

BIRKENSNAKE 6

NEVER

ENDING

TALES

Edited by Miodrag Kojadinović
and Megan Milks

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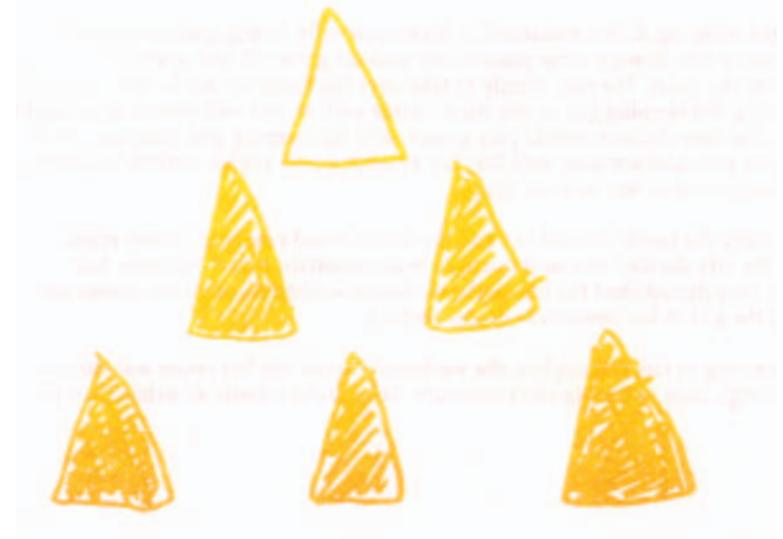
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End Notes by Megan Milks

This is the BirkenSnake 6 that doesn't end but goes on and on, my friend. When Miodrag and I put together a call for submissions for a volume of Neverending Tales, we were curious to see what kinds of circuitous, cyclical, recurrent, endless, asymptotic narratives we might attract. We received all kinds, and many more than we expected. The issue we've created collects tales that coil like rattlesnakes, tales that swallow themselves whole, tales of infinity and immortality and histories repeating. These stories imagine their characters in everlasting sleep, in everlasting hell, in the uncertain limbo of being kidnapped into someone else's life. They bend time and space and the body; they ask what forever feels like and what yesterday feels like today.

Together, these tales of endlessness tell us something about the endlessness of story itself, the ways in which we cannot move past yesterday or see beyond today's horizon. Like James Tadd Adcox's inescapable Infinity Room, story stretches out wide and unceasing: "we have been in it our entire lives." In their obsessions with endlessness, these tales also tell us something about ends: that they are a privilege and a sham, that resolution is our phantom limb, there and not there, asserting itself again and again. There are no endings and there are infinite endings. Which ending do you choose?

We've worked on this for a year and the project has arrived at its end, which is of course another beginning. Here it is, for you, to begin again (and again and again).



Asleep, Asleep

by Eliza Smith

Once there was a girl who was so tired of her waking life that she decided to sleep instead. When she told her parents of her decision, they were very upset. What about your tennis lessons? They asked. French? Chinese? Sewing? Embroidery? What about those things? Don't you want to learn them? You can't even make *petit fours* yet!

But the girl just yawned and patted her mouth and said she was off to bed. In her sewing lessons she had made deep black curtains to cover her windows. She had also sewn herself a black silk mask to cover her eyes. She drew her heavy blinds and darkness swallowed her room. She slipped into her grey sheets and put on her mask and closed her eyes in sleep.

The sleep was magical. The girl didn't grow thinner, colder, or sweaty. She existed in sleep as she might have in death; the only evidence of her life was the rising and falling of her chest and the occasional toss of her limbs as she turned onto her back or her side.

Eventually word spread that there was a girl sleeping on the brink of death. News stations came with their camera crews and set up in her bedroom. They clattered their equipment, loud and booming, but the girl only tugged a pillow closer to her middle or let out a deep sigh. They reported day and night, *The Girl Who Wouldn't Get Out of Bed*.

Boys from all over the country came to wake her with a kiss. Doctors came too, to feel the thump-ti-ump of her quiet pulse. Psychics came to press their temples to hers to listen to her dreams. But no kisses roused her; the force of her life only confounded the doctors; the mediums claimed the girl's sleep was dark and dreamless.

The girl never aged. She remained, at least outwardly, young and unwrinkled. All around her, though, time passed. Her parents grew old and sold the house to move to the coast. The next family to take over the house let her keep her room, accepting the sleeping girl as one might agree with an old wall sconce or a caught latch. The new children would play games with the sleeping girl, jumping out at her with yells and screams, molding her arms in funny angles, curling beside the breathing lump of her, in deep sleep.

Eventually the family moved out and the house stood empty for many years. Then the city decided to tear it down to make room for a new highway. Just before they demolished the house the workmen walked through the rooms and found the girl in her upstairs bedroom, asleep.

Not wanting to risk waking her, the workmen carved out her room and shipped it in a large crate to the big city's museum. The curators made an exhibit just for

the girl. Eventually the museum outgrew her, and the director had her moved to the basement. There she slept on, quiet and barely breathing, amongst the mummies and the stuffed birds and the presidential portraits. And there she stayed, content and glad as any sleeping person could be, for the basement was dark and dry and soundless and unfrequented.

After many years the museum lost its funding and closed its doors. It auctioned off the contents of its stores, including the sleeping girl. The ringleader of a little-known circus bid for her and won. He hauled her off to his campground where he built a special trailer for her, the walls painted black and the windows covered in ebony wood. When he toured the country, the ringleader would charge five dollars a head for audience members to peek at her through little holes in the trailer walls. They would whisper to each other in amazement: the girl was centuries old, preserved in sleep! And then the ringleader would hurry them along before they grew tired of her.

The girl became famous again as the ringleader's most prized act. He toured the country with her alone, leaving his tattooed woman and alligator man and his menagerie of lions and crooked-necked giraffes behind. Eventually, though, as the ringleader had feared, the country lost interest in the sleeping girl. She didn't do anything! the audience said.

He still dragged her from small town to small town, earning what he could off her sleeping body. One night as the ringleader drove through the flat middle of the country, his truck broke down. Being a bad man, selfish and terrible, he left the sleeping girl in her trailer on the side of the road as he thumbed for a ride to the next city.

The planes stretched every which way around the sleeping girl's trailer. Cars passed quickly, never stopping to see what was inside the black, wheeled box. In a few days the sky turned green and grey as a bruise and a great funnel of cloud and wind wounds its way down from the horizon. The tornado caught the trailer and the truck, wrenched them apart as it sucked them into its vortex.

The girl's blinds ripped from the windows, the walls of her room flew off in different directions, and she was torn from her bed in a great gust. She flew to the middle of the storm where it was quiet and still. She floated there, hovering and weightless, still asleep. The tornado wrapped her and carried her in the great swirl of its being, moving forward, never slowing, just rocking and cradling her, twisting against the horizon to the ins and outs of her slow, dull breaths. Some say it never will stop. It will keep plowing over earth and sea, at least until the girl is ready to wake.

WHAT DOES FOREVER FEEL LIKE???

by Wyatt Sparks

it's 2 it's 4 it's 8 it's 10 it's 20 and 40

It's Hercules and hydra. It's for every one head you take, you get two heads. Everywhere else this is a good thing (i.e. two for one, birds and stone, bang for buck) not here though, def. not here. It's an issue of temptation.

You love the long necks like anyone else, except eventually they're a garden. It's a simple principle but then there are a lot of fucking heads all over the place. Some become mothers and fathers, which only equals more heads. The heads make a city and in the city the heads have districts, some for fashion, some for the loveless heads that the other heads no longer want to be around.

You come to the city on public transit. It only takes you a second to start slashing again. And the baby heads, it hurts to cut them up, down to the stump, but at this point you can't help yourself. It's the best kind of murder—one where there's a profit. Some of the heads grow old and cry because they've seen so many heads around them turn to two and four.

In the morning, bright and early of course, the heads drive to work in offices, train stations, and flower shops. Heads kiss other heads goodbye before work. Then heads meet and laugh or are impolite.

In a rage even a head will kill another head and then there are two new ones that the head doesn't argue with anymore. It's a huge problem. The heads avoid your murderous trail. Some come to talk and find you caked in blood but it's not something you can just turn off lickity split. Some of the heads wonder what they're going to do with all the extra heads. Most of the heads live for yesterday. They talk about what it was like to be the only heads.

Walking through, you hear a head talking at a wedding.

Let me say I believe these heads will grow old together. Let me say that they have a future with the sun as an integral part. I believe they want and know this. Let me say that when these heads are at their worst they will at least be doing it together.

And it was the most sensible thing you heard all day or in a long time. It makes you happy. You wipe your face and find a wetness. You continue to ram-page.

In the Long Run

by T.B. Vaughan

You're angry, driving nowhere. Your knuckles are glossy and pale, but the backs of your hands are as red as your cheeks. You are distracted. The headlights are on full beam, screaming at the road, bouncing off rock faces and the desert on either side. There are no lines marking the centre of the road as it curls up into the mountains. Roadkill, common in this part of the world, enter the arc of the beam and dive underneath the car, dark streaks and shadow flashes. You are not noticing, because you are too angry—angry with me, your son. Hurt. Your jaw is clenched.

The ocean is miles away but you can smell it in the air. You have about three minutes left to live now, listing around a slow curve and across a canyon bridge.

Just over twenty miles away I am sitting on the back porch, a beer in my hand, listening to the ocean below. I am angry at you, too, but it is mixed with other thoughts and feelings, the sense of distance I feel from my mother and sister. I know you are overreacting, but in that uncertain way teenagers know things, unable to detach themselves from their own emotions. I told you that I wanted to spend the summer with them and, by default, my mother's new husband Stephen Graham—a man who is only ever referred to by his full name. It is a habit that will be continued now, at least for me, until he dies—my loyalty to you and my resentment sealed by your death (which will happen shortly, in less than two minutes).

I hardly move, sitting here, lost in my conflicted, internal world. I am not really aware of the beer in my hand, barely touched, that came out of the cooler ice-cold and is now warm like old coffee. I am focused inward, and backward, remembering your face when I told you, and then the shaking rage in your hands as you felt around in the glass jar for the car keys. Shouting at your back, your back like a wall, as you walked away down the driveway, not speaking or looking back.

"Stop being a kid," I shout, in my memory of you walking away. "No wonder Maddie went to live with them!" You stop, do not turn around, and then keep going.

I sit, remembering this, the cool beer in my hand.

I am no doubt sitting in the same position as you swerve to avoid a young woman called Carole Tyler, twist and grind your way through the barrier, and flip out on the dust and rock; die. You will have hit her, but not seriously harmed her. A head wound, a lasting scar on her temple, she will wave down a passing pest control van. She is doing it now, you are dead, and she is flapping her hands in the air, nearly causing another accident as the van's headlights strike her bright, angelic frame.

I hear of your death about three hours later. A policewoman calls at the house.

She has not seen the car, touched your body, checked your pulse, closed your eyes, or interviewed the girl; she is just in the right place to reach me so her police radio calls her in, explains the barest facts, and here she is. She looks tired, and a little annoyed, as if she had better things to be doing. She asks me if I need her to stay, but in such a way as to make it clear she has no idea what she could be useful for—that she understands, also, that it is probably best for me to be alone at a time like this. A phone call with a recorded message breaking the news would have been better than this woman. I thank her—thank her—and close the door after she has turned away.

Over the next months I am accepted into MIT. I keep my secret passions quiet, becoming one of those boys whose eyes slide discreetly away from contact, whose responses to personal questions are returned questions, oblique references to non-specific truths, or outright lies. My skin remains pale in the summer months; computer terminals and light bulbs give off the wrong kind of glow to darken the skin. When I get cramps in my hand from using the keyboard I start using a pen, convinced they will balance each other out.

I do make friends. Later I will even be married, but most of my time is spent in study. One of my friends, Paul, drops around every Tuesday and Thursday night, after he goes to soccer practice, and we drink one or two beers together. I am like a collectible to him; a subject of intense interest. Unlike me he is gregarious and direct, although for his own, carnal reasons, he is no more honest. He picks out fascinating people and talks about them in a fascinated way, trying to project himself into their minds to work them out, or just enjoying their incomprehensibility. I am one such project. Because I am quiet he thinks of me as shy, and believes it is his responsibility to urge me out of my rooms.

“It’s not good for you to sit here all the time,” he says. “When was the last time you even saw a girl? You’re at college, man; that’s what college is for—not study.” He laughs at his own joke.

When I only smile he asks me: “What are you hiding from?”

“Nothing,” I say. “The opposite.”

By our third year we see each other very little. I have become less fascinating. I did tell him what I was doing at some point and he told me I was insane, although he was young enough and curious enough not to be totally sure.

You have been dead for four years when I receive my doctorate. My mother, my sister, and Stephen Graham are there, in spite of my having asked my mother not to bring him. Because she ignored this I do not meet with them for dinner afterwards, but drink with a couple of friends from my faculty, Willis and some other boy I don’t remember, before heading back to my rooms. I have a teaching position at MIT now, which I resent but which practicalities demand. During the period of my doctoral thesis I realised that I would have to re-learn social interaction. I was surprised at how easy it was, like exercising old muscles, picking up a musical instrument that I had not played for years but which once I had been more than proficient at. To be published, to gain employment and funding will

all require this skill, so I learn it.

On the eve of receiving my doctorate I am sitting in my rooms, listening to the gaudy shouts of my fellow graduates in the courtyard below, incapable of tears or exultation. Books and papers are strewn around, covering the unmade bed; charts and equations on the walls, the curtains closed but the window open, a yearning that surpasses any science, any linguistic functions, any physical expression.

I am remembering you on my sixteenth birthday. We were in Boston to visit your mother, who refused to move west.

“The West is for cowboys and malcontents,” she had said, more than once. She is dead now, but then we were visiting her and you took me to see the Red Sox play. By some blessing it was against the Yankees, and by some further miracle the Sox won the game. We danced through the streets, up to Faneuil Hall and the Irish Bars, screaming “Yankees suck!” at every subdued figure in a blue baseball cap, and then just at anyone who looked receptive. You had your arm around my shoulders, and you bought me a beer, saying “get that down you” as you handed it to me. You kept introducing me as “my son,” proud of me, to be with me. After I replay that night in Boston, I replay the night of your death, your expression, your back, the car pulling out of the drive. Before nine o’clock on the evening of my doctoral graduation, I am back at work.

Two years later I meet my future wife. She is the sub-editor of a science journal that wants to publish some of my work, and a hopeless romantic. She is plump and friendly, and laughs at my attempts to avoid personal questions, which I now only avoid because I have nothing personal to recount; or only one thing. She has an endearing habit of humming slight, happy tunes in the morning, and she finds my lack of knowledge about world events or popular culture equally endearing, or at least claims so. For a few months I allow myself our relationship, although it takes willpower at first to stay away from my studies. This changes. She has a look in her eyes, when we make love, as if she has found something wonderful; I expect I have the same look in my eyes. Sometimes, when we are together, she kisses me quickly as if she could not help herself and just needs to get it out of the way. I smile all of the time, and my office begins to feel like a black well, full of shadow, that I must stay away from.

We are married. I take Isabelle Mary Collins to be my lawful wife. Our honeymoon is in Mexico. Men in sombreros, with skulls painted on their faces, serenade us at our table. There are graveyards full of white stones, white wooden crosses, and the desert stretches out forever, full of white bones. A desperation creeps into the way I hold her, but she believes it to be only the natural expression of love. When we return to Boston I begin my work again.

We buy a house, a little way out from the college but with a garage that I can use when I am ready to start experimenting. She does not understand why I don’t want children, why I avoid the conversation as if it fills me with dread.

“Who is Carole Tyler?” she asks one day, maybe two years after we have been married. I have written the name down absently, thinking of something else, on

the telephone note pad.

“She’s the woman my father hit when he died,” I say. Then I ask: “Do you have to keep humming all the time?”

We are divorced two years later, a few months before I turn thirty. I keep the house, and without children she takes a chunk of dollars but nothing that prevents my progress. It is a little over a decade since you died.

By the time I am thirty-five I am ready to start experimenting, but the initial results are inconclusive at best. Isabelle has stopped writing to me. Willis drops around every now and again and I do my best to entertain, but we both know he is only there because he has few friends as well and, unlike me, he minds. My work at the college is starting to suffer, with the time and energy that I am having to dedicate to the experiments, but by now I have no choice. The questions I ask of my peers have started to get them asking questions of each other, as if I was Frankenstein or some weird spiritualist. The signs of professional suicide are there, but I could be close.

Progress is as it has always been, two steps forward and several back. The mice stay dead, or vanish and do not return.

Three years later I am replaced at the university, but I have expected this and some money is squirreled away. I can continue, if I live frugally and no unexpected costs arise, for another two or three years. In the mirror the physical signs of my lifestyle are starting to show, or maybe it is just the passing of the years. I grow a beard that I occasionally trim back. My eyes are red and unfocused, but I put off buying glasses until I need them to work.

There are one or two sympathetic ears in the community, and it is when I am visiting one of my fellow cranks in New York that I run into Paul again. I try to avoid him but, unexpectedly, he recognises me and takes me by the arm as I am heading into a store to hide. I was not paying attention to the store but I notice him look up, and then into the windows, where a number of female mannequins are modeling dresses and lingerie.

“It is you, isn’t it?” he asks.

I think about saying no.

He buys me a coffee, not a meal which would tie him down. I have become a subject of fascination to him again, albeit briefly, while he waits for his train.

“I heard about the post going,” he says, referring to my job at MIT.

“I needed more time to continue the work, anyway,” I say.

“You can’t mean....” He looks shocked, almost horrified. “You’re still working on that?”

“Of course,” I say.

He is speechless, shakes his head, takes my arm in his hand and looks me in the eye, wanting badly to say something, but then a look of resigned disgust comes across his face, and he releases me. I am relieved.

I have to start a part time job to pay for the basics. I work in a bookstore, but it is actually a boon. The work is easy and gives me a reason to leave the house, to shave, to interact. Most of the other employees avoid spending too much time with me, so I spend a lot of time in the back room, pricing, and stacking shelves. When someone I know comes into the store, at least on the two occasions that has happened, it is easy to slip away and remain concealed.

Each year I commemorate your death with a beer and a Red Sox game in one of the bars near my house wearing, for the sake of memory, the battered red cap you gave me. I haven’t spoken to my mother or my sister since... since I don’t remember, but I hear that Maddie is married. I’m happy for her. She calls me sometimes, concerned, and I know it causes her pain to think of my life, but sacrifice is necessary. I wonder, if I explained, whether she would understand. She has never abandoned me, though, in spite of the pain, and that is something that binds us together even if she does not know it. I did not go to Stephen Graham’s funeral.

Just short of my forty-eighth birthday I make the breakthrough. A live mouse, blinking and confused, sitting on the metal plate. Three minutes on the watch. I have three minutes, but which three?

The next steps are time consuming but fairly mundane from an intellectual point of view. If only I had thought to do them earlier it would have been much easier. I calculate probable speed, probable route, nothing more than guesses, growing helpless with despair. Only three minutes. At the same time I am building a bigger unit, buying the components as I have money. So close now I am limiting myself to one meal a day, and am neglecting all bills bar the electricity. There is a faucet in the yard of the abandoned house on Wicketts Hill that still works, so I fill up empty coke bottles there.

A breakthrough. For reasons that are inexplicable, but have a feel of fate about them, the video footage from the speed camera on the bridge across the canyon is still intact, and it allows me to pinpoint the required time. I steal a safety vest, bright yellow with a broad reflective strip across it, from a construction site. I save up to buy some safety flares from a sailing store in the North End. I am forty-nine years old, plus three months and twenty-two days, when I step into the machine, my heart thudding and my palms sweating.

You are approaching the canyon bridge now, travelling at approximately forty-seven miles per hour. I look around me, looking for Carole Tyler, to pull her away from the road, but she is nowhere to be seen. The steel boundary, unbroken, and the curve it borders are obvious so I rush forward along the tarmac to reach them, get ahead of them, to warn you. I crack the flares and cast them on the road, just in front of the curve, but the timing is wrong and you are travelling too fast, booming like the sound barrier, white light a star, heavy like the void, my legs crushed by the hood and fender, swept into the air, over the barrier. Your car screeches to a halt. I hardly feel it when I hit the desert and bounce, landing on my side.

Dick Cheney's Smirk

Yes, also, thinking is detrimental to your peace of mind. Yes, the Buddha offered up his blood to the starving tiger. However, one also has to choose for which starving tiger one sacrifices one's blood. The point is that the tiger, once confronted with your empathy, has a choice too: to continue to starve to death or to take your life. Some tigers are greedy and deserve to starve to death. In making such a choice, one becomes responsible for one's freedom, as Sartre would say. In avoiding such a choice, which let's face it, is a moral judgment, one refuses to be human, inasmuch as one is in breach of Rousseau's Social Contract. That choice between self-sacrifice and self-indulgence is not always about hammock sizes. Sometimes it is almost enough to trouble the countenance.

A Slave to the Name

She must first obey her father, then her husband when she becomes an ajuma, and finally obey her son as a halmoni. Any woman who violates or lives outside of these roles is called a ch'angyö (prostitute). —Kim Hyesoon

A male slave's daughter has her father's master's name. A male slave's son has his father's master's name. A female slave has her father's master's name until she marries and takes her husband's master's name. A man has his father's name. A woman has her father's name until she marries and takes her husband's name. A man's son has his father's name. A man's daughter has her father's name until she marries and takes her husband's name.

Oh, no. Not again, says the little girl, swirling around inside her mother's coffee cup. It must be morning.

The fidgets come like birds. The rust colored curtains decorated with images of giant fingered citrines, on the closed windows, bluster. She looks at the mysteriously moving curtains out of the corner of her eye, never certain what she's seen. She's been catching them at it for years, and doesn't ask anyone. Because maybe it's her eyes, or worse, her brain. Maybe it's her mother's hatred of her, because she's so pretty, that gets in the curtains. Even though she tries to be her mother as much as possible. Maybe it's herself that gets in the curtains. Or maybe, somewhere, wind comes in from some neighbor's air conditioning...

Caffeinated adrenaline moves up the spine like pain shouting into sunny-tailed fireworks. Sleep falls out, and dangerous cliffs, and boys.

And a scruffy man shaking ominously with extra strength that makes everything around him vibrate like a mirage, walking along toward her on the other sidewalk as she's walking to school. He's breaking something sharp—more and more sharp—on the sidewalk. He's swinging it against cars, and signs, and bricks, and sharpening it, honing it as a better tool to kill her, most likely. He's yelling something incomprehensible, sounds that sharpen themselves on the sky into daggers. She looks down and he's saying, his face turned toward her, "In the blink of an eye, I can make a white girl shy."

She runs back home, and throws her textbooks down on the floor.

"That happened, Mama. I felt something like a pigeon in my throat when he said that. And he kept breaking the stick thing shorter and sharper, and it was so loud. I didn't turn or raise my head to look at what it was. I think I would have died to see it."

"I know, Hon. I saw it out the window."

"I wanted you there, Mama."

"I was there."

Sometimes, she finds round stones in the backyard, and nearby alleyways. She has yet to wonder if her mother has put them there for her to find. She cracks

them open with a darkened hammer into crystal caves. A geode garden growing miraculously.

The little girl is only little sometimes.

Sometimes she is in her mother's veins, calcium ions acidic sticking to the walls screeching about her father putting himself into some woman. He goes inside them somehow, like he went inside her mother. And they turned into her, some kind of extension she has yet to understand. They say it will happen to her, too, one day. A man will go inside her and then become another little girl. The coffee leaching the calcium, the travels of the blood, the branching of the veins. Her brain.

"Was that you, Mama, who made the scary man on the street so strong? Were you there inside his muscles, shaking them at me, cursing my throat? Did your spirit travel inside him and make him break that thing over and over, stronger than one man could be?"

"You shouldn't ask so many questions. Oh, you."

"Was that you?"

"Oh, you!"

The birds that hit the windows left imprints, and feathers. The mother has painted the windows to look like pterodactyls to scare death away. The little girl holds the birds in her hands and warms them when they hit. She holds them to her chest so they can hear her veins. The movement of her blood keeps them alive, and sometimes, she keeps them a whole day. Sometimes only moments. Sometimes they seem dead, and she sends the secret blood through her hands into them, and they scramble up, open eyes, fly away into the trees. They become so strong, with her inside them for a little while.

Sometimes the little girl is very big.

And bird mites burrow in the skin, making trails, tiny worlds, passageways, caves, niches. They make anyone who steps a foot into her house suspect, unless he wears bags on his feet. He might catch the mites and spread them to all their friends. When a boy comes to the door and you give him bags for his feet, you are never visible to classmates again, other than being something nasty to slough off the skin, to shiver around, sit away from, and laugh at with friends in the cafeteria. Birdie.

The father let the bird mite take-over happen. Why? To make a moat of mites? So no boys would ever do more than look in the windows, through the giant translucent wings, pushing their noses against the glass, their cheeks sideways, their eyes curling over themselves, and rings of red around the pale skin flat? Years of bird mites, so she could never go to school, never hold the hand of a boy to her heart, never have a child to take care of, other than her father.

The little girl is no size at all.

The house is full of birds in rib cages. One bird to a human rib cage, on brass stands. The rib cage bones are smooth from so many hands polishing them lovingly. The birds look, and look, and hop. They scatter features and directions. When you look at them, the birds pulse inside the rib cages, aging into ochre discolorations. The brass stands closest to the fireplace are slightly dulled by smoke. But they take on the most shine when the wood burns. The father brings in more and more wood. The wood never ends. After the sticks burn smaller and smaller, he brings more sticks in. The father starts the fire. He sits in his chair, face shadowed, flashing yellow-orange, and stares at her, scratching his skin. It's OK to scratch. He has mites. It's OK.

The little girl is curled into a ball.

She is her own geode. She pushes herself against the sharp points of the golden yellow crystals all pointing toward her in the little cave curved so much like her. She snuggles against them, and feels their secret mineral power pulsating into her. She becomes bigger, so big her skin pushes against them all the way around, her flesh indenting. Balls have no end. They just give birth to what's already in them, round, with no place to stop, ever.

She becomes so powerful with the secret golden light of the geode, she opens up out of it into a dance of the geode flowers. Ravell is playing on the old stereo. Her father and mother watching her dance are sitting on the couch by the fireplace, lit by the flames dancing their features into shadows. She becomes less little, as she stretches in every direction her body wants to go. She doesn't tell it what to do. It keeps stretching beyond her skin. Into the invisible, where she likes to live.

Her parents clap, sitting down, as she stands, flapping her arms like a bird, a bird whose life she has renewed by becoming inside it, or like flower petals of the day and the night sped up in time, and changed, forever, in eternal space.

A History of the Infinity Room
by James Tadd Adcox

¹The Infinity Room was constructed in 1985.

²To say that the Infinity Room was constructed in 1985 is clearly a mistake; it stretches infinitely; the idea of its being constructed within any precisely definable period of time is unimaginable.

³It is located thirty-five miles from Madison—a distance near enough as to be disconcertingly close to “real life.”

⁴It is impossible to continue past a certain point in the Infinity Room, though not because the Room itself stops. It does, however, narrow—the further the Room stretches, the narrower it gets, until it appears to vanish, far off in the distance. (On this point, see Appendix, §1.)

⁵The visible length of the Infinity Room is generally held to be just over 39 meters (128 feet).

⁶There is no center.

⁷The Infinity Room moves, slightly but perceptibly, under one's weight as one walks through it. (Appendix, §2)

⁸About Alex Jordan, Jr., the room's designer, little is known. He was an intensely private man, "a shadowy figure as reclusive as the late multi-millionaire Howard Hughes," according to his (unauthorized) biographer Marv Balousek. (Although see Appendix, §3.)

⁹Balousek speculates, perhaps unfairly, on Jordan's arrested sexual development, likening him to "a pre-pubescent boy fascinated by women's nipples and bathroom jokes."

¹⁰Both Balousek and, later, Doug Moe (whose work was authorized and, indeed, encouraged by Jordan's estate), tell of a meeting between Jordan's father, Alex Jordan, Sr., and architect Frank Lloyd Wright, at "an unspecified time apparently between 1914 and 1923." After looking over Jordan Sr.'s architectural designs, Wright is supposed to have remarked: "I wouldn't hire you to design a cheese crate or a chicken coop. You're not capable."

¹¹The Room is often understood as a deliberate affront to Wright's work, though Wright had been dead for many years by the time of its construction.

¹²“Once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable...”

¹³It should be noted that Sid Boyum, the source of this story in both the Balousek and Moe biographies, was well-known locally as an inveterate liar.

¹⁴At a point circa twenty-nine meters from the entrance to the Infinity Room, just before the room becomes so small as to impede further progress, there is a glass panel set in the floor. The ground is several hundred feet below. Through the panel one can see the tops of trees.

The intense vertigo inspired by the panel comes not from the distance to the ground beneath one’s feet, but rather from how meaningless that distance appears in comparison to the infinite stretch of the Room.

¹⁵According to one commentator, the Room represents “the most brutally direct incarnation of the labyrinth myth... The Minotaur to be found waiting at its center is Endlessness itself (by which the hero, in his mortality, is consumed)...” (Appendix, §5; in addition, cf. footnote 6.)

¹⁶In Book 11 of the Confessions, Augustine distinguishes the ideas of endlessness and eternity: that which is within time but continues forever (and thus may have a beginning but no end), and that which is prior to and outside of time (which therefore cannot be said to have a beginning). The Infinity Room can be entered from one end; being endless, there is no opposite end (though some, particularly those who believe the Room infinitely approaches a specific point [Appendix §1], posit the existence of a “theoretical” end, useful mathematically if unreachable in fact. (On the nature of the [or an] “opposite end,” see Appendix, §6.)

Appendix

§1. There is some debate as to the exact nature of the Infinity Room's endlessness. Does it infinitely approach a specific point—that is, is there a point past which the Infinity Room does not extend, though it grows infinitely smaller as it approaches that point? Or does it extend forever, and only appear to vanish past a certain point? Though the latter case might seem, at first, to be the less probable of the two, bear in mind that matter has a lower limit—although physical structures can be very small, they cannot, as far as we know, be infinitely small. Infinite length, by contrast, is possible, if unlikely (cf. footnote 12).

§2. Of course, there is no walking through it, or not entirely—the Room continues, endless.

§3. What is known: Jordan kept a residence in Madison. He never spent a single night in either the Room or the house to which it is attached, though he drove from Madison to visit it nearly every day of his adult life (cf. footnote 3). He was convicted of extortion in 1939, for a plot in which a female friend lured wealthy businessmen to her apartment for sexual intercourse while Jordan photographed the acts with infrared film. His longest relationship was with “Miss Jennie,” Jennifer Olson, his companion of fifty years (they never married). He was born March 3rd, 1914, in Madison, and died in the same city, November 6th, 1989. Aside from his daily trips to the monstrosity of a house to which the Room was attached, he did not like to travel.

§4. But are there other entrances to the Infinity Room—entrances too far for us to ever reach?

§5. Visitors to the Infinity Room often report dreaming, afterwards, of walking towards the “far end” of the Room, growing ever smaller as the Room narrows, until finally they reach a certain distance, which they know, in the logic of the dream, to be the halfway point of their lives; then turning, and walking once more towards the entrance, knowing that they will die just as they reach its threshold...

§6. Certain theorists hold that, past a certain point, the Infinity Room begins once more to expand. What lies beyond this point is a matter of pure speculation, of course. One popular version is the “periodic model”: an Infinity Room that steadily expands and contracts along its infinite length (and, thus, across the infinite reaches of the universe). More radical, however, is the “non-periodic” version of this belief: an Infinity Room that, past a certain point, expands forever. It is possible, even likely, such adherents argue, that there are entire universes contained within the unreachable expanses of the Infinity Room.

Others, however, maintain that it is a mistake to believe that there is any end to the Infinity Room on either side; which is to say, they believe that the Infinity Room stretches infinitely in both directions. What we take to be the “entrance” to the Infinity Room is therefore an illusion (cf. footnote 17): There is no escaping the Infinity Room. We have been in it our entire lives.

¹⁷A photograph, taken shortly after the construction of the Infinity Room, shows a fir tree, planted or otherwise set near the Room's “tip” (that is, the point at which the Room becomes so small as to vanish from sight; cf. footnote 5). The sight is impossible, magical. It is not uncommon for visitors to weep before the photograph, which hangs just before the Room's entrance.

More recent photographs show that the tree has disappeared, likely blown off during a storm. (Regarding the construction of the Infinity Room, cf. footnote 2, above.)

Digging Up the Late Unpleasantness by Leeyanne Moore

Our yard had grown a pimple. It was a rental property in the country, and what lay there popping up out of the grass—well, crabgrass—looked mounded and distinct.

We were in the country, in a house that was white and squat, like a toaster oven. It had a long bit of yard running from the front of the house right back to the piney woods behind us. An electric fence was on one side of the house, protecting the woods and scraggly cows that sat under the pines in the middle of the day. On the other side was a long dirt drive that made our cars dusty when we used it to park out back, next to the kitchen door.

The fence and the drive, these were the two buffers that kept the house from being swallowed by the gaping woods on all three sides of us, while the oily black new road ran past us in the front. In the morning there were stray dogs asleep on the road, probably because it was warm in the morning sun.

We'd gotten this place for the privacy and for the quiet. A place where one could sit on the porch with a mint julep in your hand and become a gentleman scholar, I'd said. After driving several times down the oily road to town and back, she started spotting them. On the back of trucking rigs, or used as window curtains. Hanging over porch railings where they'd been shaken free of dust. Confederate flags. There were more Confederate flags than you could shake a stick at. Faded, small, large. Hook rugs and license plate frames.

She pointed out not the quiet of where we lived—but the disquiet. The discord of silent hate. For example, we got a Sons of the Confederacy club notice in the mail. She left it out on the dining room table as a kind of accusation or reproach. She'd point out that a road we'd just passed was called Lynch Man's Drive. That kind of thing.

When I had interviewed for the job at the college, they asked me an odd question. What do you do on Sundays? I was a little freaked out. My thesis advisor had not prepared me for such a random question. Sundays, they repeated. Sunday mornings. They wanted to know if I was God fearing. So I talked about her. I was hoping that in such a conservative place they'd see me as less of a fly-by-night godless bastard and more as a solid community member kind of guy if they knew a good woman stood behind me. And on Sundays we...seek... peace, I said. Righteousness. Rightness with the world, if you know what I mean, I babbled. If they were going to talk in code, then I would respond back in code. Because I was that desperate for a job, any job, anywhere.

Having gotten the job, I was walking down the hall my first day of class when a colleague came and squeezed me around the shoulders. Happy? he asked. He was also the chair of our department. Sure, I wheezed out. How's your sweet-

ie? he said. They were very considerate of Elaine, as if she had a deadly disease or something. To be honest, I was faintly alarmed by their ever-solicitous tone. Eh, I confessed.

They come and they go, he'd said. If the partner's happy, they stay. Unhappy, then they leave a lot faster, or—

He paused.

Or—? I prompted, feeling sweat start to seep through my shirt.

Or they get left.

It's okay, I said to her whenever one of these silent signals appeared to remind us that we were living in another place, nay: in another world from whence we came. It wasn't okay, with either of us, but I wasn't above tossing out meaningless reassurances. I just hoped she wouldn't abandon me here all by myself.

We went to a summer movie. It was a charming spot in the middle of town where an old movie theatre had burned down. Only the back wall of the ruined building remained, and they were projecting an old Doris Day up on the wall. We sat on the lawn watching the film.

Elaine murmured much of the time to a woman next to her while I watched the show. During the intermission Elaine said the woman mentioned that the theatre was a historic site. Turns out that back in the fifties the county leaders refused to stop segregation. So they closed all the schools for six years and the movie theatre was where they held classes for all the white kids.

She also told Elaine that the last cross burning happened in 2000. There was an old couple in their 80s who escaped from an assisted living facility together. They set up house on the outskirts of town. She was white, and he was black and their little house had a cross burned in front of it, and afterwards they no longer lived together. But the woman still comes to the outdoor movies, and the lady Elaine was talking to pointed her out.

The town tried to do other things as well, to rally a sense of community or, failing that, a sense of small town charm lost when the main street burned in the 1930s. They had a farmer's market at an old train station that we went to once a week. They'd put in brick street crossings, using a handsome herringbone pattern as if to draw our eyes down, away from the drab depression era storefronts, a third of which stood empty. I pointed out these efforts, but the patina of modernity did not assuage her. We tried using the stores. Did they have what we wanted? Nope. Could they order it? I guess. Would they call us when it came in? After a longish pause to consider such a request, a silent nod. We wrote down our number. No one ever called. After the first four months, we stayed out of town, pretty much.

I pointed out the pimple. It'd grown. We waited until twilight, when

the sizzling sun was beheaded by the pines. That was when the unbearable heat toppled off and our house clicked in the humid gloaming just like a toaster oven, and we left the doors and windows open so you could watch the heat waves escape and shimmer. The mosquitoes swarmed while we both tried to stand, a little off balance, on the pimple. I was reminded of an old fashioned pitcher's mound.

Elaine was reminded of high school, she said. She was walking with her friends one night through the high school field and the sprinkler system had broken, causing a mound just like this one. She'd stood on it and started jumping. Soon her friends joined in and as the mound slowly deflated, their feet became covered in muddy water until they were even with the rest of the earth and the water was up to their ankles.

I could have pointed out that we didn't have a sprinkler system, but Elaine's idea wasn't a bad one. So we started jumping. We jumped on the mound until we were both slippery wet with sweat, but no water came out and the pimple didn't go down.

Should we call the landlord? I asked.

Let's dig it up, she said.

What if it's gas?

She paused, her face dripping with sweat, little commas of wet under each breast. Our heat is from natural gas, isn't it? She bit her forefinger, and I found myself thinking it was a lovely gesture. The fear of losing her had started made me see all her gestures as lyrical, highly feminine, precious.

It won't be gas, not this close to the surface, she said. Unless it's a body, she added.

I was thinking: now that would be some excitement. We'd been here long enough that I, for one, was in need of stimulation. I was beginning to understand why youths in silent suburbs sought drugs. Why they did strange things like hollow out a cabbage and try to smoke it. Or sniff solvents. Do whippets. I was starting to understand the senseless brawling my students engaged in every weekend. Better the feel of adrenaline and the smell of blood and beer vomit than this silent, rural nothingness. The lung strangling humidity was keeping us under its thumb until we were tame and silent. While Elaine wilted from isolation, from a lack of social stimulation, I was bored. So bored began to grow curious about rumors of faculty threesomes. Anything was better than the sweet tea sugar coma we'd been living in for weeks.

I got a shovel from the back porch. Took off my shirt. By now the sweat was thick enough, it was like I'd stepped straight out of the shower. Too slick for the mosquitoes to latch onto. I hoisted the shovel like a javelin for the first thrust.

The sod came up easily. The clay beneath not so much, but I was stronger and had more energy than I'd been expecting. What was under there? Soon enough the ground was almost fluffy from whatever was going on below. I could scoop up the feather-fuls of dirt without a problem.

I hit the hat first. The hat was old, and had two crossed rifles pinned to the front. Below the hat was a soldier who was wearing it. I'd dug up a civil war soldier. He came up out of the ground and then sat next to the hole on his butt, knees up, holding his head in his hands. I think our jumping up and down maybe gave him a concussion. I wanted to say sorry, but didn't know how he might take out his revenge. He didn't have much to say in response to Elaine's concerned questions about his head.

At last, he stood up and dusted himself off. Elaine brought him a tall glass of lemonade and though he seemed disinclined to speak, or even meet our eyes, which gave an edge of uncertainty to everything he did, he drank his lemonade so very genteelly that we both relaxed. We had nothing to fear from him in exchange for our hospitality. After that thought I paused, realizing for the first time, *My God, I'm starting to know how they think.*

In a slip of a soft voice he kindly enquired if we had another shovel, for he'd surely like to help me continue digging.

It was pretty much dark by that time, but with the porch light on, we could still see, the soldier and I said. About twenty minutes later, even Elaine realized that wasn't true. But we wanted to keep digging, so we tried running the car perpendicular to the drive and using the headlights. The hole was still a very deep dark pit with some kind of a mining chemical stink rising off from the dirt. The soldier finally unbuttoned his coat and threw it up on the grass. We got to work, alternating our strokes into the dirt, while every fifteen minutes or so we were alternating beer, lemonade, and water to keep hydrated while the sweat poured from us.

The next day, Elaine brought home a solar powered camping lamp from the big box an hour away, and we found a way to hang it in the open hole using a broom pole. It took a lot of digging to unearth our next find. It was a camera.

The soldier hopped down into the hole without my asking—the hole was shaped long and wide now, like a grave, and he pulled out the large old squeezebox shaped camera for our inspection. I skipped classes the next day, cancelling them because I wanted to dig. My darling girl gave me a kiss and went off to do what paid the bills.

By the time she returned with groceries for dinner for the three of us, I'd unearthed two photographers, a rotting hospital cot, several bulging bags of corn meal loaded with mealworms, and we were working—the four of us now—on hauling a cannon up. The cannon was much smaller than I'd have thought. It took shot the size of my fist. With the cannon out, a new protuberance formed at the bottom of our hole. The dirt was bulging with mystery.

I stopped only to go inside, shower, and eat something. It didn't matter. Things kept pouring out of the hole.

One time, a few years back, I'd fallen on an outdoor basketball court and bloodied up my knee pretty badly. Eventually my knee healed but I started

noticing after awhile that there was a greenish bruise on it that was getting bigger. Turned out that the gravel caught deep in the flesh was working its way to the surface. Soon it emerged bit by bit.

This was like that.

I wasn't even digging any more. I was sitting up on the porch, drinking and watching what came out. The soldier gave me a gun and showed me how to load it. Because you never know, he said and assumed I wanted to keep my sweetheart safe. What came up were units of men, battalions. They silently trod straight back into our piney woods, guns ready to fire. It was like watching a flood streaming around the house, the cars. A dry flood that left behind the smell of pine needles and dust.

I was tense once they were out of eyesight, waiting, but around the house it stayed silent. If anything, the woods became more hushed, the cicadas and crickets mute as the careful foot treads marched through the shadows.

Glad they had moved on, I turned my focus back to our now somewhat crowded front yard. Those who'd emerged from the hole earlier relaxed again. Rifles that sat across knees were leaned up against each other, silvery dull bayonets crisscrossing. Like a brook's babble, the clusters of men kept up a continuous low murmur of discussion. Someone had set up a tripod with a black kettle over a campfire. The kettle burbled with a mystery stew in it. The wasps from a hole in the ground nearby flew out at night and just like moths attracted to light, they dove into the fire.

Off near our porch, a group of soldiers—Union? It was hard to tell, the uniforms were a little mixed up on the battlefield—played cards. They used the side of a dead horse for their card table. No one came up onto the porch, except one polite soul, asking for the stub of a pencil to write to his sweetheart with. My darling, the love of my life, gave one to him, received his thanks with grace, and then retreated inside. She stayed in there a lot now. I saw her looking out the windows at what was going on, and knew nothing of her thoughts, her attitudes towards all this.

Things kept pouring out from the hole. If it kept up, then what?

Even when my brain wasn't being boiled from the thickening heat, no answer came to mind. Inside, the house was quiet, except for the rattle of our box a/c unit. You couldn't tell what was going on out there, until you looked out our window and saw some man with a long mustache and narrow shoulders standing at the side of our house, taking a drink from our rubber hose.

When I came out the next evening it was clear that the soldiers playing cards had decided enough was enough. They began shooting down the hole, standing right to the edge, close to anything else that tried to come up.

Which just made the pressure from the hole build up. The square pit began to bow up in the middle. The more it bowed, the more vigilant the soldiers

became. They aimed their bayonets at the edge of the hole, kept guns oiled and ready. Their rotting butterfly camping chairs had been switched out for Walmart plastic stuff, but they were no longer sitting, they were crouching and standing all around the hole.

The Confederate flag was rigged up to our porch railings. It wasn't put there by me—by us, I should say. It just showed up one morning, along with a lot of local types—men with trucking rigs, baseball caps, and worn jeans riding low. The flag seemed to keep the soldiers away from the house, and the new men, too, I told Elaine, so we left it up. She reluctantly admitted that with all the rather silent, flint-eyed men around, she felt safer with it. I agreed. I even suggested it might be smart to stay on the right side of things, just now... just in case.

What right side of things?

I mean...I mean...the way they think of it, I said, however it is they're thinking. I had to do this with my students, of course—understand how they thought. Most were tobacco farmers' daughters and the first in their family to attend a four-year university. Their bumper stickers declared Tobacco Money Paid For This Car.

The local men and the soldiers mixed and mingled with little effort. One of the soldiers started wearing camouflage. Another got a T-shirt that read, "It's about heritage, not hate." A third started wearing crocs and shot at the groundhogs climbing up the kudzu vines that wrapped around the laundry pole in the back yard. A fat groundhog went tumbling down, hidden in the kudzu that had leapt the electric fence. Poor fat hog, it too was destined for the black kettle.

People saw our yard. They stopped their cars, got out, came around sort of shy, and asked if we had any 'collectibles.' War re-enactors started coming by, wanting to hang out. They sat cross-legged at the feet of the soldiers in plastic chairs. This went on for ages, so we tried to work around them. We tried to start a raised bed, grow some veggies. Something uncomplicated, she said, bending over the dark dirt, casting little warty nuggets into the ground.

"Yessum," I agreed and she frowned.

There were things that came up in the raised bed, postcards of lynchings like packets of seeds rising in front of where we'd planted collards, tomatoes, okra, and kale. We hit the middle of summer and it was too hot for anything to grow. Men circled their chairs around the hole and sat, passing corn liquor. Activity was definitely slowing down. Some of them hitched rides in town, didn't come back. Others shot streams of tobacco into the hole.

We came out very early one morning at dawn after hearing shots. Saw some heads poking up just a few inches from the hole. More shots and the heads poking up fell back down again. One of the soldiers caught our eye. "Deserters," he said.

Like all things, it eventually came to an end. The hole slowly stopped its historical purge. The soldiers would spot something down there. They'd reach down, pluck up a rusted medal from the shallow hole, toss it out towards the

road in disgust, then spit more tobacco into its depths.

Whenever I mowed around them, I noticed the hole seemed less deep. Soon it was a flat and level depression and I could mow right across it. Level but bare. Ugly. Grass won't grow there, though annoying ash seedlings with their arrow shaped leaves violate the sanctity of bare dirt. Around the same time, we abandoned the garden, deciding it was just too hot. Even watering the plants at night didn't work. Elaine figured out that when the cool well water hit the baking hot dirt, the plants' roots simply boiled, sending them into shock until they wilted and died.

One day the hole was gone. I had to go into campus for a committee meeting. The parking lot near the athletic field was empty, but the noise of the sprinkler sounded like the spit of tobacco. I drove into our empty yard and parked the car, the echo of that fast spit repeating in my head. Yet at home our property was silent. I stood with a dark brown loafer on the bare spot and looked around. Once again the cicadas began to scream from the woods. There were some cows sleeping in the shade of the white pines, their backs to me. Sweat began to spring out all over my torso and I went inside.

Overall, it'd been an uneasy live and let live approach. We felt they could turn on us at any moment, but they never did. In fact, people passing in their trucks and cars now regularly waved at us if we were outside. We always make sure to wave right back.

The last soldier hitched into town and we finally took the flag down off our front porch. She wanted to put it in the trash or burn it. Isn't there a law against flag burning? I asked.

The American flag, she said, indignant. Then she looked at me like she didn't know who I was or where I came from. I resented it. I was just asking.

She said, I'll take care of it. I stood there holding it until she reached out and tugged it away from me.

I'll take care of it, she repeated, and began folding it up. Just go, she told me.

Just git, I joked and gave a little laugh, hoping she'd parrot me back.

Just git, I joked again.

She looked down at the flag instead of at me, folding it up, her lips pressed together.

Okay, baby doll, I said and kissed her silent cheek. In the end she put the flag in the car along with a bunch of other items for the Goodwill. I snuck it out and put under our spare set of jumper cables in the shed. Because you never know.

A Brief Play by Alicia Cole

Dedicated to Ismail ibn Conner

Scene: 1

The hill is covered with rabbit runs, their brown ears swiveling with the lengthening of the day; he is slightly ahead of her. She follows.

She says: When we stand at the sea, it is always like this. I fill up. You learn to speak.

He looks out. He is always looking out, writing a prayer.

Scene: 2

Monologue (Her)

We met in the bar. You shone like the sun, so bright my first husband went blind.

Later, kissing in the dark, the bulk of you like a warm stone. Your tongue was thick with dates, strong tea tasted only after sunset, the proper taste of a holy man.

Scene: 3

Monologue (Him)

Oh, little sister, your mouth was full of joy in the dark.

I would have covered you with a white shroud, the fire of your hair against my shoulder like petals dropped by the sea.

Up the hill, the rabbits are still running. I walk out, gingerly, my feet strangely firm on this rocky shore.

This Garden by Jennifer Smith Gray

“Silly Scilla, silly Scilla,” the girl sang quietly, placing a blue flower in her hair. She knew she’d have to remove it before she returned to the house, but for now she closed her eyes and tried to imagine her grandmother’s garden, tried to let herself be there, instead of here, on a sunny June day, with her grandma humming along to her silly tune.

Her grandmother’s garden was smaller than this one, and the dirt and vegetables ran up to the brick house, in fact, up to a neighbour’s house in one corner. But the garden she was in now was some distance from its owners’ house, and there were no neighbours that she could see. Days ago she had learned that she could scream and nobody would hear. Nobody would come to see who the hard-working visitor in the garden was. Only fields with random clusters of blue flowers surrounded this garden. She didn’t even think the flowers were scillas, but she calmed herself with the familiar song anyway.

When she heard Murray clear his throat, she remembered the tiny celery seeds spilling out of her apron pocket. She halted her song with a sigh. Wasn’t it too late in the season to plant celery? Her grandma would have hers planted already, she was sure. If she even had celery. She remembered picking carrots, cucumbers, and peas there, but not celery. Now her brother would get to eat all the sweet peas, unless he saved some for her to have when she got home. Which would be today, she reassured herself.

She rubbed the side of her face. It wasn’t as swollen, but it was still tender from the blow of the shovel the second morning, when, after waking up confused and scared, she’d refused to start her planting and instead threw dirt at Murray. That night, Catherine snuck in and placed a cold cloth on the wound. Catherine said nothing to her, but it was then that she resolved to just do her work until they came for her. So, she knelt down now in a row of dirt, digging her bare toes into the soil. She froze when her foot bumped something hard. Scooping the dirt aside with her fingers, she found a tiny, plastic change purse. Glancing at Murray to ensure her treasure remained a secret, she squeezed the purse open. She peeled away a crumpled piece of notepaper and pulled out a bracelet with letters. A name. Meredith.

She knew that name. Of course, there was her friend Meredith Carlson at school. She wondered if that Meredith missed her right now. Her thoughts briefly shifted to her seventh-grade class, likely getting ready for the end-of-year fun day. But wasn’t Meredith also the name scribbled on those yellowed drawings on the fridge? And she was sure it was written inside the cover of the Nancy Drew book she’d peeked at on the shelf beside the bed.

Murray’s shovel scratched a rock and she was again brought back to now, to the garden where she’d spent daylight hours for the last five days. Or was it six? It couldn’t yet be seven, she was certain. They wouldn’t let her be gone a whole week.

She knew that before lunch, Murray would check her apron pocket to make sure her morning seeds were gone. So, she shoved the bracelet into the back pocket of the faded jeans Catherine had tossed onto her bed at sunrise— one or two sizes too big. She thought about her own clothes. She had been wearing her softball uniform when Murray pulled up to her, a block from her home, pretending to be in need of directions. The red jersey was still dust-covered from her awkward slide at second in the seventh inning twenty minutes earlier. That is what the news shows would tell people to look out for, she figured, a girl in a red ball shirt. A shirt most likely charred in the fire pit by the garage. The room she slept in—they called it her room—faced that way and she’d watched Murray build a fire there that first night.

She nervously patted her seat to make sure the bracelet was still there, hidden. She would keep it and show it to her mom. She would tell her mom about the crazy man called Murray and his wife Catherine, and this garden. Her mom would help her to understand. Or to forget.

The sun was almost right above them now and she knew enough to get on with it, digging holes and dropping seeds. She had only a handful of seeds left when she heard the back porch door swing shut. Holding her breath, and with hopeful eyes, she turned to look. Her shoulders dropped, carrying the weight of dejection. It was Catherine with the lunch tray. It wasn’t her dad. It wasn’t the police. It wasn’t anyone else who might be able to help her.

“Let’s eat, Meredith,” Murray dropped his shovel and held out a hand to help her up.

“I’m not Meredith,” she whispered, struggling to breathe as a wave of some kind of understanding washed over her.

Staring at the dirt rows before her, she thought of her brother and hoped he did eat all the peas.

And she wondered what would happen to her here when there were no more seeds to plant.

The Infant with Elephant Ears

Tale and Explication

by Lena Bertone

An old man lived with his three daughters in a straw cottage in the village of Acitrezza, and from the wooden bench on their dirt stoop, he could see three black stones that rose from the sea like great lumps of coal.

“Those stones were thrown by the Cyclops,” he would say to passers-by.

“Shut up, Old Pietro,” they would say, for this was his name, and

“Shut up, old man,” his first daughter Pana would say from the kitchen, where she stirred a bowl of wheat flour and water for bread.

So the old man shut up, but only until he felt a rumble beneath the earth and then he said, “I haven’t felt such a tremor since this entire village was toppled by the earthquake of 1152!”

And a child walking by said, “Shut up, Old Pietro,”

And his second daughter Vana, darning stockings in the bedroom, said, “Shut up, old man, and sit quietly and leave us all in the peace of silence.”

And the old man shut up, but only until he saw a pretty young woman carrying a basket, and in the basket was an infant with great big ears that pushed against the straw sides.

“Your ears are as large as those of Dionysus!” Old Pietro said to the child.

“And they hear just as well,” replied the child’s mother, and she smiled and walked on toward the sea.

“Who was that, Father?” asked Old Pietro’s third daughter, Gaetana, who had just returned from the field, where she had gathered dandelion greens for soup.

“I don’t know, Daughter,” he said, and they went inside together to prepare their afternoon meal.

*

Let me interrupt the story to point out what you already know—the template is now set: There are three daughters, one of whom is good, i.e. respectful of elders, listens rather than shuts out, which tells us that she will be the heroine of this story. If I felt like it, I could make her beautiful, or ugly-about-to-turn-beautiful with the catalyst of a good deed, with good defined as loyal, selfless, or fluent in a code that transcends her current life.

*

The next day, the woman and the child with ears like Dionysus walked by the cottage again, and this time Old Pietro said, “I have never seen ears so big and deep! With such ears, you must hear from one side of the ocean to the other.” “Shut up, old man!” Pana called from the kitchen where she stirred her wheat and water. “Have you no tact? No mother wants to hear a stranger telling her how ugly her child is. Especially not from an ugly old man like you.”

“Signora, no,” Old Pietro said to the mother, “that’s not what I meant at all.”

“Yes, I know, Old Pietro,” said the woman, and walked away toward the

The next day, when the mother and child passed, Old Pietro could not help but remark, “My, but your child’s ears seem to grow larger with every passing day.”

To which Vana responded from inside, where she sat on the bed with her needle and thread, “Old man, mind your business and don’t embarrass me by trying to seduce beautiful young women.”

“Signora,” Old Pietro said to the mother, “that’s not what I meant at all.”

“Yes, I know, Old Pietro,” she said, and walked away with her basket toward the sea.

*

Now we have ended the second cycle of the bad daughters’ abuse, with bad defined as mean, disrespectful, intolerant, and most importantly, incognizant of the meaning of the patterns in the story. These sisters do not know the code that Gaetana knows, and that will make her the heroine herein. But what if the code were different? What if there were another code and another story that the listener is not made aware of?

*

That night, when Pietro was asleep, Pana, Vana, and Gaetana walked together to the dandelion fields.

“Our father is old and a bother, and I don’t want to cook for him anymore,” said Pana, whose idea it had been to meet in secret while Old Pietro slept.

“Yes, and he’s filthy and smelly, and I don’t want to bathe and dress him anymore,” said Vana. “How are we supposed to find husbands when we spend all our time taking care of that decrepit old man? All he does is sit on his bench all day and scream absurdities to whoever happens to be passing by.”

But Gaetana replied, “That’s not true! And furthermore, he’s our father and it’s our duty to take care of him in his old age.”

“Well then,” said Pana, “if you feel that way, you can make his bread.”

“And you can bathe and dress him,” Vana added.

“But who then,” asked Gaetana, “will gather weeds from the fields for us to eat?”

“You can do that too,” they both replied. “And since we’re in the field now, perhaps you should get an early start.”

So they left Gaetana to gather dandelion greens, and when she returned at sunrise, she bathed and clothed Old Pietro, and when she had set the greens to boiling, she started mixing wheat and water for bread.

That morning, Pana and Vana said, “We are going to Catania. Expect us back tonight.”

*

Here we see Gaetana becoming overburdened with the roles that she takes on when her “bad” sisters take advantage of her. But in truth, these extra tasks that Gaetana must perform are the first of many directives that will eventually lead her to win the spoils of this tale. Pana and Vana, on the other hand, are confirming their status as the static bad characters in the story, at best; but at

worst, they are beginning to walk down a much darker path that may not even be accessible to Gaetana, who is unwilling to tread outside her familiar construct of goodness. For example, is it “bad” to question one’s living situation? Is it “bad” to refuse to be taken advantage of? It seems that Gaetana’s answer, conscious or not, would be yes, while Pana and Vana give themselves the space to explore aspects of self that are unfamiliar and dangerous—taking risks for the possibility of a better outcome.

What if, for example, because Pana and Vana have pawned off their daily tasks on Gaetana, they spend the rest of that night walking the streets of Acitrezza and finding everywhere around them signs that they should forego all other plans and go immediately in the morning to Catania? Signs: a discarded flyer with the appropriate coded message, a stray dog whose nighttime yowl eerily and impossibly imitates human speech, and tells them, in rhyme, to go seek Bartolomeo on Via Vico Bruno in the city. What if this were the case? What if, rather than the selfish reasons we presume, Pana and Vana go to Catania because they feel compelled by a mysterious code of their own?

*

At noontime, the mother and child passed by, and Old Pietro called from his bench: “Come inside and have soup and bread with us.”

“I don’t know,” said the woman. “I wouldn’t want to be a bother to your daughters.”

“You won’t be a bother!” exclaimed Gaetana from the kitchen. “Pana and Vana are out, so there are just enough chairs at the table for all of us and your basket.”

So the woman came in and sat down with Gaetana and Old Pietro, and their bowls of soup turned into beef stew and their bread sprouted pastries, and they had a lovely lunch, at the end of which, the woman asked Gaetana for a favor.

“I must travel to Etna for three days and I need someone to take care of my child,” she said, and she lifted the baby out of the basket and put him in her lap so that his ears flopped down past her knees.

“I would be happy to,” said Gaetana.

“But you must take great care of him,” said the young woman, “and never let him out of your sight. If when I return he is healthy and happy, I will give you a bag of gold coins for your trouble.”

*

Here we watch as Gaetana’s major task is set for the story. It is facilitated by the fact that her sisters are not home, and it seems that it may be that the strange woman and her very strange baby could have in some way caused the sisters not to be home, because it is rather convenient that they are absent, and the woman does call attention to their absence, doesn’t she? But while Gaetana is willingly taking on the child, and while she and Old Pietro accept the mealtime magic of the strange woman with no discernible reaction or questioning—the “good” thing to do—Pana and Vana are in Catania, on Via Vico Bruno, which is not much more than a crooked alley, a remnant of a one-horse-wide battle route, looking for someone called Bartolomeo, without knowing if that is his first name,

last name, alias, nothing. They cannot find him on their own, and just as they decide to turn around and go home, a skinny old crow flies down from its nest on a balcony and speaks to them in the dog’s voice: “Bartolomeo will see you tomorrow.”

*

So the woman left and Old Pietro fell asleep on his bench and Gaetana strapped the boy to her waist while she made more bread for dinner. She wrapped his head in a great swath of linen to keep his ears from getting into the dough.

Pana and Vana returned from Catania that evening and kicked their father as they passed up the stoop to the door. “Wake up, old man,” Vana said. “You’re drooling and snoring here for all the neighbors to see, and we have good news to tell.”

They barely noticed the child on Gaetana’s hip as they told her their good news: that in Catania, the Queen was seeking a wife for her son, the Prince, and she would be receiving visitors for the next three days.

“Surely one of us will be chosen to marry the Prince,” Vana said. “Pana, you make the best bread in all the land, and I have the greatest talent for sewing, and you, Gaetana. . . well, there may not be hope for you, Gaetana.”

“I must take care of this child for the next three days, anyway,” said Gaetana, “and if the mother returns and finds a healthy, happy baby, then we shall all be richer by a bag of gold coins!”

*

Gaetana shows a naive confidence here that she can achieve the task that she has been given, perhaps because she is not familiar with the progression of this kind of story, in which more obstacles appear than are originally supposed. At the same time, Vana and Pana are subverting the truth of their activities in Catania—implementing self-created obstacles, as it were—in order to continue seeking out Bartolomeo, the mysterious, and the unknown, which may or may not end badly for them: they don’t know, and yet they persist. Or perhaps these two stories exist side by side: in one version, they really and truly do seek the prince that the Queen promises, and in the other version, they will pursue the dark code that has been initiated by their curiosity and ambition.

*

When her sisters and her father had gone to sleep that night, Gaetana took the boy and a loaf of bread for them to eat into the field with her, and laid him on a blanket to sleep while she gathered weeds. But she was tired from not having slept the night before, and soon dozed off amidst the yellow flowers. While she slept, Pana came to the field to steal the loaf of bread that Gaetana had made, because she wanted to take it to the Queen as a gift. But as she took the loaf, the baby awoke and one of his giant ears slipped out of the linen swath.

“It’s you!” cried Pana, “that child with the thunderous ears!”

“Yes, it is me,” the infant said, “and I will tell your sister that you stole her bread to give to the Queen as your own.”

“No, you will not,” Pana said, and she cut off his flopping ear, buried it under a mulberry bush, and threatened to cut off the other if he told.

She went away with the bread, and later that night, Vana came to the field to steal the linen swath that covered the baby’s head, to make from it an embroidered handkerchief for the Queen. But when she tried to remove the fabric, the boy awoke and his other ear came tumbling out.

“You have come to steal this cloth from my head!” he cried.

“It is my own cloth, stupid boy, and I will cut just a piece of it. But because you are so ugly, I will cut off this monstrous ear and if you tell anyone, I will cut out your tongue as well.” And so she sliced off his ear and buried it under a fig tree, and then cut a piece of the cloth, and rewrapped his head so that no one would know.

In the morning, Gaetana cursed herself for having fallen asleep, and returned to the cottage empty-handed, with the child on her hip, as her sisters were leaving to visit the Queen.

“We shall return tonight, once the Queen has chosen one of us to marry the Prince.” They were wearing their prettiest Sunday dresses and carrying in their bags their stolen gifts for the Queen.

*

Who are the gifts for? The Queen or Bartolomeo? It depends on which version of the story we’re observing. Here on the underside, we understand that the gifts are really for Bartolomeo, and the violent way in which they are obtained communicates that Pana and Vana have an instinctual dedication to the unraveling of their code. They travel to Catania and look again for Via Vico Bruno, but it seems not to be where it was yesterday. They begin to quarrel over this way or that way when Vana’s handkerchief, embroidered with the infant’s blood, falls from the shoulder bag onto the cobblestone street. A crow swoops down from the sky to pick it up, and tells them in the dog’s voice, “Follow me.”

*

Meanwhile Gaetana set about bathing and dressing her father, and when he was seated at his bench on the stoop, she took the baby into the kitchen for a bath in the sink. She removed the linen cloth from his head, and she saw that his ears had been cut off. She cried and her tears washed the blood from his head, and she ran outside to Old Pietro.

“Father, something terrible has happened! Someone has cut off this child’s ears, and now when his mother returns, he will be neither healthy nor happy.” She held the child out for him to see.

*

Notice here that Gaetana is either oblivious to the fact that this is the work of her sisters, or she is trying to hide the truth of their badness from her father. Since we have not yet seen or heard any evidence that Gaetana is capable of hiding, deceiving, or even having bad thoughts, I think we can assume that she is still, at this point, oblivious. And what does it mean that the heroine of the story is oblivious and also unable to successfully complete the task that has been set

out for her? It could just be a result of the form of these kinds of stories—that no character is ever complete, that each character is really just a piece of a person, a two-dimensional being that can move only within a flat realm of experience, and that she/he can only be conceived as a whole person when seen together with the other, opposing characters in the story.

Or it could be another example of the conflation of goodness and stupidity.

*

“Yes, it’s true, I can see it,” he said, “but I know something that you can do. Leave the child with me and go to Piedemonta to see the old woman who lives in the cave. She will restore the child’s ears. But be careful not to tell anyone where it is that you’re going, otherwise you will never get there.”

*

Aha! you say. So it is Old Pietro who is finally able to introduce deception and magic to Gaetana in order to help her achieve her tasks. And it is not so much in the role as her father, nor as the helpless old man who tests the kindness of those who pass by him as he sits on his dilapidated porch, but as he is rendered here in a third role: the secret facilitator of magic—the catalyst for the plot of the story.

*

Gaetana was reluctant to leave the baby, but she was also desperate to restore its ears, and a bag of gold coins would be theirs if she could succeed. As she walked away from the cottage, she heard her father say to the infant boy,

“Polyphemus threw those stones into the sea,” and when Gaetana was too far to hear, the boy replied,

“What for?”

“Well, to kill Odysseus for having blinded him.” Old Pietro told the boy the whole story of the Cyclops, and when he explained that Polyphemus had crushed the shepherd Acis into nine pieces with one of the jagged black rocks he had hurled at him, the boy asked,

“What happened to the nine pieces of the shepherd?”

The old man happily responded, “Nine towns grew from each buried piece, and a river that runs into the sea.”

“Well, then,” the boy said, “I wonder how long it will be before my buried ears sprout a new town and a river that runs into the sea.”

*

Here, for the second time, we see the results of listening kindly to the old man’s account of history: in the first instance, it resulted in the conjured meal, and in this instance, it leads to a revelation toward the truth of the infant’s cut-off ears. The child’s speech, in itself unusual for an infant, is another signal that there are codes in this tale which will come undone with the correct unraveling.

*

Old Pietro was so startled that he fell off his bench. “Maybe not a town, but certainly something will grow.” He took the boy to the field where one ear was buried beneath a mulberry bush, and the other beneath a fig tree, and sure enough, two trees had grown up in the field, and hanging down from each branch was a cluster of ears. Old Pietro tugged at a branch and held the ears to his own.

“Listen here, Old Pietro!” said the boy, and he pointed an ear at him. The voice that came out sounded like his daughter Pana.

“Queen, I have brought you, humbly, a gift,” she said, and after a moment of silence, the Queen responded,

“This bread is beautiful but it has blood on it. Whose blood have you brought me on this bread?”

“My goodness, your majesty, I don’t know! It must have been my sister Gaetana—she’s so clumsy that she cut herself and bled on the loaf.”

“That is a lie,” said the Queen. “And furthermore, you did not make this bread. Send this woman away.” Old Pietro and the boy heard Pana kicking and shouting as she was led out of the court, and they were about to put the ear down when they heard Vana say,

“No, your majesty, I have no idea who that woman was. No relation to me whatsoever. Please accept this embroidered handkerchief as my gift to you, my Queen.”

“Oh,” said the Queen, “this too has blood on it—blood in the very threads used to embroider it. Take this woman away as well.” And they heard Vana crying out and screaming as she was dragged from the court.

They put the ear down, and though Old Pietro realized what wretched women his daughters were, he could not help but grieve their badness, and as his tears fell on the boy, small ears sprang from the holes on either side of his infant head. They were lovely, small, round ears, and the boy and Old Pietro celebrated by picking figs and mulberries and eating them with rice when they returned home.

*

Old Pietro has just learned hard truths about Pana and Vana from a talking infant and ears sprouted from a tree. He grieves his daughters’ wickedness and the tears that spring from his eyes restore the infant’s sliced-off ears. There are many levels of implication here, the first of which is that perhaps Gaetana, in often covering for the depth of her sisters’ badness, had been in fact keeping their father from realizing how sinister and selfish they were capable of being. But that despite his willful ignorance he should so readily believe what the infant and the ears tell him, correct in their assessment of Pana and Vana’s violent qualities, reveals that he was already aware on some level that these two daughters were of a darker nature and willing to seek out mystery via questionable means and behavior. And though he weeps for them, has he not just sent his third daughter into the same potential darkness, a cave where she must do who knows what to restore the ears of the child in order to collect what: a bag of gold?

*

But the boy feared what Pana and Vana would do to him when they saw that he had grown new ears, so before dusk came, Old Pietro wrapped the boy’s head again in the linen. And sure enough, when the sisters returned home, they were angry and hungry.

“Where is our food?” demanded Vana, whose Sunday dress was dirty from the dragging.

“Yes, where is our soup and bread?” asked Pana, who had thrown her own loaf at a rough castle guard.

“There is no food, no soup and bread, for your sister Gaetana has run away from here, perhaps never to return.” Pietro chewed the inside of his cheek to make the tears come.

“Old man,” they both said, “we don’t believe you.” They pressed further, but Old Pietro had nothing more to say to them and went to bed, holding the boy close to him.

*

In their version of the tale, Pana and Vana had followed that crow, kept their eyes on it so intently that soon they could see nothing but its gray-black form in the sky, the buildings and people and cars melting from their peripheral visions. And when it set down, Vana’s bloody handkerchief still in its beak, Pana and Vana were no longer in a place that looked like the city, not even in a place that looked like Catania, or Sicily, but a cold, dark, pine-wooded forest with snow falling on their uncovered heads.

“This way,” the crow said, and led them into what seemed like a hole in the ground, but which contained a stairway that led to an underground house unlike any above-ground house that Pana and Vana had ever seen—long, dark corridors that led past room upon room of lush, serious furniture, and by each heavy wooden doorway, a servant stood, looking down at the floor and whispering prayers. The crow flapped his wings into a library room, filled with book-cases, and a ceiling-high fireplace, and an old man in a throne-like chair that rose above his head in ornate convolutions of gold and copper.

The sisters bowed to Bartolomeo and trembled as he spoke to them. “Here’s what you do. It’s very simple. Find your way home from here, and then show me your bravery by killing your sister and bringing her to me in pieces. In return, you may live and work with me here forever.” When he finished speaking, he stood, walked into the fire and disappeared.

Pana and Vana left the house and wandered through the forest, looking for the path home. They heard the dog’s voice whisper to them, “this way” and “around this tree,” and as they somehow wound back to Catania, Pana asked her sister, “What do you think Bartolomeo means by ‘work’ with him?”

Depending on which version of this story you’re more inclined to believe, then, Pana and Vana may have been seeking a husband or an escape from their world into another, more uncertain one. In either case, when they returned home that evening, their sister Gaetana was gone.

*

“I think the boy knows where Gaetana has gone,” Vana said to her sister.

When their father was asleep, Pana wrested the baby from his arms and the hungry sisters walked to the field to gather greens for soup.

"You know where our sister has gone," Pana said, but the boy pretended that he could not speak and did not know.

"I think she has gone to see the Queen!" Vana said. "She thinks she can be the one to marry the Prince. We'll find her there tomorrow."

When they arrived at the field, they saw the two new trees, but in the darkness, the ears looked like fruit, so the sisters picked every one and ate them hungrily.

"Tell us where our sister has gone," they said to the boy, "or we will cut out your tongue so that you will never speak again." But the boy would not say a word, so they cut out his tongue and buried it under an olive tree.

They returned home and put the boy back into their sleeping father's arms, and resolved to return to Catania and the Queen the following day, disguising themselves with their Carnevale masks.

The next morning, Pana and Vana called out as they left the cottage, and Old Pietro was left to bathe and dress himself, and then to bathe and dress the baby, and then he sat at his bench and tried to feed the boy a bowl of rice and milk. But the boy wouldn't eat it, and Old Pietro said,

"Have I told you that there's a pomegranate tree in the field down the way, and it grew from the seeds of the fruit that Hades used to lure Persephone to the underworld?" And Old Pietro carried the infant to the field, but before they reached the pomegranate tree, the old man saw that a bush had grown up underneath the olive tree, and the berries on this bush were red and thick like tastebuds.

"My heavens," he said, "Did someone cut out your tongue last night?" He looked into the boy's mouth, and sure enough, his tongue was gone, and the old man wept with the boy tight in his arms, wept because he knew it was his daughters who had cut the boy's tongue out.

But from the tears that fell into the boy's mouth, a new tongue was formed, and soon the boy could say, "It's all right, Old Pietro, I have a tongue now, and listen here to what this tongue is saying."

They leaned in to hear the whisper of one of the tongues, and it was the voice of Gaetana, who was wandering through Piedemonta, unable to find the old woman's cave and unable to ask anyone for fear she would never find her way.

*

Notice here that this is the second time that Old Pietro's tears have healed the boy, and that all of the magic that Old Pietro has been witness to has resulted from the introduction of the strange woman and the infant into his life. But he is not too surprised by this—probably because he knew already of magic and strangeness. Otherwise, how would he have known to send his daughter to the witch in the cave that would restore the infant's ears? So it seems that his innocence is feigned; but then so is that of the strange woman and possibly also her child, because as we noted before, it was probably more than coincidence that caused them to show up for lunch on the day that Pana and Vana were absent from the house.

*

"What can I do?" Gaetana asked herself, the tongue wagging itself at Old Pietro and the boy. "How will I find the old woman?" They heard her weeping, and then a nearby tongue called out in the voice of a goat,

"Here: I will show you the way."

"A goat is always a good guide!" said Old Pietro to the boy, and he was satisfied that his daughter would find the old woman. Happily, he and the boy picked olives and pomegranates, and had a lovely meal and walked home to have an afternoon nap. They slept into the evening, and were still sleeping when Pana and Vana returned from Catania.

*

They hadn't found Gaetana of course; she wasn't in Catania. But neither were they sure that they wanted to work for Bartolomeo, if that meant being one of those servants, each praying at their respective door. Pana especially was unconvinced that they should go on with their task. She had no affection for that baby and didn't mind so much the violence they were inflicting on it, but to kill their own sister and chop her into pieces. . . she had her doubts.

*

"Where is our food?" they cried. "We're hungry and we didn't even get to see the Queen. The line was so long that they turned us away at dusk!" But they were only speaking to themselves, because Old Pietro and the boy slept soundly in the bed.

"Look at them," said Pana. And then Vana noticed, "Look, look there, Pana," she said. "Their mouths are red from pomegranate juice. Let's take the boy and make him show us where the pomegranate tree is."

So they took the boy and shook him awake, and assuming that he still had no tongue, they told him to point to the pomegranate tree, or look in its direction.

"We're hungry!" Pana said. "And if you don't show us where the tree is, we'll cut out your eyes and then you'll never see it either!" The boy would not relent, so they cut out his eyes and threw them into the dandelion field.

"Stupid boy," Vana said. "But look here, Pana, here is a bush with red fruit." And they ate all the tongues from the bush, and then returned home and slept until four the next morning, when Vana woke Pana and they sneaked out of the cottage to be the first in line to see the Queen.

*

Vana was still very interested in Bartolomeo's proposition. She was sure that he had something nobler in mind for her and Pana than servants' work. And she didn't feel her current life offered much of a positive alternative, so why not take the risk? She convinced Pana to go with her to search for Gaetana, and prepared herself for the eventuality that she would have to kill Gaetana on her own, and perhaps Pana as well.

*

That morning, Old Pietro rose and bathed and dressed himself. Then he washed and clothed the baby, and made him warm cereal from milk and wheat, and sat him at the bench on the stoop and prepared to tell him the story of the volcanic eruption of 1629.

"It covered the entire city of Catania," he said, "and lava stretched its arms out into the sea. You can see the shape of the mountain behind us."

"No, I can't see it," said the boy, and Old Pietro realized that the infant's eyes had been cut out. This time, the old man was angry and could not cry, but he carried the boy to the field, and he saw flowers had grown up all through the field, and each blossom was a blinking eye. He looked into one and saw Pana and Vana making their way up the steps to see the Queen in their butterfly Carnevale masks.

"Who are these ladies?" asked the Queen, "And why are they wearing masks?"

Pana stepped forward and curtsied, bowing her head down low, but when she opened her mouth to speak, a hiccup came out, and then a cough, and when Vana approached to see what was wrong with her sister, she too began coughing and wrenching, and before the Queen could command them away, the sisters were expelling great gobs of ears and tongues that flew from their throats to every corner of the royal court.

"Execute these witches!" cried the Queen, and they were dragged out of sight, still coughing and vomiting bits of ear and tongue, unable to defend themselves as their masks dropped down to the ground.

*

Pana and Vana were as surprised as anyone that they vomited up the fleshy, half digested body parts as they searched the city for Gaetana.

A voice called them to the alley behind the castle, and as they wound through the musty curves inside the city, they found themselves emerging into the forest clearing, where the staircase hole led down to Bartolomeo's home. They clung to each other and descended, walked the long corridor to the library, and entered, sick to their stomachs that they had come again without having fulfilled their task. Bartolomeo knew.

"Why are you here?" he said. "Your sister is still alive and she's bringing good news to that old sap of your father. You haven't done what I asked of you and still you have returned here seeking reward."

"We seek nothing," Pana said. "I'm sorry," and she turned to leave.

"No, wait!" said Vana. "You must take us. We'll do anything. I'll do anything."

"You've already failed." But Bartolomeo fussed with his wild hair. "The only thing you can do now," he said, "is walk through that fire."

He offered no explanation, and though Pana cried and screamed, Vana dragged her into the fire, and there, they both burned and vomited and screeched until their faces melted from their heads and they had no way of seeing their way out to the other side.

*

At the sight of their tortured faces inside the eye-flowers, Old Pietro

began to cry for their imminent deaths and his tears restored the boy's eyes, and the boy held the old man close and comforted him. Over Old Pietro's shoulder, the boy saw in one of the eye-blooms that Gaetana was returning home, and that she was at the door of the straw cottage.

"Old Pietro, let's go home, for Gaetana has returned. But first, let's pick dandelion greens for soup." So they picked greens, and then walked home.

But this was the third day, and at the cottage, they found that the boy's mother had also arrived, and she was furious that her child was not with Gaetana.

"How dare you let him out of your sight!" she cried. But when she saw her baby with Old Pietro, she was relieved, and took him and held him tight to her, and he gurgled and smiled at her. She unwrapped his head from the linen, but was so shocked to see his small ears that she dropped him hard on the ground, and he laid there still, as though sleeping.

"What have you done to my child? Where are his beautiful ears?"

"Signora, please, let me explain—" Gaetana pleaded, and told her the tale of the sliced ear, and her visit to the old woman in the cave at Piedemonta. "A kind goat showed me the way, and then waited outside while I talked to the old woman."

While Gaetana told the story, Old Pietro picked up the boy and laid him on the table, and began stirring wheat and water for bread.

"The old woman said that to restore the baby's ears, I would have to travel to the mouth of the volcano Etna and look in to see if it was angry and red. If it was, I would have to sacrifice my own ear to restore your boy's. The goat carried me to the top of the volcano, and I looked in and it was red and bubbling.

"I started to slice off my ear, but the goat said, 'Wait! Don't cut off that pretty ear. You can cut mine off instead and Etna will never know the difference.' But I cut off my ear and threw it in, and looked again into the volcano. It was still red, and the goat said, 'It wants another ear—but this time, cut off mine so that we will both have one left.'"

"But I cut off my other ear and threw it in. Still, the lava was red and it rose to my feet, and the goat said, 'Quick, cut out my tongue and one of my eyes and feed them to the mountain! Quick, before she consumes us both!' But I cut out my own tongue and one eye and threw them in, and now when the goat and I looked in, the lava turned black and sank back down into the earth.

"As I was crying into my hands, the goat turned into the old woman and she put her hands over my ears, restoring them, and then breathed into my mouth, returning my tongue, and kissed my blind eye, which grew right back into its socket. And she told me that if I came home and loved the child, that his ears would grow back just as they had been."

Gaetana lifted the still baby from the table, and put her hands over his ears, and kissed his face. As she cried over him, his ears began to grow, but to her surprise, the rest of him grew too, and soon she had before her a full-grown man with ears to match, dressed and looking every bit a prince.

His mother turned too, and Gaetana realized she was looking at the Queen, with a scepter and a crown, and a smile on her face as she said, "I would be honored to have you for a daughter."

They sat and ate beef stew, and bread sprouted with pastries, and made plans for Gaetana to marry the Prince, and for Old Pietro to come live with them in the castle at the center of Catania.

But Old Pietro said, "I would prefer to stay here," and he did just that, taking care of himself in his straw cottage by the sea.

*

Yes, that's nice. Innocent Gaetana gets a prince, conveniently grown from her very own tears, and she has completed her tasks, overcome obstacles, and appeased the angry lava. This is how such stories should always end.

Vana dragged her sister through that fire, screaming, wanting to know what was on the other side and more sure every moment that she would kill her sister if Bartolomeo asked her to, that she would do anything he asked her to do.

They emerged from the fire into a snowy patch of mountain. Pana collapsed to soothe the charred skin of her naked body, from which every thread of clothing and hair had been burned. She rolled in the snow, steaming it with her heat, while Vana observed the wall of lava that moved toward them silently, wondering how she would surmount this test that Bartolomeo had surely designed for her—just for her—so that she could prove her commitment to his will. She might be able to outrun the wall, which she could see crackling red and black despite its silence, but running was no way to show her courage. So instead, she grabbed Pana's shrieking face, told her that she could no longer stand the sound of her lispy whistle, and drove a pine branch through her mouth and deep into the snow and ice. With Pana's head firmly affixed to the cold ground, she grabbed her sister's feet and pulled, her own naked breasts swinging down in the wind that threatened to yank her into the lava like an undertow. She pulled and her sister's legs stretched like the bread dough she was so good at kneading, and Vana pulled her ten meters, twenty, thirty, until she could no longer see Pana's face and she thought the legs might snap if she pulled them any farther. She thrust a second pine branch through Pana's feet and the ice beneath them. Now she had a barrier between her and the lava, albeit a thin, stretched one, and she asked into the sky,

"There, is that enough?"

But she got no answer, and so she returned to her sister's chest and reached into it with her ragged fingernails and pulled out her heart, and smeared the blood of it over her face and arms, and then she pulled out her own heart and smeared its blood over her neck and body, to fool the lava into thinking that it had already burned her.

"There now," she said. "Is that enough?"

But she got no answer, and the wall of lava was closer now. It was close enough that she could smell it. She could smell everything in it—the center of the earth, the rock it had decimated in its path through the earth, the air it had swallowed on its way out of the earth, and the seared flesh of every person it had eaten on its way to her. As it came closer, she could see those people too—bits of them that stuck to the exterior of the rolling wall: fingers and tongues, bones cooking black then white.

It was inevitable. She would be consumed by the wall—and perhaps this was as it should be—and fearing that the sight of it would make her run, she plucked out her eyeballs and let them lie there against her face, feeling them heat and blister as she waited to be enveloped. But now, inside her head, the wall spoke.

"You think your actions will please me?" its sooty voice asked her.

"I don't think anything," Vana said as the lava rolled itself over her. Her charred, bloody flesh felt the lava like a blanket, and the lava whispered sweetly, incoherently, in her ear.

And then Vana found herself back in Bartolomeo's library, a robe over her tender skin and a glass of chilled sweet vermouth on the antique table beside her. Bartolomeo rose, closed his book, and said as he exited the room,

"*Coniglio con agradolce*¹ will be served in the dining room in twenty minutes."

¹Sweet and sour rabbit.

The Way of All Flesh (redux)

by Jim Cigo

The way the sky wraps around the planet or weather wraps around your head. The way a walk takes you through time and space. The way sound takes the measure of place. The way passion diverts breath and blood. The way waves overtake the names lovers leave in the wet sand. The way the ocean's undertow projects shadow onto the sky in the guise of gull flight. The way the flame of ignition sits for an instant at one end of the ring of gas before consuming it in sequence. The way the secrets you share can erect unforeseen barriers. The way a missing stroke of punctuation can change what you mean to say utterly. The way you hear your own voice from both inside and out when you read aloud, alone, and it's late and the type slides down the page and you're suddenly tired so tired so tired so tired...

Mr De Ville goes to the Post Office : Variations

by Armel Dagorn

Mr De Ville, of De Ville, Collins, and Haughney, didn't understand what the woman said when she turned around in the queue at the GPO. She was facing him, and it was clear she was expecting some kind of answer for the gibberish she'd just uttered. What was that, now. Mr De Ville didn't come down to the Post Office on his short lunch break to be pestered by working-class, tracksuit-clad creatures.

"Wo' day izzit? Izzit Toosday? I' is, izzin i'?"

"Yes, it is."

Appalling, it was. Never mind that "working-class" reference. It was doubtful the simpleton had ever lifted a finger in her life for anything. How could you not know? Mr De Ville considered himself quite the liberal, but he simply could not understand how you wouldn't know the day of the week. He could imagine being unsure for part of a second, but surely your mind found its footing back, computing what meetings one's had, and the ones to come. Thank God that woman went up to the counter then, as her turn had come. What people you had to mingle with. It was revolting, really. In no time it was his turn. Inexplicably he ignored the clerk and ran out after the woman.

#1 Mr De Ville certainly had no idea what he was going to do, or why even he was doing this. It was his first time following anyone. He just had to see how this woman lived, where she came from. Her kind was so alien to him he had to know. They took a few turns along red-brick rows of houses which made Mr De Ville shudder. Suddenly an ambulance sped alongside him and screeched to a stop, and two goons in white coats jumped out of the back and onto the girl. "Sarah, come with us now, and no funny stuff!" Everything had an explanation, thought Mr De Ville, relieved.

#2 When he got out into the street, she was nowhere to be seen. Mr De Ville went straight back to the office, not bothering with the business he had in the Post Office. At his desk, he couldn't focus on any of the cases he successively tried to have a look at. He just could not get that clueless creature out of his mind. What a cheek, to be out there, and make a show of yourself and your ignorance. He wondered how such individuals could function, how they survived. The afternoon passed and Mr De Ville couldn't get his mind off the issue for long enough to get any work done. Soon it was time for his meeting with Mr O'Neill. It was a formality, a simple contract to be signed—everything had been reviewed already. As the senior partner, Mr De Ville took the pen first, then froze. His three associates and Mr O'Neill were watching him. He could not for the life of him remember the date. He started sweating huge, obscene drops, and finally had to mumble "What is the date?"

The Immortal Pet Laboratory: Satisfaction Guaranteed by J. J. Steinfeld

#3 Mr De Ville followed the girl for a good few minutes, among what he would later describe as “squalid working-class housing,” turning left, right, walking faster or slower along with her, a real detective. At some stage he turned around and saw a man he recognised. He was dressed in cheap casual clothes, although much more tasteful than the woman’s. The man jumped back around the corner when Mr De Ville turned around but not fast enough as to be unseen. That man had been standing in the queue at the Post Office, and Mr De Ville had turned to him and commented “What a dreadful place, isn’t it? My butler just died before he could run this errand for me. And here I am! Ah!” What was this now—you try to be courteous and make small talk, and you end up with a stalker.

#4 Mr De Ville followed the girl to a row of red-brick houses. Oh, the bleakness. She entered a house. The brass number on the door, an 8, had fallen sideways, looking now like the common symbol for infinity. She’d left the door slightly ajar, and a bright but somehow mellow light seeped out from inside. Mr De Ville’s curiosity got the better of him—he pushed the door open and stepped inside. A pleasant warmth enveloped him and he started walking forward, following the sound of a soft tune. A flute or something. There were no walls he could see, only a yellow-orange mist that seemed to be limiting the view. It soon started to clear up, revealing grass under his feet, grass of a darker shade of orange than the sky above. A sky-blue stream slithered away into the distance, and finally Mr De Ville saw where the music originated: a little man with curly red hair, a goatee, and a goat’s body from the midriff down who was sauntering around, playing on a pan flute. The tune seemed to be for the benefit of a dozen girls who lazily danced in a circle, wearing only thin veils and garlands of flowers. He recognized the girl from the Post Office there, but she abruptly left the group and walked towards the stream. In two fluid moves she shed her tracksuit, first her top, then her pants. She was naked underneath and as she dove into the water Mr De Ville beheld her perfect body, white and smooth, the perfect round shape of her bottom and breasts, the ivory tusks of her legs, last to disappear under the surface. Mr De Ville felt dizzy. With no wall to lean for support, he fell over on his behind. When he opened his eyes after the fall, he saw the street, the red-brick houses, and the door slowly creaking closed.

#5 Mr De Ville did not feel quite right following that girl, but his curiosity was too strong and he took turn after turn along rows of red-brick houses, until an ambulance screeched to a stop next to him. Two goons in white coats came out the back, and one told the other, “Him there, with the top hat.” Before Mr De Ville knew what was happening, he’d been grabbed, a strong arm locking under his own frail ones.

“There, there. It’s gonna be OK.”

“Regrettable,” the laboratory’s head scientist told the man in his office. “I want the puppy as is,” the client demanded. “I’d advise against that,” the scientist cautioned. “I paid your damn lab to give me another Machiavelli, a dog that had been part of my family for fifteen years. A precious dog that protected us and asked nothing in return but our love,” the client said, angrier than he could ever remember being.

“I understand you are deeply disappointed, but the cloning process is not without its flaws and occasional mishaps,” the scientist said with an arrogance that infuriated the client even more.

“You and your damn Immortal Pet Laboratory cheated me,” the client yelled, looking upward, as if the dog for which he paid nearly three months’ salary was hovering close to the ceiling.

“We can arrange a full refund, sir. Please calm yourself. Nothing is gained from emotional outbursts.”

“All your advertisements proclaim Satisfaction Guaranteed.”

“But—”

“I want my dog. I paid a great deal of money to your deceitful, corrupt Immortal Pet Laboratory,” the client screamed and made threatening gestures with his fists.

“Okay,” the scientist said, leading the client to the nursery, where the genetically bred dogs were kept. He pointed to a cage containing a deformed dog that looked little like Machiavelli.

The scientist opened the cage for the client. After petting the dog, which he sensed was temperamentally similar to his vicious old dog, the client said, “Attack,” and Machiavelli II lunged at the scientist’s throat.

**Utopia #3: I Will Be Everything Except God
Because God Is Not Everything
(That Is Why He Had Jesus)
by Sylvain Verstricht**

Waking is always a bit jarring. I lay there for a few seconds not knowing who I am, hoping I might be somebody else.

My hands travel from my face, down my neck, to my chest, down my stomach, to my legs. I have never known this body. This is not me. Thank God.

Blood travels from my heart to my limbs like coffee from my stomach to my brain. I get up and stand in front of the full-length mirror that makes up my closet door. I am not me. I breathe. Even that feels different, lighter. My body, on the other hand, is heavier than I remember because I did not have this body to remember before now.

I'm a jock. I'm a fucking jock.

I obsess over every inch of my body until I begin to feel narcissistic. Then I turn around and look at the other half, my head twisted over my shoulder. You would think they would have figured out a better way to do this by now. I should set up a video camera that would project the image of my back in front of me. I should make a mental note of this for the life in which I will be an artist, for an installation.

My clothes will be tighter. That's okay; I did not get this body not to show it off.

Everywhere I go, I can feel people's eyes on me, though I suspect it might only be me looking at myself. The club is packed and men are easy. I bring a twink home. I fuck him. It's over.

My hair is in my face. I blow it off, but it falls back into the exact same place. I bring my hand to my cheek, slide it down my neck, squeeze one of my tits. Then I insert my fingers into my vagina, because why wouldn't I?

"I love your band."

Men are easy. I bring a drummer home. I fuck him. It's over.

The white coat floats around me like I have my own wind machine always just a few steps ahead of me.

The blade is in my hand. The hand is steady. The chest is sliced open.

My white-gloved hand slides between his ribs, becomes red. I can feel the heart beating against my fingertips.

The pharmacy has no secrets from me. The white pills fall into the palm of my hands like snowflakes on a tree branch.

My body lies motionless on the floor. My eyes are closed because to see the world on top of feeling it is too much. Tears still manage to escape and run down my temples towards the centre of the earth. The humanness of me.

I am what you want me to be. I'm nice, but not too nice; smart, but not too smart; I'm your type, exactly. I am those things so we can love each other, which we do, inevitably. Then, of course, I have to dump you, and I'm sorry, even though it's actually your fault. I'm just that nice.

The blade is in my hand. The hand is steady. The wire is cut. I open the door and slide in. More wires. Disconnect, reconnect. The engine starts. I am no longer here.

The river speaks. I cannot help but listen. It's the weight in my right hand that reminds me of my task. When I hold the axe in my hands, it is my own hand I am holding, it is your hand I am imagining. I take a deep breath. The axe flies past my head and comes crashing down against the wood, breaks.

This home will be more window than wall, more outside than inside, more warmth than cold.

Beyond the Rainbow by Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan

No. Not today. He can hardly summon up the strength to raise his frail wrist and wave at the passengers. The train comes with its usual might and speed cutting across the dusty stretches of agricultural fields.

He squats down on the edge of his land, expressionless. There is not even a blink in his eye. The brown attire of the guard, in the last bogie, flutters away, disappearing fast into the horizon where mountains talk to clouds and distant birds have their homes. Clutching the walking stick, he cannot help recalling his first breathtaking encounter with the train.

Too far for him to remember, but his mother's repeated narration during his childhood made him memorize every second of it.

That day he woke up from his afternoon nap to find his mother not by his side. He yelled incessantly till his mother picked him up. She passed him to her brother-in-law, motioning him to bring along the child to the cornfield. Promptly and cheerfully, he had perched himself on his kaka's² shoulders, a then-favourite spot of his. His mother routinely used to carry food in the blazing sun for his father, who toiled in the field to make ends meet.

While in the field, he heard an appalling sound, unworldly and shrill, and clung to his mother, afraid. Squirming, he looked at the huge monster, which was lunging forward with feisty determination. He was struck by its strange beauty; it was so big, yet so fast. As the train progressed, a palpable thrill shot through his body. He pointed his tiny hand and clapped with unbound joy.

Tearing apart the first roti, his father smiled at him, 'It is the tarrain... my son.'

His mother directed, 'Say ta-ta,' and made him wave his hand at it.

'Ta-ta' was the fourth word in his vocabulary which until then had contained only 'mama,' 'baba' and 'kaka.'³

From that day onwards, he went to the field daily, riding on his kaka's shoulders or toddling close to his mother. From the time he was enrolled into the village chatasali,⁴ he used to go all by himself carrying food and a pot of water for his father. He would wait, kicking sand and throwing pebbles, while his father had his well deserved lunch. He saw the train once and if lucky, twice. Sometimes, he waited with the empty pot and plates, his hands folded behind. His father would ask, 'Why don't you go home and do your lessons?'

'No, baba. I want to see ta-ta,' was his usual reply.

The train never disappointed him. It came whistling its way with rhythmic vigour. This used to be his moment. He would hop, scream, and wave to the nameless hundreds passing by. Some waved back. Most didn't.

Studies never inspired him and he didn't progress beyond class six. He took to helping his father in the field. He always wondered where the train came from, and where it went. He had learnt from his village teacher that there were many other villages like his; so many that one could not count on the lines of one's fingers, nor could one see from the top of the village hillock. He correlated this lesson to the train. He assumed that people might have to move from one village to another; hence they got on to the train. But then, how could the train manage to carry so many people from so many different places to so many differ-

ent destinations! He could not think beyond this. He told himself that some day he would take a train ride and experience the journey from the unknown to the unseen. He would then poke his head out, and wave at all the people and cattle on the way until the scene faded away.

He spent all his life working in the fields. With his hard work, he had added another patch of land to his parental property. His family was small; his wife Sumati and daughter Lila. His income was adequate to feed the three stomachs generously. But Lila's marriage forced him into the clutches of the village money-lender. All his earnings in the later phase of his life went into settling debts. He could only dream of savings. His ambition of travelling by train remained just an illusion. His movements were confined to walking or at the most, travelling by bus.

But throughout, he carried his childhood dream to see the world speed by through the window of a train. To see all those villages which he knew only by names; to see the Chilika Lake, the Chandaka jungle, and the minister's bungalow. He had heard that people stayed for days together on the train. Inside, there were sleeping beds, lights and fans; lavatories and washbasins—all moving with the train. There were no ditches, no mounds; no stray cattle would come in the way. What a smooth mesmerizing ride it would be!

Each day, as he stooped to work on the land, he would hear the train rumbling along the tracks skirting his field. He would straighten up, his face re-kindled with childhood fervour. He would stand transfixed; the earth trembling beneath his feet, the whistle almost numbing his eardrums. As the village boys screamed and shouted at the speeding gigantic machine, he would become one with it and wave to the lucky ones inside.

Today, he has ceased to be passionate and responsive. Gray and wrinkled, absolved of all desire and curiosity, he feels ancient-too old to pursue his dream. He had been an honest, hard working and loyal man all through his life. But perhaps that was not enough. None knew of his desire, none other than his Sumati who had died a couple of years back, leaving him all alone.

The rain had just stopped. He heard children giggle. His grandson hopped into his lap.

'Daddu,⁵ what is that?' the child asked, pointing towards the sky.

'A rainbow.'

'What is a rainbow? Where does it come from? Where does it go?'

'What is there on the other side?'

He fumbled, and with a broken voice he continued, 'I don't know, Babloo. Why don't you go on the train and tell me what lies beyond the rainbow?'

'Sure, daddu. But, I'm scared. Will you come with me, daddu?'

He felt hot tears roll down his cheeks, as he hugged his grandson close.

'Yes... Babloo. Yes I will...'

⁴ Daddu: Grandpa

¹ Kaka: Father's younger brother

² Mama: Mother, Baba: Father

³ Chanasali: Pre-school

Afterword, or Neverendingword by Miodrag Kojadinović

Working on this collection with my co-editor Megan has been a rather interesting experience of the kind that I think the publishers intended when they sent out a call for applications for people interested in working on the project.

First, the selection process was rather different from my previous editorial work. Not because it was collaborative, as I have done that before, but because I had never met my co-editor when we were assigned to work together (and we haven't actually met in real space yet). Further, the response to our own call for submissions was if not overwhelming, then certainly quite substantial, especially in light of the space we had, so we could select only about one-in-ten (not suggesting, or excluding a priori any references to what this percentage has been made to imply after Kinsey).

Because of that, i.e. the limitations of space, and to my chagrin, there were great pieces that have not made it into *Birkensnake 6 Neverending Tales*. They would have been too long (even though in our CfS we did say everything from 8 to 8888 words qualified, it turned out not to be so easy to toggle larger pieces with the limited space at our disposal, and that was non-negotiable with such a huge number of variations of this issue coming out at the same time), or they addressed the topic another piece we had already selected did (not frequently, but it did happen a few times), or the editors had a very different opinion on the pieces (this happened the least often, but it did happen).

I have still not reconciled fully with my own rejection of a great story of apparitions and dreams and mystery happening in a former US colony in South East Asia (well, the only former US colony anywhere on earth, really). I think that piece would have made a great contribution. But the two of us had already used a third of the allotted space by selecting the pieces we were both equally enthusiastic about and were in the process of selecting additional ones (a third each). If I had chosen that piece, which I liked a lot, I would have had to stick to it alone and perhaps another one. And so in tune with my Gemini Moon and not my quadruple Scorpio, I opted for variety over the mesmerising allure of individual mystique.

I think I did not make a mistake in choosing to showcase the works of more

authors, but a lingering regret of not letting the readers walk down the winding path through that enchanting tale, but keeping that privilege only for myself remains. There were a couple other pieces I really wanted, but I had to give up on them too in order for this to be a collaborative effort. I imagine Megan must feel the same about some stories she liked.

Secondly, I want to say something on the issue of collaboration itself. It was interesting to see how much the two of us matched in tastes and general outlook on what good literature is and how to do selection and editing, this coming between people from rather different backgrounds, life histories, gender, and age and only vaguely similar in belonging to the broad field of teaching of what is usually lumped as “humanities and social sciences”, *CMAD*: “not the big money-making technical, financial and marketing, and show biz fields”.

Mind you, that is not to say that the matching was always perfect; indeed we had important disagreements on one or two contributors pieces, at one point near the end, perhaps because of a “fatigue of the material” (as everything tends to get jaded as the excitement of the novelty wears off with time and under the pressure of deadlines) even serious ones. But, exactly because we agreed most of the time, and in the case of one special piece in this book we did so immediately and wholeheartedly, we were able to work through the differences and come up with the collection that now lies before you, the reader – flesh and bones, and in a few cases viscera, in full sight.

We are humans, and fallible, so this anthology is probably not perfect, but in the real world we live in it is a fine selection, pretty representative of works we got overall (i.e. of writing today and indeed globally, with contributors living on three, and originating on four, continents, and often with first languages other than English), and packed with some rather fascinating reading between the covers. I do hope those who have the privilege to read it the way reading should be done, without having to think as an editor, will feel the excitement that we did.



About the Contributors

James Tadd Adcox lives in Chicago. His first book, *The Map of the System of Human Knowledge*, a collection of fictions, is available from Tiny Hardcore Press.

Tantra Bensko (<http://lucidmembrane.weebly.com/>) teaches fiction writing through UCLA Ex. Writing Program and her own academy online. She has two books out, with two more slated—from Dog Horn and Make-Do, four chapbooks, including from ISMs Press, and two hundred stories and poems in journals and anthologies, such as *Red Fez*, *Birkensnake*, and *Surreal South*. She publishes people's chapbooks through LucidPlay Publishing, maintains a resource site, Experimental Writing, published Exclusive Magazine, and runs the FlameFlower Experimental Fiction contest. She lives in Berkeley.

Lena Bertone's writing has appeared in *Caketrain*, *Harpur Palate*, *Redivider*, *PANK*, *Wigleaf*, *NANO Fiction*, *Matchbook*, and other magazines. She has a chapbook coming from Origami Zoo Press in 2014, and a novel coming from Aqueous Books in 2015.

Alicia Cole, an educator and writer, lives in Lawrenceville, GA, with a photographer, a cat, and two schools of fish. Her short fiction may be found in Lodestar Quarterly and Demeter's Spicebox; her poetry may be found in *Goblin Fruit* and *Mythic Delirium* and is forthcoming in *Dark Mountain*. She muses on writing and life at three-magpies.livejournal.com.

Armel Dagorn is 28, French, and has been living in Ireland for the past seven years. His writing has been published in magazines such as *Paper Darts*, *decomp*, and *Popshot*. He keeps his sh*t together at armeldagorn.wordpress.com.

Jim Eigo has written on theater, dance, art, literature, sex, and the design of clinical trials. He is an architect of two reforms of AIDS drug regulation, expedited approval and expanded access, that have helped bring many treatments to many people, work profiled in the Oscar-nominated documentary *How to Survive a Plague*. His short fiction has appeared in such volumes as *Best American Gay Fiction #3*, in such print journals as *The Chicago Review* and in such web publications as cleavermagazine.com.

Jennifer Smith Gray melded her common maiden name and her common married name to come up with this fascinating, one-of-a-kind new name. Likewise, the ordinary experiences of her past—childhood, university, young adulthood—have come together nicely with new ordinary experiences as a wife, mother, and less-young adult, to kick off some pretty extraordinary stories (if she does say so say herself). Born and raised in Northern Ontario, Jennifer transplanted herself to the big city 17 years ago and is inspired by the writing development opportunities in and around Toronto.

Leeyanne Moore lives in Charlottesville, VA, and has a penchant for all things perversely southern and fabulist.

Dr. Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan is an engineer-turned development researcher from India. He does research and activism on the frontiers of disarmament, energy, and human development. He writes short fiction in both Odia and English. His micro-fiction struggle appeared in *twenty20* journal. His flash fiction 'The Thief' received an honorary mention in '100 Words or Fewer Writing Contest-Five.' Also, his short story 'A Door without a Handle' is published in *Scribble – the literary supplement*. He has scripted plays on issues of casteism, dowry, and child labor. He is currently working on his first collection of Odia short stories.

Eliza Smith was born in Los Angeles, but lives in Oakland, which suits her better. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PANK*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Birkensnake*, and *Ho-bart*. She is an editor for Story Tapes.

Wyatt Sparks is living the good life in Chicago. His work has been featured in *Pank*, *Red-lightbulbs*, *Untoward*, and some other great lit mags.

J. J. Steinfeld is a Canadian fiction writer, poet, and playwright who lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published fourteen books, including *Should the Word Hell Be Capitalized?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *Would You Hide Me?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *An Affection for Precipices* (Poetry, Serengeti Press), *Misshapenness* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions), and *A Glass Shard and Memory* (Stories, Recliner Books). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over forty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

Gene Tanta (genetanta.com) was born in Timisoara, Romania and lived there until 1984, when his family immigrated to the United States. Since completing his MFA and Ph.D., Tanta has written two poetry books, begun editing two anthologies, and published poems and translations in journals such as: *Ploughshares*, *EPOCH*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Circumference Magazine*, and *The Laurel Review*. The five prose poems included in *A Birkensnake* are from his third collection called What Is to Be Said. His research inspects the heavily policed border between ethics and aesthetics in the work of post-communist Romanian and first-generation American poets. Currently, he is living in Bucharest as a Fulbright Scholar.

Toby Vaughan is the co-editor of a small online short story magazine, called *The Red Line* (overtheredline.com). He has lived and worked in Beijing, Seoul, Boston, Zurich, and Rio de Janeiro, but now lives in London, England. While writing this story he listened to "Gone, Play On" by Russian Red.

Sylvain Verstricht has a master's degree in film studies from Concordia University, though he has mostly been writing about dance for the past seven years. Other short stories from his Utopia series can be found in *Headlight Anthology 16* and *Cactus Heart 3.5*. He lives in Montreal.

About the Editors

If he had any choice in the matter, **Miodrag Kojadinović** would have not chosen Serbia, Canada, and Mainland China as the locations to spend the longest time in, but that's what has happened. He comes from an extended family of visual artists and musicians, but chooses to express himself primarily through writing (though he has also appeared in several documentaries and a TV show and his photos were exhibited in a few countries). His writing has been published in English, Serbian, Dutch, Russian, Spanish, Traditional Chinese, Portuguese, Slovene, Mandarin Chinese, Swedish, Italian, and Hungarian (and forthcoming in Polish) in 22 countries.

Megan Milks is the author of *Kill Marguerite and Other Stories*, forthcoming from Emergency Press, and most recently the chapbook *Twins* (Birds of Lace, 2012). Her fiction has been anthologized in three volumes of experimental writing as well as many journals, and her scholarship has been published in *Feminist Studies*, *electronic book review*, and the volume *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, which she co-edited, forthcoming from Routledge. She teaches creative and new media writing and journalism at Illinois College.

About the Book Designer

As a child, **Walker Mettling** lived in the shadow of a rock quarry on Lake Herman Rd., where some of the Zodiac murders took place. He ran through the blackberry bushes with his dog, Zodiac, and the neighbor's dog, Dog, and twice knocked himself unconscious with a wooden pair of nun-chucks that he got from his cousin in Kansas. Also, once Zodiac dropped a ten pound weight on his head while he was watching Scooby-Doo.

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