DIAGRAM, Riptide, The Closed Eye Open, Bright Flash, La Piccioletta Barca and The Abstract Elephant. He is also the writer-director of the 2015 independent film Sparks and Embers.

## **Lawrence Bridges**

[www.lawrencebridges.com](http://www.lawrencebridges.com)

Lawrence Bridges is best known for work in the film and literary world. His poetry has appeared in The New Yorker, Poetry, and The Tampa Review. He has published three volumes of poetry: Horses on Drums, Flip Days, and Brownwood. As a filmmaker, he created a series of literary documentaries for the NEA’s “Big Read” initiative, which include profiles of Ray Bradbury, Amy Tan, Tobias Wolff, and Cynthia Ozick. His photographs have appeared in the Las Laguna Art Gallery 2020, Humana Obscura, Wanderlust a Travel Journal, the London Photo Festival, and displayed in the ENSO Art Gallery, Malibu, California.

## **Owen Brown**

[owenbrownartist.com](http://owenbrownartist.com)

I studied at California College of Arts, and have degrees from Yale College and the University of Chicago. For many years I supported art and family by working as an entrepreneur in the Bay Area. After 30 years in San Francisco, I moved to Minneapolis. I have exhibited throughout the US. Works have been acquired by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Nature Conservancy, and the Weisman Museum, and can be found in collections here and abroad. In Minnesota, I show at Grand Hand and Veronique Wantz, on Artsy I am represented by Gallery 13.

## **Carina Chang**

[www.carinachang.com](http://www.carinachang.com)

Carina Chang is a first-generation Chinese American painter artist based in Queens, New York. She was raised between New Jersey, New York, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Raised by immigrant parents from

Hong Kong and the Dominican Republic, she studies cultural identity and self-identity. She challenges figuration in a Western canon by representing Asian influences in fine art. She studied Fine Art at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ.

### **Michael Fallon**

Michael Fallon's poems have appeared recently in Northeast Narrative, Crosswinds Poetry Journal, The Connecticut River Review, The Loch Raven Review, Illuminations, Southword, and other magazines. He is the author of 4 collections of poetry, A History of the Color Black, Dolphin-Moon Press, 1991; Since You Have No Body, winner of the Plan B Press Poetry Chapbook Competition, 2011; The Great Before and After, BrickHouse Books, 2011, and Empire of Leaves, Singing Man Press, 2018.

### **A. Farrier**

A. Farrier writes urban and southern Gothic fiction, with the occasional dabble into poetry. They are a graduate from Arkansas Tech University with a BA in English, a BA in Communications, and a BFA in Creative Writing. Their work has previously been published in Watershed Review, Litro: A Literary Journal, and Zimbellhouse Publishing's Anthology: 1929 among others.

### **Oz Hardwick**

[www.ozhardwick.co.uk](http://www.ozhardwick.co.uk)

Oz Hardwick is a UK-based poet, whose work has been widely published in international journals and anthologies. His chapbook Learning to Have Lost (Canberra: IPSI, 2018) won the 2019 Rubery International Book Award for poetry, and his most recent publication is the prose poetry sequence Wolf Planet (Clevedon: Hedgehog, 2020). Oz is Professor of English at Leeds Trinity University, where he leads the postgraduate Creative Writing programmes.

### **Eren Harris**

[www.erenharris.com](http://www.erenharris.com)

Eren Harris is a genre- and gender-fluid creator. Their debut poetry chapbook, Chrysalis, is available now from Lupercalia Press. Eren's poetry has also appeared or is forthcoming in corporeal, Claw & Blossom, held., Two Hawks Quarterly, and the Arthropod Anthology from Perennial Press, among others. Their short story "Bodies in Flight" won the fiction prize for Please See Me's Spring 2020 contest. When not immersed in editing their first novel, Eren assists high school students with the college application process. They live in Los Angeles with their husband and two cats.

### **Jordan James**

Jordan James has been published in Cagibi, Throats to the Sky, Product, Kalopsia, and The Robert Frost Review, with works forthcoming in The Westchester Review. He is currently a graduate instructor at USM working on his PhD in Creative Writing.

### **Stephanie Johnson**

Stephanie Johnson's poetry has appeared in numerous publications including Witty Partition, Sink Hollow, Forum Literary Magazine, and others. She is an Associate Editor at Novel Slices, a new literary magazine based solely on novel excerpts, and has spent most of her adult life teaching English literature, ESL and Spanish in several countries around the world. Her writing usually focuses on the slightly uncomfortable space of the expatriation/repatriation experience. She is currently based in Sydney, Australia. Find her on Instagram at @stephaniejohnsonpoetry and Twitter at @stephan64833622

### **Jennifer Kim**

Jennifer Kim grew up in California. She studied Philosophy and Politics at Pomona College. Afterwards, she studied law at the University of Pennsylvania. Along with being an avid reader and writer of fiction, Jennifer also enjoys acting and dancing.

# Contributor Info

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## **Van Lanigh**

Van Lanigh is a painter, photographer, and sculptor based in the Netherlands whose works have been exhibited nationally, as well as in Switzerland, the United States, France, Germany, England, Italy, and South Korea. Describing her art as an unusual blend of abstractionism, figurative art, and surrealism, she endeavors to achieve resonance with viewers through the use of visual effects and the message of each piece. Lanigh's vibrant compositions are created using oils, oil pastels, acrylics, plastic, and clay.

## **Serge Lecomte**

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium. He emigrated to Brooklyn in 1960. After graduating high school, he became a medic in the Air Force. He earned a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature, worked as a Green Beret language instructor and received a B.A. in Spanish Literature from the University of Alaska where he taught from 1978-1997. He built houses, worked as a pipefitter, orderly, landscaper, driller, bartender. He is also a published poet, novelist, playwright and artist.

## **Joel Long**

Joel Long's book *Winged Insects* won the White Pine Press Poetry Prize. *Lessons in Disappearance* (2012) and *Knowing Time by Light* (2010) were published by Blaine Creek Press. His chapbooks, *Chopin's Preludes* and *Saffron Beneath Every Frost* were published from Elik Press. His poems and essays have appeared in *Gettysburg Review*, *Sports Literate*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Bellingham Review*, *Rhino*, *Bitter Oleander*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Terrain*, and *Water-Stone Review*, among others. He lives in Salt Lake City.

## **Barbara Martin**

[www.barbaramartinart.com](http://www.barbaramartinart.com)

Barbara Martin is a visual artist who grew up on three continents and has lived in twelve states coast to coast. She currently lives outside Philadelphia. Her work is contemporary in style and leans toward the abstract and sometimes surreal or visionary. She has completed several residencies in the West, and her paintings have been displayed in galleries and museums across America, as well as published in numerous on-line and print publications. She earned an MBA, is a certified creativity coach and teaches the occasional art class.

## **Clara McAuley**

Clara McAuley (she/her) is a 16-year-old poet currently living in Oregon. Besides being an avid reader and writer of poetry, she is also passionate about feminism, social justice, cooking, sewing, Aerial Acrobatics, science, and linguistics.

## **Cole McInerney**

Cole McInerney is a poet and songwriter who lives in Toronto. He studied English at Ryerson University. His poems have been published in several print and online publications, including *Panoplyzine*, *The Continuist*, *Dots Publications*, *Niagara Poetry*, and *The Vital Sparks*.

## **Bruce Meyer**

Bruce Meyer is author of books of poetry, short stories, flash fiction, and non-fiction. His stories have won or been shortlisted for numerous international prizes. His most recent collections of short stories are *Down in the Ground* (Guernica Editions, 2020) and *The Hours* (AOS Publishing, 2021). His forthcoming book is *Toast Soldiers* (Crowsnest Books, 2021).

## **Ryoko Minamitani**

Ryoko is a Japanese artist based in South Wales. She creates pure abstract paintings that explore the relationship between spirituality and artistic expression. During meditative states, she transfers the true nature of the inner unconscious behind the mental and emotional phenomena on art works. Her art works have been shown in numerous exhibitions and galleries mainly in the UK and some were chosen for selected shows and private collections around the world.

## **Julian Santiago Munoz**

[juliansmunoz.com](http://juliansmunoz.com)

I am an adjunct instructor at Miami Dade College. I have degrees in English from Stanford and the National University of Ireland. I was born in Bogotá, Colombia, and currently live and write in Miami. My work has been published in *Evocations Review*, *Critical Read*, and *The Festival Review*.

## **Ernst Perdriel**

[www.ernstperdriel.com](http://www.ernstperdriel.com)

Ernst Perdriel was born in Montreal (Quebec, Canada). He is a multi-field artist (visual art, photography, writing - French), designer and horticulturist. He participates in solo and group exhibitions in visual arts since 1995. The artist uses mosaics, collages, landscaping, photography to talk about our complex era. Perdriel has contributed in numerous publications since 1992 as a writer, illustrator, artist, photographer and in self-publishing. His works have appeared in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Filling Station*, *pulpMAG*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, *Kolaj Magazine*, *Into the Void*, *The Healing Muse*, *Iris Literary Journal*, *Ponder Review* and others.

## **Horia Pop**

Horia Pop is roughly some sort of a bum, always avoiding work when not necessary. He lives in France. His poems are all about lunatics and

bums. His short stories and plays are about what he has witnessed or lived.

## **Jeremiah Prenn**

I live in Boise, Idaho. I've been published in *Wingless Dreamer*. My background in writing is simple: I've been writing every single day for a long, long time. I'm interested in fiction and poetry that is precise and impactful.

## **Donna Pucciani**

[donnapuccianipoet.wordpress.com](http://donnapuccianipoet.wordpress.com)

Donna Pucciani, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Voice and Verse*, *ParisLitUp*, *meniscus*, *Gradyva*, and other journals. Her seventh and most recent book of poetry is *EDGES*.

## **Cleo Rohn**

Cleo Rohn (she/her) is a poet, spoken word performer, and educator with her roots in rural Vermont and her branches in Seattle. Her work often dwells on the link between sense of place and sense of self, and on the basic essences that connect us to one another. She has performed in New England and the Seattle area, and her work has been published in *After Happy Hour Review*, *The Water Tower*, *Vantage Point*, and *Dryland Lit*.

## **Marsha Solomon**

Artist Marsha Solomon has exhibited nationally and internationally in galleries and museums for more than twenty five years. Audiences in Long Island's Hamptons, Washington, DC, Chicago, and Florida have enjoyed her work, which has also traveled to exhibitions in England, France, Singapore, South Korea, Italy, and Japan, and others. Her work has received extensive critical attention and has been written about in international, national, regional and local publications like *Long Island Pulse Magazine*, *The Guardian UK*, *Chelsea News*, *Art Week*, *The Suffolk News*, *Art Slant*, and the *Daily Record*.

# Contributor Info

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## **george l stein**

[georgelstein.com](http://georgelstein.com)

george l stein is a photographer living in the greater NYC area focused on street, art, urban and rural decay, alt/portrait and surreal photographic genres.

## **Martin Toman**

Martin Toman is a writer of contemporary fiction who lives in Melbourne, Australia. He studied at the Australian National University and the University of Canberra before becoming a teacher of English Literature. Martin has been published online and in print, and recently in publications such as Big City Lit, Minute Magazine, Across the Margin, Fresh Ink, The Raven Review, Haunted Waters Press, The Adelaide Literary Review, and Literally Stories.

## **Bruce Turk**

Bruce is a professional actor and director. He has studied painting at Northwestern University, in Japan, and at the Art Students' League of New York. He continues to perform and practices visual art in his Southern California studio.

## **Alik Vetrof**

Serves art since 1989, a member of the creative association "ASA ART randevu": - I create art projects on topics that I'm interested in and worried. For me it is important to give his own interpretation of the images in the works. Hurt the viewer, to include it in the discussion and create your own history of the art object, to think and to make to become a partner displayed on the canvas or in an art project.

## **Valerie Viera**

Valerie is a poet, songwriter, musician and entrepreneur living outside New York, NY. Writing and performing her poetry since she was 9 years old, her style is direct and honest. She's been published in several journals, and her songs have been performed internationally.

## **Evan Williams**

*none provided*

## **Eric Woods**

[instagram.com/eric\\_telefox](https://www.instagram.com/eric_telefox)

Aging raver transplanted from the northeast sprawl to the tropics. Inspired by all the graffiti artists, past, present, and future.





**Untitled** Eric Woods



The Song Between Our Stars

