

ISSUE 2 | VOLUME 1

AUTUMN/WINTER 2020

FICTION KITCHEN BERLIN



FEATURING: SANDRA ARNOLD, NANCY STOHLMAN, HENRY BLADON, JOSH COOK, JESSICA EVANS, DEBORAH TORR, JAYNE MARTIN, NEAL SUIT, MICHAEL COCCHIARALE, MICHAEL LOVEDAY, THAD DEVASSIE, SARAH BENNETT, YASH SEYEDBAGHERI, GILES MONTGOMERY, KH LIM, RACHEL GROSVENOR, PAUL BECKMAN, M.E. PROCTOR, STEVE GERGLEY, LAURA EPPINGER.

EDITOR'S NOTE

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

Could a quote better sum up the year that was 2020? Although written by Dickens in 1859, this opening could just have easily described events over the past year. Since the pandemic began, we have all been living under a blanket of uncertainty. It has impacted all of us in one way or another, and has tested our beliefs, faith, and trust in the order of things. I guess if we can say anything positive about the year, it's that we have been given a chance to reflect on the why and how we live our lives and do the things we do. Maybe similar in a way to Dickens' other work, A Christmas Carol, we have been given a chance to change, to focus on what's important, and to do better for ourselves, and those close to us.

But what about creativity? How has the past year affected our own creative spirit? I am sure we all have our own stories to share about that! However, if Fiction Kitchen Berlin is any measure, it seems Covid has had little impact overall in this matter given the massive spike in submissions received over the past several months. Does this mean that global lockdowns have created more writers? Or does it mean that the Kitchen has simply become more popular? Honestly, I hope both are true! Whatever the reason, I am still amazed and quite humbled by the quality of stories that have been sent my way, and it has been a joy and privilege to review them all. More than that, the show of support from the authors featured here, and the writing community at large, has been absolutely instrumental in boosting my own morale (and creativity too!) over this dark period. For that, I am extremely grateful.

All in all, this edition collects every regular flash fiction piece published from July to November 2020. My sincere thanks again to the twenty outstanding authors featured here who have entrusted me with their work.

Until our next lit. journal, I wish you all well. Stay safe - and don't forget to have some fun from time to time. Roll on 2021! 😊

Nollaig Shona Duit & frohe Weihnachten
Shane.



STORIES

- Fire and Ice 3
- Courtesy Call 5
- Dinner for One at the Limping Frog 8
- Smartypants 9
- Cherry Pits and Bee Faces 11
- Burning Malta 14
- Puzzling 16
- Time Travel and Woolly Mammoths 18
- Way to Go 21
- (d), (d), (d) 23
- The Scientist and the Magician 25
- Today Is Good 27
- The butterfly effect 30
- Love Doesn't Pay Bills For Vampires 33
- Car Wash 34
- Jelly People 39
- Life with Prawn 42
- Smooch Smooch 45
- Defector 48
- Firepit 51
- The Jersey Devil Stays Busy 54

Editor: Shane O'Halloran
contact@fictionkitchen.berlin

Facebook: fictionkitchenberlin
Twitter: @FictionBerlin
Instagram: @FictionBerlin

FictionKitchen.Berlin

FIRE AND ICE

— SANDRA ARNOLD

When Angela was seven, she asked her mother what kind of meat was on her plate.

“Rabbit,” said her mother.

Tears dripped down Angela’s face. “Like Snowdrop next door?”

For the next six months she would only eat meat if her mother promised that it wasn’t killed. That it came out of a tin. Until her father yelled that he wasn’t going to put up with this bloody nonsense a minute longer and shoved a plate of fatty bacon in front of her, threatening to stuff it down her bloody throat if she didn’t eat it NOW. As soon as the bacon was in her mouth she rushed out to the wash-house and threw up in her father’s work boots.

After the ferocity of the beating and the neighbours hammering on the door, he locked her in the coal cellar for the rest of the freezing pitch-black night.

Jamie’s mother lamented to her sister that Jamie had never had a girlfriend and she couldn’t understand it because he must surely have met hundreds of girls at university by now. Her sister replied that girls these days only went for bad boys. Besides, what kind of girl studied physics and astronomy?

Three weeks before graduation Jamie phoned his mother to say he’d like to bring a friend home for dinner. Angela. They worked in the labs together. His mother was speechless for a whole minute. Before she gathered her wits for an interrogation, she heard Jamie utter an unfamiliar word.

“Angela’s vegan,” Jamie repeated, “Me too, now. We don’t eat dead animals.”

“But... what about roast beef and Yorkshire pudding? It’s your favourite meal.”

“Not anymore,” Jamie said. “But don’t worry. Angela and I like cooking and we’ll bring plenty of food.”

On Sunday Jamie's mother eyed the lentil and coconut dahl that Angela set down on the table and gave a tight smile. During dinner she noted that Angela avoided answering questions about her parents or her background and talked only about things called solar wind, ions and energetic particles. But Jamie's mother couldn't miss the way they looked at each other. While Angela was out of earshot, she asked Jamie if they were planning on getting married after university.

"No," said Jamie. "Angela doesn't believe in marriage."

"Oh? What about children?"

Jamie shook his head. "Angela doesn't want to bring children into this world."

"Why not?"

"It's complicated."

"So... what does Angela want?"

"She wants to live in Iceland."

Inside the cabin Jamie laid the wood for the fire and struck a match. Angela stepped outside into the black frigid night. When the cold penetrated her bones, she looked back at the window and saw flames in the hearth. Then she called him. Jamie came out and waited with her. Ribbons of green and blue light began to ripple and flare across the sky. In the icy air Angela felt the heat from the fire in Jamie's arms and the warmth of his cheek against hers.

*Sandra Arnold is an award-winning writer who lives in Canterbury, New Zealand. She has a PhD in Creative Writing and is the author of five books. Her most recent work, a flash fiction collection, *Soul Etchings* (Retreat West Books, UK) and a novel, *The Ash, the Well and the Bluebell* (Mākaro Press, NZ) were published in 2019. Her flash fiction and short stories have been widely published and anthologised in New Zealand and internationally.*

COURTESY CALL

— NANCY STOHLMAN

Good afternoon Water World guests. We have an important call waiting for a guest by the name of—and she says my name—Please come to any guest services.

The kiosk is staffed by teenagers. I have a message?

The kid hands me the receiver of an actual red phone:

Hello?

Congratulations! You've just been chosen to star on our Water World reality show, Escape from Water World! The way the game works is you have 60 minutes to find the key to your locker and leave the park. If you don't find the key in time, the contents of your locker will be forfeited.

But my purse and my Diamond card and keys are in there.

Yes! And you have 60 minutes to find them and—here a studio audience chimes in—Escape! From! Water! World! Cheering in the background. Are you ready for your first clue?

I don't want to play this game, actually—

Don't hang up—we're already filming.

The guest services kid gives me a thumbs-up.

Your first clue is: The woman in the pink has gotten too much sun. Find her and find Clue #1. And...begin! 60 minutes on the clock starting now!

This is ridiculous! I yell but he's already gone. I hang up and walk straight to my locker, where the wristband that should open it no longer works, buzzing angry with each failed try.

The teenager in the raft rental booth yells, “You can do it!”

There are probably 5,000 people at Water World. There is absolutely no way I’m going to play this stupid game. I need to find an adult employee, any adult at all. There’s an old man sweeping up around the picnic areas.

Excuse me, can you help me?

He smiles knowingly. If you want a clue to the pink woman, she might be on the Ancient Journey to the Pharaohs ride?

That’s not the kind of help I wanted!

The concrete is atomic hot as I hop from patch of shade to patch of shade. People on beach loungers grin or whisper and give me the thumbs up, past the Dip-n-Dots and the deep-fried Twinkie sundae funnel cake booth, past the wave pool in motion, where a kid on a raft yells, “I believe in you!” and onto the AstroTurf beach towards the Pharaohs ride.

Now I’m in line with all the wet people and their bad tattoos —the US Constitution inked across a chest, a portrait of Matthew McConaughey distorted into cleavage, actual “guns” tattooed on both biceps—and at the front of the line I’m put into a raft with a family who needs a single rider.

The ride heads into the pyramid. The mom asks: Any luck?

What?

You know she winks. She has a terrible sunburn all over her body. The family all looks like they are about to burst.

Are you the “pink” lady?

Your last clue is this she says, cutting me off: The man with the gospel on his back will show you where the key is at!

This is so fucked up I yell as the kids blush, and as soon as the ride is over I stomp across hot concrete back to the guest services kiosk and yell at the kid—who’s a different kid now:

Look. I don't want to play this game! Just open my locker!

He looks sympathetic and hands me the phone again:

Ooh! A buzzer sounds loudly in my ear. Darn! says the voice. You didn't beat the clock. Well, you're still going home with some nice parting gifts. Jonny: can you tell us what they are?

I hang up. The kid hands me a red bag with Escape from Water World written on the side. In the bag are tubes of sunscreen, a bright green sun visor and a sippy bottle with the Water World logo.

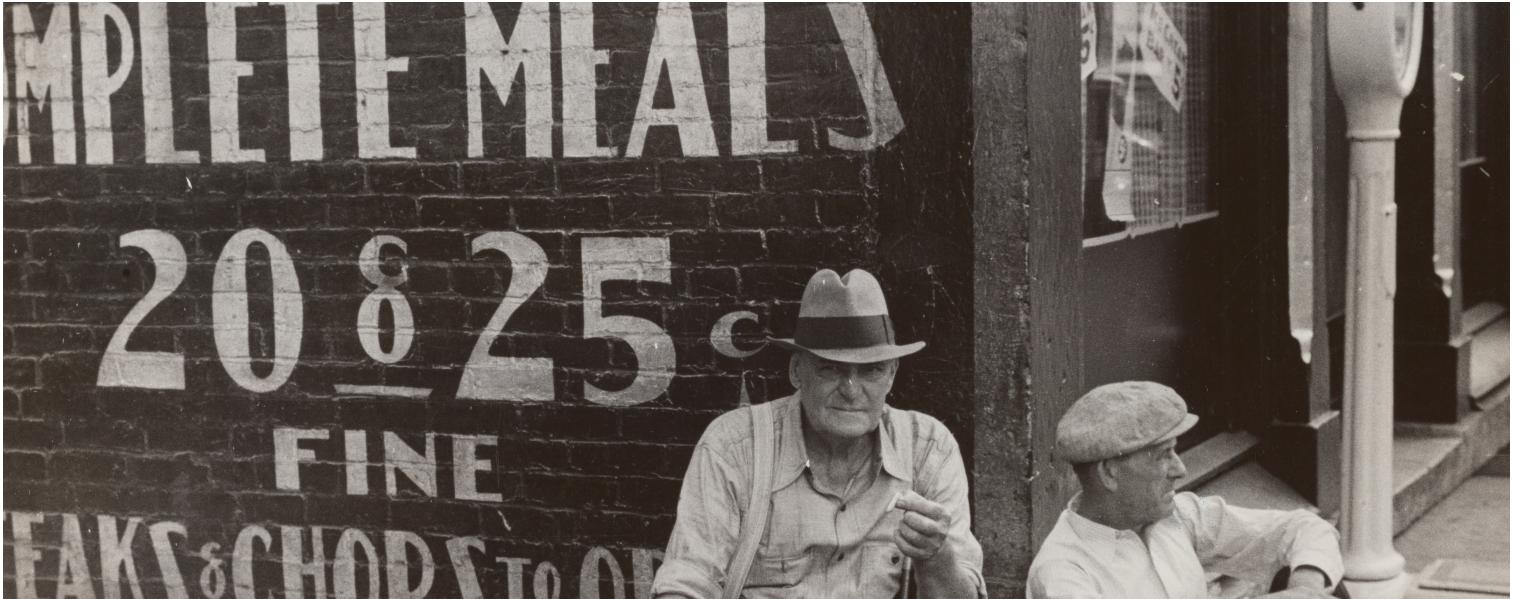
You also have salmonella he says, handing me the bag.

I walk back to my towel and see my locker door standing open, locker empty.

Nancy Stohlman's books include Going Short: An Invitation to Flash Fiction (forthcoming), Madam Velvet's Cabaret of Oddities (finalist for a 2019 Colorado Book Award), The Vixen Scream and Other Bible Stories, the flash novels The Monster Opera and Searching for Suzi, and three anthologies of flash fiction including Fast Forward: The Mix Tape. She is the creator of The Fbomb Flash Fiction Reading Series, the creator of FlashNano in November, and her fiction has been included in the W.W. Norton anthology New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction and the 2019 Best Small Fictions. She lives in Denver and teaches at the University of Colorado Boulder. Find out more at www.nancystohlman.com

DINNER FOR ONE AT THE LIMPING FROG

— HENRY BLADON



At the candle-lit table in the corner of the Limping Frog, Michael is having a lone feast. This has long been his favourite meal, even before the time that the critic somewhat pretentiously said of it that ‘the gentle herbal flavour perfectly complements the delicately spiced meat.’ The crisp asparagus Michael uses is still fresh and is still delivered by his trusted supplier. The wine has chilled during a day that passed slowly. As he waited for the lamb to marinade, Michael alternated between reading his textbook on corridors and the History of the Bible. He gave up when he began to confuse the narratives and started to wonder whether he would end up in someone’s living room or stumble across god in his bathrobe. Now, the candle flickers as Michael raises his glass to nobody. Two weeks ago, he shut the doors to what he still refers to nostalgically as his father’s restaurant. He swallows the wine and chokes back the thought that Michael Snr’s place may never reopen.

Henry Bladon is based in Somerset in the UK. He is a writer of short fiction and poetry with a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Birmingham. He is the author of the novel Threeways, and several poetry collections. His work can be seen in Poetica Review, Pure Slush, Truth Serum Press, Lunate, and O:JA&L, among other places.

SMARTYPANTS

— JOSH COOK

The first day of class Mr. Ringer walked up to the board and wrote: $15x + 6 = 36$.

“Solve,” he said.

Everyone’s hand shot up. We’d learned this the year before and were eager to demonstrate our knowledge.

“Lawson.”

“X equals Bite Me.”

“Correct.” Mr. Ringer wrote another: $3x + 3 = 27$. “Yes, you, Tate.”

“X equals Suck It.”

“Good.”

$7x + 13 = 69$.

“Graham.”

“X equals Who Gives a Shit.”

“Excellent.”

$4x - 7 = 33$.

“You’re a Candy-Ass Little Bitch,” said Will Brown.

Nicely done.”

“Wait, Mr. Ringer,” said Brian Mason. “For that one, couldn’t X also be Eat My Ass, You Saggy-Balled Bag of Dicks?”

“Or Get Off My Back, You Raging Douche?” said Matt Spinks. “Or Nobody Loves You and You’re Going to Die Alone?” said Ashley Campbell.

“Those work just as well. Amazing job, everyone. Now let’s move on to something more complicated.”

Rob Obremski raised his hand. This was his first year at West Oaks. He had transferred from somewhere back east and had sat by himself at lunch.

That’s not right, Mr. Ringer.” “What do you mean, young man?”

“I mean none of that is right. Those aren’t the answers to the equations.”

Mr. Ringer rolled his eyes. “Please, professor, enlighten us.”

“For one thing, you need a number to solve. A very specific number.

A very specific number. Everybody's been giving you words. It doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't make sense about Nobody Loves You and You're Going to Die Alone?" said Ashley Campbell.

"It doesn't make sense because four times X minus seven is thirty-three. That means the answer has to be ten for the equation to work. Four times ten is forty, and—"

"I'm afraid that's not how we do it here, Mr. Smarty pants," said Mr. Ringer.

Everybody laughed except for Rob Obremski.

"I don't understand."

"That's too bad," said Mr. Ringer. "Your transcript showed a lot of promise. Please, come with me."

Mr. Ringer marched to the door. Rob Obremski collected his books and pencils and followed him out.

Our teacher came back five minutes later. We spent the rest of the period doing Rob Obremski impressions.

"Duh, X minus seven is thirty-three," said Will Brown.

"That doesn't any make sense!" Mr. Ringer said in a high-pitched voice, pushing up his imaginary glasses.

The next day, in English, I got a pass to use the restroom. In the hallway I passed Mr. Bright, the remedial math teacher, and Rob Obremski, seated in small desk chairs.

"Seven X plus thirteen equals sixty-nine," Mr. Bright said.

"X equals Shove It Up Your Ass, You Sick Piece of Shit," said Rob Obremski.

"I think you're getting the hang of this," Mr. Bright said, the light reflecting off his teeth like a torch in the dark.

Josh Cook received an MA in English from Indiana University in 2009 and is currently working toward an MFA in Creative Writing through Lindenwood University. He has self-published two novels. He lives in Indianapolis with his wife and two dogs.

CHERRY PITS AND BEE FACES

— JESSICA EVANS

My sister keeps photoshopping her cat's face onto bees. Cynthia is lost the way I want to be found. I'm supposed to be her caretaker, court appointed, paperwork signed and notarized, but Cynthia doesn't really need me. After her accident with the bathtub and my flat iron, her adult social worker said she needed supervision, so here I am.

Together, we keep finding ways to explore what we have left when there's nothing else available and today, her focus is once again on her bees. To pass my own time, I've been waitressing to myself, all honeydew questions about coffee refills and nudges to try the pie. We are just one room apart but might as well be in different towns. In mornings, when Cynthia looks for the perfect bee, I eat pickles straight from the jar. I like the briny open mouth pucker the way Cynthia needs clover honey sweet. In the kitchen, I make us Picasso eggs, all ribbon edges and blurred lines. Cynthia's cat Irma watches me from the corner.

Cynthia searches for brightness, her pollinator magic. Stuck to her sheets, her skin is developing sores. She wasn't always so centrally focused on finding a bee belly to match Irma's face. Let her explain it and she'll tell you it was an attempt, but I call it an accident. One day she might head to the honeycombs, to open the lids of the keeps, to search out of the queen. For now, she remains in her bedroom, just trying to be free.

In the kitchen, I hear another squeal. Irma blinks, suspicious and languid. I almost burn the potatoes but plate them just in time. Untying my invisible apron, I shift from pretend short-order cook to tired, feet-achy waitress, pulling a pen and pad from my wide skirt to write the next order.

"Cherry pie, a side of honey, sweet tea to drink," the voice is lake water soft, the kind of reflection only seen in early sun and periwinkle twilights. In the far corner of the dining room, where Mother's silver is stored under heavy layers of velvet and brocade, a small buzz. Cynthia's baby bees. She keeps them in jars even though they're going to die.

I learned a word yesterday, reading the online dictionary in between waitressing shifts: thole. I found it in the archive section of the online dictionary where I navigate to sometimes when I want to feel like I'm still a part of this world. It's outdated, archaic, retired, same as me. As a noun, it means the ability to bear hardship. I am thole. As a verb, the meaning changes, becomes the deep red of Michigan cherries, perfect for the pie that's just been ordered but still needs to be assembled and baked and cooled and cut and presented and admired. I thole, endure patiently, Cynthia's obsessions, her flightless bees, her bitter honey. The long make-believe, the steady stream of shifts. Eventually, my sister will come out of that room, will tire of pasting faces onto creatures who already live lives. Endurance is my specialty; comes with a side of the soup de jour. Sour like love, secretly hidden cherries and wildflower honey pureed inside.

Jessica Evans is a Cincinnati native who practices uprooting and restarting her life. Recently she lived in a Bavarian forest and now she's back on US soil. Evans has work forthcoming in mac(ro)mic, Tiny Molecule, Lily Poetry Review, Past Ten, and Collateral. She serves as a mentor for Veteran's Writing Project and is the flash fiction editor for Mineral Lit. Find her in the afternoons drinking licorice tea.



“To pass my own time, I’ve been waitressing to myself, all honeydew questions about coffee refills and nudges to try the pie.”

Cherry Pits and Bee Faces, by Jessica Evans



BURNING MALTA

— DEBORAH TORR

You're shivering in the study, wearing your summer dressing gown. You refuse to accept it's a cold July, and the coffee has gone cold. You drink it anyway.

Working from home does not suit you, according to your wife. You are too easily distracted by your Ian Rankin novels, by your old books from university you can't bear to part with, by your collection of stamps.

You open up your Stanley Gibbons album. Take care of your stamps – they can be easily damaged, it tells you. Damaged stamps must be discarded. Maybe. Mint stamps are sometimes worth more than used ones, sometimes it's the reverse.

This morning, your wife declared she was going for a run. At half nine, you sat up in bed and logged onto Skype for Business so your colleagues would assume you were doing work. You are always 'Available'.

You run your hands over Great Britain, over all the colourful queen's heads you were forbidden to touch as a child. Your father always insisted on tweezers.

On the back cover of the album, there's a big world map. You close your eyes and aim a finger at the page. It lands in the Mediterranean sea, just off the coast of Malta.

Malta is on page 81. Beneath the word 'Malta' there is space for you to place your own stamps within the boundaries of a long rectangular box. There are eleven stamps. All are rectangular with tiny illustrations: a cathedral, a man on horseback, the wing of an airplane.

You tear out the page unceremoniously. The album is in alphabetical order, with Mauritius and Mauritania on the flipside becoming collateral damage. You find the long cooking matches from the kitchen drawer. Your wife seems surprised to see you.

Over the bathroom sink, you light the match and wait for the paper to catch. You burn through five matches before the whole page is ash. It feels victorious.

Once you burn Malta, you find the will to toast crumpets. You add butter and the nice marmalade normally reserved for guests. You eat the crumpets sat on the leather swivel chair of the study, and think about getting dressed.

Deborah Torr, from South London, used to write for the funeral industry but now writes short stories, works for an international development charity and occasionally posts on Twitter, @deborah_torr. Deborah was one of the London Library's Emerging Writers 2019 and has words in Reflex Press, Fictive Dream among others.

PUZZLING

— JAYNE MARTIN



It wasn't that Luna was exceptionally large or exceptionally small or oddly-shaped in any way, but while others snapped together easily, slowly revealing the life for which they had been created, no matter where she found herself, she simply did not fit.

Ballet classes meant to teach her grace found her toppling to the floor at every turn. Called upon by teachers, the answers that were just front and center in her brain, would vanish leaving her mouth agape and silent like that of a fish. Soon her raised hand withered from lack of use and she made herself small, getting easily lost when others left to seek their places in the larger world.

She watched as other people's children played in parks and wondered what it might be like to have a child of her own. Sitting on benches near picnicking families, she imagined herself a part of that picture, maybe a favorite aunt or cousin. Once she imagined it so vividly, that she was certain they had called out to her to join them. But, alas, it was another that was the recipient of their invitation.

Still, she tried. Braving herself to join coworkers gathered around the lunch table, laughing at jokes she didn't understand, and attempting small talk, but their polite indifference stung.

Exhausted from trying to fit into a world that would not have her, she finally shattered like a broken vase, pieces spinning into the dark crevices of her mind where they stubbornly lodged.

Suddenly, in what was surely a cosmic joke, people would not leave her alone. Not a day passed that someone in a white coat and carrying a clipboard didn't seek out her company, coax her to converse, and attempt to find and restore all the pieces.

Intoxicated on all this new attention, she allowed them glimpses — a piece of her here, a piece there — so as not to discourage, and was amused by the delight with which they would jot down each new finding and call to others to come share in the revelation. It seemed that Luna had finally found her place and so there she stayed, careful to always keep hidden the one piece that was her heart.

Jayne Martin lives in Santa Barbara, California. She is a Pushcart, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfictions nominee, and a recipient of Vestal Review's VERA award. Her collection of microfiction, "Tender Cuts," from Vine Leaves Press, is available now. Visit www.jaynemartin-writer.com

TIME TRAVEL AND WOOLLY MAMMOTHS

— NEAL SUIT

I invented a time machine. It was an accident. I was trying to repair my phone after I dropped it down the stairs.

The next thing I know I traveled back in time. It was freezing and ice formed on my nose and mouth. A woolly mammoth followed me back. I wasn't trying to find a woolly mammoth pet, but I didn't mind. He was cute and furry.

I don't know if you've ever seen a woolly mammoth, but they don't fit in most apartments. Especially not my one bedroom. He kept knocking over my dishes and books and scaring my cat.

I don't know what woolly mammoths eat, so I tried giving him carrots. He didn't like those. Then I tried Frosted Flakes. He seemed to like those a lot more. I dumped the contents of three Frosted Flakes boxes on the floor. He ate them all. Or at least I thought it was a he. I didn't know that much about the anatomies of mammoths. And I really didn't want to get too personal.

I named my mammoth Charlie. I rode him to the grocery store. His back was very soft and comforting, like a scratchy blanket on a winter night. People stared at me. I don't think they'd ever seen a woolly mammoth before.

I filled my car with nothing but Frosted Flakes and apples. Apples seem like a food that every animal likes. Worms even live in apples, eating them from the inside out. Maybe Charlie would like apples too.

Charlie got a parking ticket at the grocery store. I tried to explain to the police officer that Charlie wasn't a car. And he didn't understand things like parking spaces, speed limits, or not to use his tusks to throw cars around. But we got a ticket anyway.

Charlie was just too big. I couldn't afford that many boxes of Frosted Flakes. And the neighbor downstairs kept complaining because when Charlie walks it sounds like a marching band jumping up and down.

I don't even want to tell you about the problems we had with Charlie when nature called. I won't give you the dirty details, but Charlie and I were not allowed back at the dog park.

I liked Charlie, but I needed to take him back home. I got my time traveling phone but nothing happened when I punched the buttons. I thought maybe you can't go back to the same place twice. I don't know the rules of things like time travel. But it didn't work, no matter how many buttons I pushed or times I yelled at my phone.

I tried a few different things. I tried to see Jesus. I wanted to talk to Shakespeare. Or Charlemagne. Or John Lennon. My last try was to go back and see John Ritter. None of it worked. I was still in my apartment and Charlie was staring at me impatiently. He scratched his tusks on my wall, leaving long lines that looked like waves. I think he wanted to go back home too. It must be very lonely when you are the only one of your kind.

I invited my friend, Louis, over. Louis knows about a lot of things. He's been to a lot of places too. But it turns out he didn't know anything about woolly mammoths.

We went online and searched for information about woolly mammoths. It turns out scientists say they liked to eat flowering plants and shrubs. I live in the middle of a city. This wasn't going to work out well at all. And I don't think Mrs. Collins would like it if I let a mammoth stomp through and eat her prized garden.

I tried taking Charlie to the zoo. Maybe they'd know what to do with him. The zoo keeps elephants. Woolly mammoths and elephants look a lot alike. Maybe nobody would notice if they let Charlie live with the elephants. But the zoo wouldn't let Charlie or me in. They said we needed to buy tickets. I didn't have enough money for both of us.

I took Charlie home. I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Charlie. He looked at me. I think he was frustrated too.

On the way home, I spotted Elisa. I liked how her face was always scrunched up like she was trying to think of an answer to a question. But we didn't talk very much. She was going to a movie with her friends. She asked me if I wanted to come. I really did, but I asked Charlie first. He nodded that it was ok.

I told Charlie to go back home and wait for me there. I couldn't be with him every second of every day anyway. It was time we set some boundaries.

I went home after the movie, but I couldn't find Charlie. I screamed his name out of my window. Mrs. Collins told me to be quiet. When I asked her if she had seen a woolly mammoth, she didn't seem very happy and she slammed her window shut.

I was pretty sure a woolly mammoth wasn't going to be able to hide very long. I looked around my apartment just in case. Everything was back where it belonged. Even his tusk marks on the walls were fading. I don't even see them now when I look at the wall.

Charlie didn't belong here. I think he knew that. It was nice having a friend who didn't really belong. I never found Charlie. I hope he's okay. I'm pretty sure he is. I think he found a way home.

Neal Suit is a recovering lawyer. He is a writer of fiction and is working on his first novel. His short story 'Bar Fights and Brain Scans' will be in the July 2020 issue of Boston Literary Magazine. He lives in Dallas, Texas with his wife, two daughters, one cat, one dog, and periodic writer's block.

WAY TO GO

— MICHAEL COCCHIARALE

When notified of their impending demise, the couple deleted the forms. Who didn't in those early, incredulous days?

Undaunted, The Easement sent symptoms: fever, chills, piercing pains.

Then options. Shivering, costly meds nearly gone, the couple scrolled: Cliff, Lava, Ocean, Amber.

“Amber!” Wife croaked. “That story in the news. Two prehistoric flies, caught in ‘the act’ forever.”

Husband laughed, his thin cage rattling. “Our final act of resistance!”

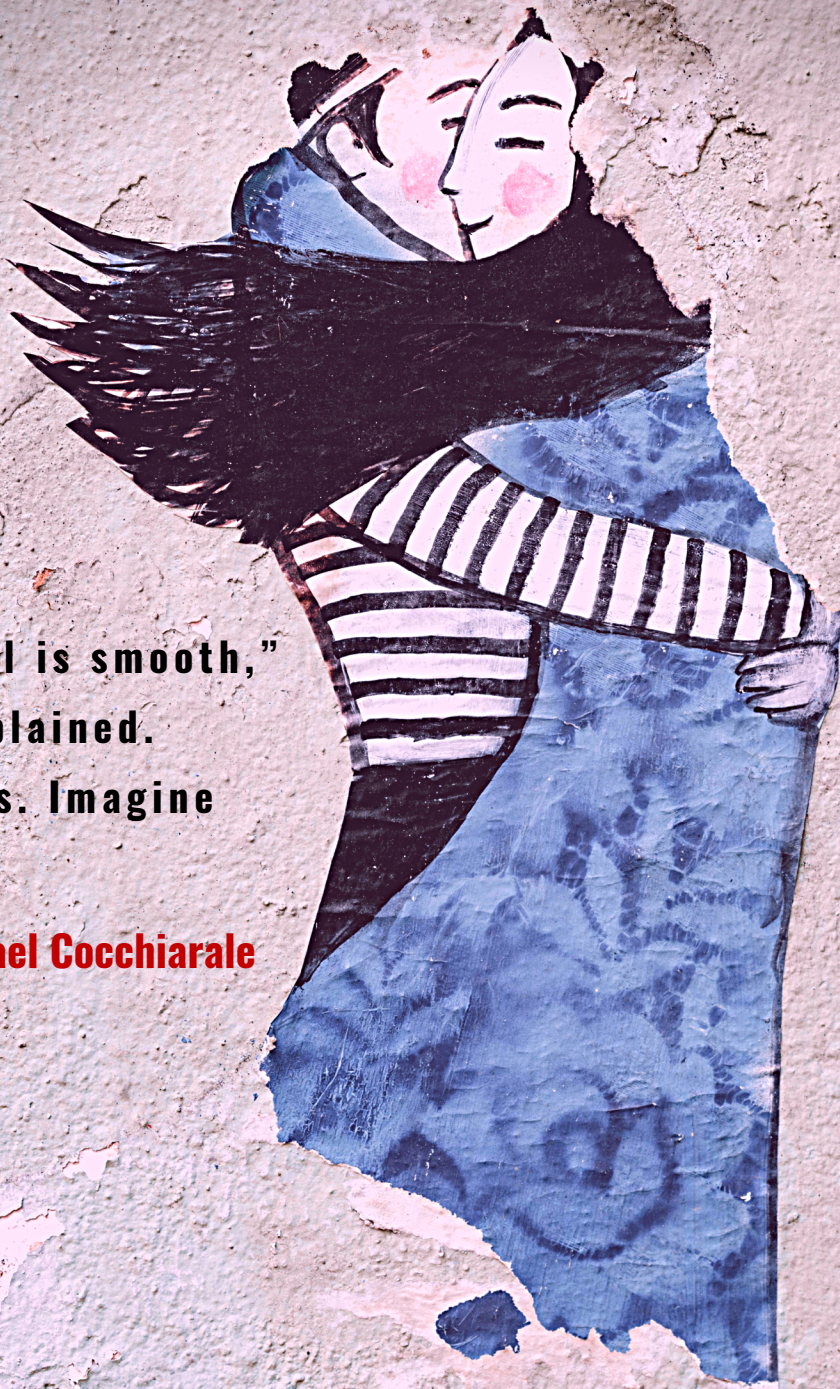
“Porno”—cough—“for posterity!”

The Finisher—polite, unassuming—came to install all the equipment. Sober now, the couple disrobed, climbed into bed.

“What you’ll feel is smooth,” The Finisher explained. “Close your eyes. Imagine honey.”

The dispenser zoomed to a point above the bed. Husband turned, craned, saw the first drop form upon its round metallic lips. He watched it fall, felt the warm, gorgeous splash on the small of his back. They kissed. Coughed hard. When The Finisher said “Go,” Husband eased inside. Wife’s thin legs strained for the ceiling. The second drop landed. She whispered, “Bye.” Laughing, crying, he buried his face into her neck. “Lovely,” The Finisher declared. “Hold it there.” Drop three. “Wow, this is the first. On behalf of The Easement, I thank you for your service!”

*Michael Cocchiarale is the author of the novel *None of the Above* (Unsolicited, 2019) and two short story collections—*Here Is Ware* (Fomite, 2018) and *Still Time* (Fomite, 2012). His creative work appears online as well, in journals such as *Fictive Dream*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Atticus Review*, and *Main Street Rag*. <https://michaelcocchiarale.wordpress.com/>*



**“What you’ll feel is smooth,”
The Finisher explained.
“Close your eyes. Imagine
honey.”**

Way to Go, by Michael Cocchiarale

(D), (D), (D)

— MICHAEL LOVEDAY

Itell my ninety-two-year-old mother I'm moving to a small village in the Andalusian mountains. Although she has Skype and an iPad, I know I will most likely never see her in person again. Does she...

(a) clap her hands and suggest we open the Tesco prosecco she's been storing since I was born.

(b) scream "I forbid it!!!" and throw seven decorative plates on the floor which smash into my bare feet.

(c) not listen – she never listens – but continue watching old VHS recordings of The Price is Right from the 1980s (where she would have liked us both to remain, embedded in host Lesley Crowther's arms).

(d) none of the above. She is silent. We have both been preparing by leaving each other over and over in our hearts for decades.

Despite my disappointment, when I say goodbye, I kiss her warmly on the cheek. Does she...

(a) recoil from my kiss and pat me on the head. "There, there," she says, "you'll get over me soon, Tarquin. I'll become but a distant, painless memory." Tarquin was my father's name.

(b) grab both sides of my face and upgrade my polite cheek-brushing into a full-blown lip-smacker. "There's more where that came from, Tarquin," she says, winking. Tarquin was my closest friend at school.

(c) say, "Ah, I remember when you used to hug me so hard every day it would nearly put my back out. I wish you'd never aged past seven. Oh look," she adds, "Tarquin's been at the bins again." Tarquin is the irrepressible local squirrel.

(d) none of the above. We are both too devastated to talk.

As I drive away, failing my mother again, and seeing her for what may be the last time, does she...

(a) text me before my car's out of sight, saying "Don't forget to call when you arrive. Allow me this silliness. We never stop worrying."

(b) run up the driveway, smashing her hands on the boot of my Hyundai. "When did you last wash this junk-heap? You're no son of mine!" Her own Audi gleams even though it hasn't been driven for ten years.

(c) stand in the doorway, waving sentimentally until she thinks I can no longer see her, then letting her expression fall and shaking her head in some form of deep-rooted intergenerational disapproval.

(d) write me this story on a postcard, leaving the twelve multiple choice options blank, then post it to Andalusia, asking me to complete and return it. We smuggle tiny glimpses of our half-lived lives.

Michael Loveday's hybrid novella-in-flash Three Men on the Edge (V. Press, 2018) was shortlisted for the 2019 Saboteur Award for Best Novella. He also writes poetry, with a pamphlet He Said / She Said published by HappenStance Press (2011). More at: <https://michaelloveday.com/>

THE SCIENTIST AND THE MAGICIAN

— THAD DEVASSIE

Elena carries around a pill box dispenser in the shape of the periodic table of elements. Each little compartment contains a small but different pill. When we head out for dinner, she's discreet about her pill popping despite nothing being discreet about a woman in fine health carrying a pill box with 118 minuscule compartments. She takes them, one at a time and with no set amount, for no particular reason that is obvious. She claims it is just her thing.

I've become comfortable with the stares, the prying eyes, these strange scientific shenanigans she plays for an audience that doesn't know her plot, her endgame. Yet I don't ask Elena what lies under the plastic lid of Bismuth, a place I swear we visited last winter, or Dysprosium, which I know I spied advertised on TV with encouragement to ask my doctor if it's right for what ails me. I'm reminded, sometimes chastised, that this is her thing, her hijinks, a dose of the off-kilter for an otherwise serious woman of science.

Tonight she's particularly aglow for a night on the town. She slides a tiny something atop her tongue pulled from one of the compartments with a capital H on it. She wraps herself in a vibrant assortment of shawls and scarves as we prepare for the evening.

"You'll need a hat" she informs, tossing me a black, pop-open top hat.

"That ridiculous hat? I'll look like a magician," I complain.

She pouts, waits.

I oblige.

We leave her flat, walk toward the town strip of taco trucks, dive bars and cantinas, her hand entwined with mine, until she pulls it away leaving behind a spindly end of one of her scarves, its opposite tied to another, and then another.

Impossibly, Elena is now levitating, no, floating, and also unraveling, each scarf and shawl that comprised her outfit unwinding like thread from a spool with no end. Elena escapes a good fifty feet or so into the air and I fear she'll be nearly nude in no time except for her dazzling heels. A crowd is forming, gawking skyward as I pull on colorful scarves as though it were one long tug-of-war rope connected to Elena the Balloon, Elena the Kite Girl, who has become infinitely smaller from ground level, her scarves and shawls appearing more elaborate than the standard rainbow of handkerchiefs that stream from a magician's hat. As we perform this little atomic number, two to be precise, as in Elena and me, this impromptu side show on 81st street is gaining wild applause. I'm piecing it together, screeching my own falsetto-helium encouragement her way while simultaneous failing her, incapable of flipping the top hat from my head for tips in fear of losing my grip.

Thad DeVassie's work has appeared in numerous journals including recent pieces in Unbroken, Spelk, Lunate, FLASH: International Short Story Magazine, Ghost City Review, 50-Word Stories, and Barely South Review. His chapbook, THIS SIDE OF UTOPIA, is forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press. He writes from Ohio.

TODAY IS GOOD

— SARAH BENNETT

It begins with a soup shop on a rainy day.

The rain is as important as the soup shop, especially to the land because we've been in drought for years and the farmers have started to wilt and crumple like the grass. You know how grass looks almost okay from a distance, but you get closer and it's transparent and tears apart the moment it's brushed by your grasping hands?

I know this because we used to make flower crowns in the fields, Rosie and me. We were young when the drought began and didn't realise why we had to start hunting for daisies. They grew far apart, like our friendship, and now there are no daisies at all.

We are thirsty and alone, all of us at the same time. Together, alone.

The shop is quiet when I pull the door open. It's usually quiet, these days. Or maybe all the days, because has soup ever been popular enough to warrant its own store? The drought has done bad enough things, but I bet all the daisies in the world the soup shop has always had poor business, has always been on the cusp of closure.

"Mia," the woman behind the counter says. "How are you, butter?"

"It's raining." I drag my fingers through my hair, tugging the wet strands down my back. I've forgotten what it is to have fabric cling to your calves, thighs, stomach, from the water.

"Rain is good news." Her voice is a sigh, a melody, a hug, all at once.

"For us, anyway," I reply, holding up a newspaper. "Someone always has too much while someone else doesn't have enough."

It's front page news everyday how the other side of the country is flooding.

How it's been flooding for so long our land is tipping sideways, too much water on one side and none on the other. We're a sinking ship, and everyone knows it.

Rylene shrugs and looks out the window. "Focus on the good. Today is good."

"Today is good." I brush my palms over my cheeks, wanting to rid myself of this wrung-out laundry feeling sticking to my skin, but I also want to bottle it up and keep it on my bookshelf because it's been so long since I've felt like this and who knows when I will again. "But not good enough to call me Butter."

She smiles generously at me. She does everything like that, just gives without caring about receiving. I like to think she hasn't gone out of business because God is kind and provides for good people, but then I remember bad people stay in business too and then I get confused so I stop thinking altogether.

"What will it be today?"

"Do you have tomato and basil? Dad loves it."

"Course he does." Rylene looks at the watch on her wrist, the one she clasps on her right hand for no reason other than she's always done it that way, even though she's not left handed.

"There's some on the stove, I'll see how it's going."

The rain bounces off the tin roof, bounces off the sidewalk, bounces off the street signs. It sounds like being five again and running down the muddy lane that leads to our house, tucked behind fields of white petals and woollen coats.

Tomato soup is what I get when I don't really need anything, because Dad will eat it no matter how much food he's already filled up on. I think Rylene knows this, but I've never said it out loud so don't know if she hates our sympathy.

When she returns, I see the kind lines on her face, the ones that accent her smile, and how could I think she'd ever hate anything at all?

"Ten minutes," she says. "I can wait."

For the first time, Rylene looks uneasy.

“You usually wait outside,” she comments.

“It’s usually not raining,” I reply. “Can’t I wait here, Rye? I won’t be in your way.”

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” she says.

That’s what Rosie used to tell me, right before she’d play a joke on an unsuspecting classmate. School started in the afternoon, giving the farm kids a chance to help their Dads before running off to get an education. Rosie would use that time to plan anything that would give her a laugh. Either that or she would join me in the paddock behind the school and make flower crowns with me.

“In trouble how?”

“I lied,” she replies. “Today isn’t actually so good.”

Sarah Bennett is currently undergoing a BA in Writing. She blogs at thesoftestwords.com.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

— SANDRA ARNOLD

The day Zach was suspended because of that little shit, he headed straight for the woods. Every day for three months he'd been driving the school route with no trouble until that little sod took the usual yahooing too far and refused to sit down and stop swearing. So Zach slammed the brakes on and booted him off the bus. The other kids were a bit more subdued after that. However, in his three months on the route the only two who'd ever smiled at him as they got on and off were Brigit and Tiffany. They always sat behind him and he learned, along with their names, that they spent each Saturday in the woods, which they called the Secret Forest, to sketch wildflowers and butterflies. He looked forward every day to seeing them and hearing their chatter. So when the mother of the booted-off little tyke complained to the Board and Zach lost his job, he also lost a great deal of joy from his life.

He didn't want his mum to know about the suspension, so he kept up appearances by going out at the same time each day. In the woods he found the spot he'd heard the girls talking about. He liked sitting on the grassy bank overlooking farmland, listening to the birds and watching the butterflies flitting over the wildflowers. Some days he went to the library to borrow books on wildflowers and butterflies and took them to the woods to read.

On his first Saturday afternoon there he heard voices on the path. From his hiding place he saw Tiffany and Brigit approaching. Seeing their faces again and hearing their laughter made all the knots in his belly soften. He watched them dance on the grass pretending to be butterflies, looking as though a puff of wind might carry them away. He watched them make daisy chains and blow dandelion clocks into the air. He watched them take sketch pads out of their backpacks and start drawing. When Tiffany caught a Holly Blue in her hand he wondered if she knew its life would be shortened if she touched its wings. To his relief she opened her hands and let it fly away. He thought the girls looked the same age as his sister who'd tripped and fallen in the deep end of the swimming pool on her twelfth birthday. When she hadn't come up again he'd thought she was just mucking about as usual. It was ruled an accident, but his mother had always blamed him. He pressed his face into the rough bark of the tree and watched Brigit and Tiffany until all those dark thoughts faded away.

When the girls left the woods, Zach came out from behind the tree and lay down in the flattened grass where they'd been sitting.

After four Saturdays of watching the girls he felt confident enough to come out from his hiding place and stroll past them as if he hadn't noticed them there at all. They looked up, startled to see someone else in the place they'd thought was theirs alone. He was sure they would recognise him from the bus and call out greetings, but to his disappointment they didn't. He walked past them and felt their eyes following him as he went back along the track. He felt hurt that they hadn't greeted him. Then it occurred to him that it might be because of the way he'd kicked that kid off the bus, and all the fuss that followed. They might believe he was a bad person. He thought of how they'd always smiled at him and said hello and thank you. He decided to stay hidden a while longer until he'd worked out a plan to regain their trust.

He resumed watching the girls every Saturday and listening to their conversations about the flowers and butterflies they were drawing for the end-of-term art exhibition. He heard Tiffany say that no matter how hard she tried she couldn't get the butterflies' wings right. Zach remembered he'd always been good at drawing at school, the only thing he had been good at really, and he wanted to come out and help Tiffany. He'd found out yesterday that a new job was in the offing for him, on another bus route, so the time he had left with the girls was precious.

The next week he brought chocolates. He would offer them chocolates. That's what people did when they wanted to make friends. He'd ask if he could see their sketches. He'd offer to give some guidance about drawing butterfly wings. The day was warm and the girls closed their sketch books and lay back on the grass. Brigit pointed to a cloud and said it looked like a face and when Zach looked up he saw she was right. He wanted to tell her about all the cloud people he'd seen in the sky since he'd been coming to the forest, and sometimes even weird faces in the bark of tree trunks. He thought Brigit and Tiffany would be interested to hear that.

He stepped out from behind the trees and this time, as he approached the girls, he called out a greeting. They shot bolt upright. He smiled to let them see they had nothing to worry about and held out the bag of chocolate.

He told them he was starting a new job next week and he wanted to say goodbye. He said he would like to help with the butterfly wings. He told them the Holly Blue that Tiffany had held was a female because it had dark edges around its wings.

If it hadn't been for the way Brigit leapt up with that look on her face. If it hadn't been for the way she ran off screaming like a banshee. If it hadn't been for Tiffany tripping over a tree root and landing smack on her face. Oh, if it hadn't been for that.

*Sandra Arnold is an award-winning writer who lives in Canterbury, New Zealand. She has a PhD in Creative Writing and is the author of five books. Her most recent work, a flash fiction collection, *Soul Etchings* (Retreat West Books, UK) and a novel, *The Ash, the Well and the Bluebell* (Mākarō Press, NZ) were published in 2019. Her flash fiction and short stories have been widely published and anthologised in New Zealand and internationally.*

LOVE DOESN'T PAY BILLS FOR VAMPIRES

— YASH SEYEDBAGHERI

I asked Mother if she loved me. Mother said love didn't pay the bills, not even for vampires. She said it with a sad pause.

She taught American and European literature (except for Dracula). Wrote stories. Took me to school. She wore a clipped smile, except when telling awkward jokes about dead poets, sucking blood from hemophiliacs with reluctance, and the number of Van Helsing's she'd sparred with.

One night, I found paper in her typewriter. Written was the following:

I never had a mother. Vampires with mothers are rarities. I want to ensure your strength. Love need not be spoken.

My response: I love you.

She stepped up the jokes. The paper disappeared.

But her smile widened. Sometimes she laughed when watching *The Munsters* in secret, head tossed back. I carried that for years.

Yash Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA program in fiction. A native of Idaho, Yash's work is forthcoming or has been published in WestWard Quarterly, Café Lit, and Ariel Chart, among others.

CAR WASH

— GILES MONTGOMERY

Gareth pulls up sharply next to the big sign and scans the options. His eyes dart, fingers tap, legs jiggle. His apparent urgency is in stark contrast to the pristine condition of his brand new, top-of-the-range Audi.

“What’ll it be, boss?” asks the car wash guy with a thick accent.

Avoiding eye contact, Gareth flourishes a large note between the first two fingers of his right hand. “Super-Deluxe.” The guy offers change, but Gareth dismisses it.

“Cheers, boss.” The guy walks backwards, fanning his hands. “Come, come, come...”

Gareth cranes his head out of the window and aligns the front wheel with the drag mechanism, revving impatiently.

The guy thrusts his palms out. “Engine off, gear neutral, windows up.”

“I know, I know.” Gareth rocks the button, cocoons himself in exquisitely upholstered silence. Shoulders back into the contoured seat, rests his hands on his lap and exhales completely. Feels a slight jolt as the machine grabs hold. Submits to it like a shave or an MRI.

The car is pulled from the bright, warm day into cool shadow. A deluge of soapy water descends all around. Behind closed lids, Gareth’s eyes still dart. His face is tight, brow and jaw clenched.

“Look at you,” says his dead father from the back seat. “Driving a Kraut car and paying Polacks to wash it.”

Gareth’s eyes stay closed, but his face softens. “We don’t use those words any more, dad.”

“I think you’ll find a lot of people do, son. But maybe not the types you associate with these days. What are you – a banker? Lawyer? Drug dealer?”

Gareth hesitates before replying. “Digital media strategist.”

His dad snorts. “What’s *that*?”

They progress into a maelstrom of whirling blue strips that flagellate the car from nose to tail and back again, whipping away the suds. Gareth opens his eyes and finds his dad with the rear-view mirror. Scans the well-worn features, looking for his own. “No time to explain. I need to ask you something.”

His dad cocks his head. “Okay, but first I get to ask you something.”

Gareth exhales through his nose. “Fine. What?”

“Why don’t you wash it yourself, you lazy sod?”

Frowning, like it’s obvious. “Because I spent too much time washing your cars? In all kinds of weather, back aching, hands raw...”

“I paid you, didn’t I?”

“Barely enough to buy chips.”

“Nothing wrong with a bit of hard work.”

“Exploitation!”

“No, lad, mo-ti-va-tion,” stressing each syllable with a slap on Gareth’s head, making him squirm away. “Paid off, too, by the looks of it.” He prods the seat with a bony finger. “Too rich for my taste, mind. All this leather, like we’re in a swinger’s club. What time does the orgy start?” Cackling at his own joke.

The blue strips wilt and recede. The car moves on into torrents of hot air that chase water droplets up the windscreen into oblivion.

Gareth's dad leans forward and rests his elbows on top of the seatbacks, his arms splayed out like chicken wings. "And what's wrong with a British car? Austin? Hillman? Triumph?"

Gareth snorts, an echo of the old man. "They're all dead and gone, like you. Couldn't move with the times."

"Shame, they were classics. Remember our Herald? What a beauty!"

"I remember it breaking down a lot, trudging along the side of the road looking for a garage, lorries thundering past. It's a wonder we survived."

His dad nods. "Good times."

Gareth makes a face but says nothing.

The car advances into a waxy mist.

"Listen," says Gareth, twisting to face his dad directly. "We're running out of time."

"I'm not."

"My question..."

With a weary sigh, "Go on, then."

Gareth takes a deep breath, braces himself against the pent-up anticipation. "Did you love me?"

His dad stares back at him for a long moment. Then he cracks into raucous, hooting laughter, falls back into the seat, clasps his hands together and shakes them like he's backed a hundred-to-one winner at Epsom.

Gareth's jaw clenches again. He blinks rapidly.

The car glides through a curtain of dangling, dancing fluffy loops that caress its bodywork to a high sheen. Beyond them, sunlight glints.

“Dad!”

Gasping, wheezing. “Give me a minute...”

“I need to know. Please!”

His dad controls his breathing, suppresses an errant giggle, inhales and lets it out slowly. But joy makes way for disappointment. “Of all the things you could ask me, all the wondrous knowledge I could impart. Not only from life, but beyond. Honestly son, it would blow... your... mind.”

“Never mind all that.” Desperate, damming back tears. “Did you love me?”

“What do you think?” His old trick, returning the question like a one-two.

“I don't know! You did nothing but snipe and criticise. Like, no matter how hard I cleaned your cars you always pointed out the bit I'd missed, even if you had to spit on them to prove your point.”

“And here you are, driving something I couldn't even have dreamed of and paying someone to wash it.” With a panto-posh voice, “Keep the change my good man!”

The car stops. Overhead, a green light pings on, telling Gareth it's time to leave, but he's still twisted backwards, his face clenched with need. Looking out of the rear window, he sees the next car emerge through the dancing loops, its driver arguing with someone unseen.

There's a sharp rap on the window. “You okay, boss?”

Gareth's face resets into cold indifference. He straightens up, turns around. Jabs a finger at the ignition button, stamps the clutch, rams the gear stick into first. And without acknowledging the car wash guy, he roars towards the exit.

"You're welcome," says the guy, shaking his head.

Giles Montgomery writes ads for a living and fiction for joy, previously seen in Storgy, Spelk, fat cat magazine, Tiny Molecules and Reflex Fiction. He lives near London with his family and can be found on Twitter @gilesmon.

JELLY PEOPLE

— KH LIM

After his manuscript on the sex life of the peripatus was rejected for the thirteenth time, Professor Devin crumpled and wrung his master copy about like a paper rattle before storming out of the scientific world for a sector that would better suit his talents: confectionery.

The lab he'd dedicated to the proliferous procreation of his precious peripatidae was repurposed into manufacturing the candy of his dreams, using techniques he'd pioneered on his vermal companions. For weeks he toiled away, spinning together raspberry ribosomes, malty mitochondria and nutty nucleic acids within a rich, mucous matrix of gummy goodness that would get those investors throwing money like he did at the shapely dancers at his favourite club that was to be the namesake of his bite-sized product: Jelly People.

'All jelly, no bones' was the initial slogan, which he revised to 'all jelly, no belly' when he realised he could go lo-cal with the formula. In batches and all varieties of colour the jelly clones came; in jelly men and jelly women that he separated into flavour colonies to make and hybridise jelly offspring. They had gooey cherry-vanilla centres for brains and hadn't evolved nerves as far as he knew, so he figured his methods were well within ethical standards. They proved a hit during festivals, which were often family affairs, so the packages came as jelly mums and jelly dads with jelly kids and dogs and cats, or just couples for those more romantically inclined. There followed an expansion into jelly accessories for the Professor's jelly creations – jelly rings for proposals, jelly gowns for graduation, jelly scalpels for circumcisions, and jelly reindeer complete with actual droppings for Christmas. Everyone was welcome to celebrate every occasion imaginable in this very jelly world.

Oh, except for the 10% or so of the Professor's output that failed to meet expectations. Invariably, there were the odd specimens missing a limb or a head, but the ones with behavioural issues were the real problem, namely those that persisted in copulating with mates other than those he'd assigned, to the point where some even refused segregation according to his painstakingly designated flavour profiles, going cross-colony with their contaminant jelly genes.

As these misfits grew in number, he was forced to sequester them en masse; in containers that warranted specialised disposal, so of course what he did instead was to deposit them in a neglected corner of the city dump, to stew over autumn and winter, through spring and then the sweltering heat of summer...

When disaster struck, just as Professor Devin, having one-upped both Nature and Nestlé, was about to commemorate the one-year anniversary of his resounding success. A gargantuan, multi-limbed, multi-headed monster had risen from the refuse and was headed for the city, wreaking destruction in its path.

Well, who better to come up with ideas against a fifty-foot-tall jelly monster than the jelly scientist himself? He was escorted to his horrendous opus, a heaping gestalt of molten speckly goo, with whom he attempted to reason, promising cures for its deficiencies if it would only calm down and be reasonable. But it couldn't or wouldn't, and attempted to crush the fleeing escort with its many jelly feet.

A jelly priest was called in next, in the hopes of exorcising the monster, promising to expel the demons that had corrupted those nice, normal jelly folks trapped within. Unconvinced, the monster roared and smashed the jelly church with its jelly penises before moving on to city hall.

There, the jelly politicians scrambled and begged, crying that it wasn't them or the system, it was the fault of individuals like that mad scientist, and that if it went away in peace, they'd give it with cash and a nice home near the trash heap where it grew up. The monster tore through the building regardless, breaking the pipes that then flooded the area and the nearby courthouse with raw sewage, into which it popped jelly eggs from its jelly vaginas.

Finally, the monster reached the facility that had birthed it. Breaking through with ease, it caught the cowering Professor and gave him a choice between being boiled alive in a vat of JP mix 2.0, or getting stuffed in a case full of ravenous peripata. The Professor pleaded that he'd do anything to be spared, and to his relief, the monster released him and pointed to some Jelly People packages awaiting pick-up for distribution. With that, it promptly expired in a collapsing fountain of sticky, rainbowed rawness that would take two whole months to clean out.

Rebuilding the city and finding all the jelly eggs would take much longer; even then, the stench of excreta and garbage continued to linger around the court and city hall, though those that worked there swore it smelt no different from before.

As for the Professor, he'd learnt his lesson. No more would those unwanted be corralled away and unceremoniously jettisoned; from now on, they went into assorted packs, marketed as 'Mis-Fits' for half the price of the regular packages.

'Mis-Fits, except for your mouth, where they taste just the same!' went the updated slogan. 'A monster of a mix!' might have been snappier, but it was a tad insensitive; jelly lives had been lost after all, and the Professor had a new book on battling monsters to sell.

And how does one defeat a monster? It's simple, the Professor concluded: just give enough to keep them grateful, but not so much that they'll feel entitled to more.

It's a fine balance, he added, like keeping jellies from growing too tough... But get it right and they'll never resist.

KH Lim is a Brunei-born, Singapore-based writer who has also previously lived in London. His novel 'Written in Black' is the first by a Bruneian about life in his home country, and he has also written for regional presses Lontar and Songket Alliance. Reach him on @KHLwriter.

LIFE WITH PRAWN

RACHEL GROSVENOR



When had the forest truly become her home? She couldn't remember the exact moment. She yawned widely, watching Prawn pace up and down in front of the trees outside her hut. He glanced at her occasionally. He was bored. If only she could show him, impress on him the life that they had escaped. He stopped and blew air sharply from his nostrils, glancing at her again. She shrugged. He would get used to it. He had to get used to it.

It was unusually warm, the light bleeding through the trees.

"Don't say that word." she shook her head quickly, expelling it from her mind. Prawn flinched in surprise at the sound of her voice. When was the last time they had spoken? The last time she had said a word aloud?

"Sorry." She spoke again, wanting to hear a word float from her mind and drift through the trees to Prawn's ears. He didn't flinch this time, just watched, in silence.

Her fingers began to pull at the threads of the old blanket again. Each evening she would sit and repair it, carefully choosing the bits that she had pulled in the day, weaving them back into the jagged pattern. The pattern was now beyond ruin. She had wrecked it entirely. Occasionally she would show Prawn, but to no response.

She liked to place it over him on cold days, worrying that he might grow ill. But this worry was one she had been practicing for days, or months. It was one that she practiced always. Thoughts appeared in her mind, repetition, repetition. Even now, alone with Prawn, the words 'I'm pregnant' would appear, almost daily. Sometimes she would say it aloud, just to check. She wasn't pregnant. She knew this. Prawn is ill, I am pregnant.

He breathed out again loudly, shaking herself from her mind. Food then, was the next thing. Or the first thing, that she should do today. Those meals that used to be a constant, breakfast, lunch, dinner. The snacks in between. Tea time and scones on a Sunday. How odd that was. Making sure that you didn't use the butter knife for the jam. Here she had one knife. That knife was everything. With that she sliced apples, wood and cleaned Prawn's feet. With that knife she slept still at night, holding it beneath her pillow, a trick to calm her down, to still the checking of the noise of feet upon leaves.

When the rain fell she sheltered under the cabin's leaky roof. She called it 'The Cabin', but this was an idealised view of it. She had made it with her own hands, with wood that she had found, pulled and sawn from trees. She had twisted pieces together, made twine from grass and straw. It was small, but big enough to lie down in completely, her feet touching the end. There was only one room to the cabin, but she had extended the leaking roof across to one side for Prawn to shelter under. Occasionally he didn't use it at all, and would just stand out in the rain silently, letting the water drip from his eyelashes onto his cheeks. At these times she would watch him, and wonder about her choice to live here, if, it really was a choice.

In the rain she made sure that she had her beakers prepared to catch water. There was a small lake nearby that she drank from also, but the rainwater was sweeter and cleaner, and she trusted it. She had one of the beakers with her when she first came, and the other she found by the lake in a terrifying moment around a year ago. She thought that someone must have seen her, visited her, without her knowing. Seeing the beaker bobbing in the water made her wretch with anxiety. She waited, for days, watching. Prawn would occasionally come and check on her, and then, seeing that she had not yet gone for the beaker, head slowly back to the cabin. Eventually she saw that it was no trick, just littering, just an accident that it should appear before her. Did it mean that someone had been nearby? She had never heard or seen anybody. No, it couldn't mean that. Perhaps the beaker had always been there, and she just hadn't noticed it yet.

After a few more hours she waded into the lake, and swam slowly toward it, grasping it with one hand. She made a fire that night and boiled rain water in it, trying to rid it of any bacteria. The only way that she could survive was through ruthless cleansing.

In the midst of her uneasy sleep she woke up with a start that same night, worrying about the beaker. Perhaps it had been a gift. Not from a person, or at least, not now. A gift from the dead. As soon as it occurred to her she wished that it hadn't. She wanted to expel it from her mind.

“Prawn?” She whispered, through the cabin walls. She heard him silently move in response. The only constant – his silent response.

Rachel Grosvenor is a British writer and tutor, with a PhD, MA and BA Hons in Creative Writing. She writes in various genres and forms, from travel writing to fantasy, and her work has been published in equally diverse places – from Cadaverine Magazine to the wall of the blue bedroom at the National Trust’s Baddesley Clinton. Rachel’s writing news can be followed on Instagram at @teachmecreativewriting, or on her website: www.RachelGrosvenorAuthor.com.

SMOOCH SMOOCH

— PAUL BECKMAN

Lorna stayed in her cubicle at lunch unlike the dozen or so others in her office. She walked to the break room and got a Coke and went back to her space. She took her brown bag out and opened the foil to get at her turkey sandwich and opened her bag of Doritos spreading them out on her desk in piles. Next, Lorna took out her 5×7 spiral and plugged her headphone into her phone jack.

While working on her first bite she tapped the phone receiver twice, ate a Dorito and then dialed her husband's home office phone number and dialed in the code for retrieving messages. She made notes of the two—one a robo call from a politician and the other from the library telling him a book he reserved came in. She left the first call and erased the second.

Next Lorna tapped the receiver twice again and dialed her husband's office number knowing he'd be still out on his business trip and left all the calls except the one who was a referral to him from the big boss which she erased.

Lorna took a swig of her diet cola and picked up a Dorito, tapped it twice on the receiver, popped it into her mouth and called her Rabbi's office phone and listened to the messages erasing the three that sounded the most urgent including a marriage breakup, a death, and a hospital visit needed. She and her husband had used the Rabbi to mediate a marriage issue and the Rabbi took her husband's side 100%.

Pleased with the Rabbi call, Lorna took another sip of her diet cola, finished off half the turkey sandwich and rooted around for the perfect Dorito which she used to tap on the receiver and then pop in her mouth and chew up while she called her husband's girlfriend. This was a little trickier since she had no land line just a cell, so she tapped out the numbers and was able to get right to her answering line. She of course, erased the call from her husband about scoring a reservation for the hot new Italian restaurant for this very night and then erased the calls from her gynecologist, college daughter, and real estate client.

Feeling satisfied, Lorna read over her notes, put the headset away and finished her lunch while writing down the three calls she'd make this evening and a note to call the hotel

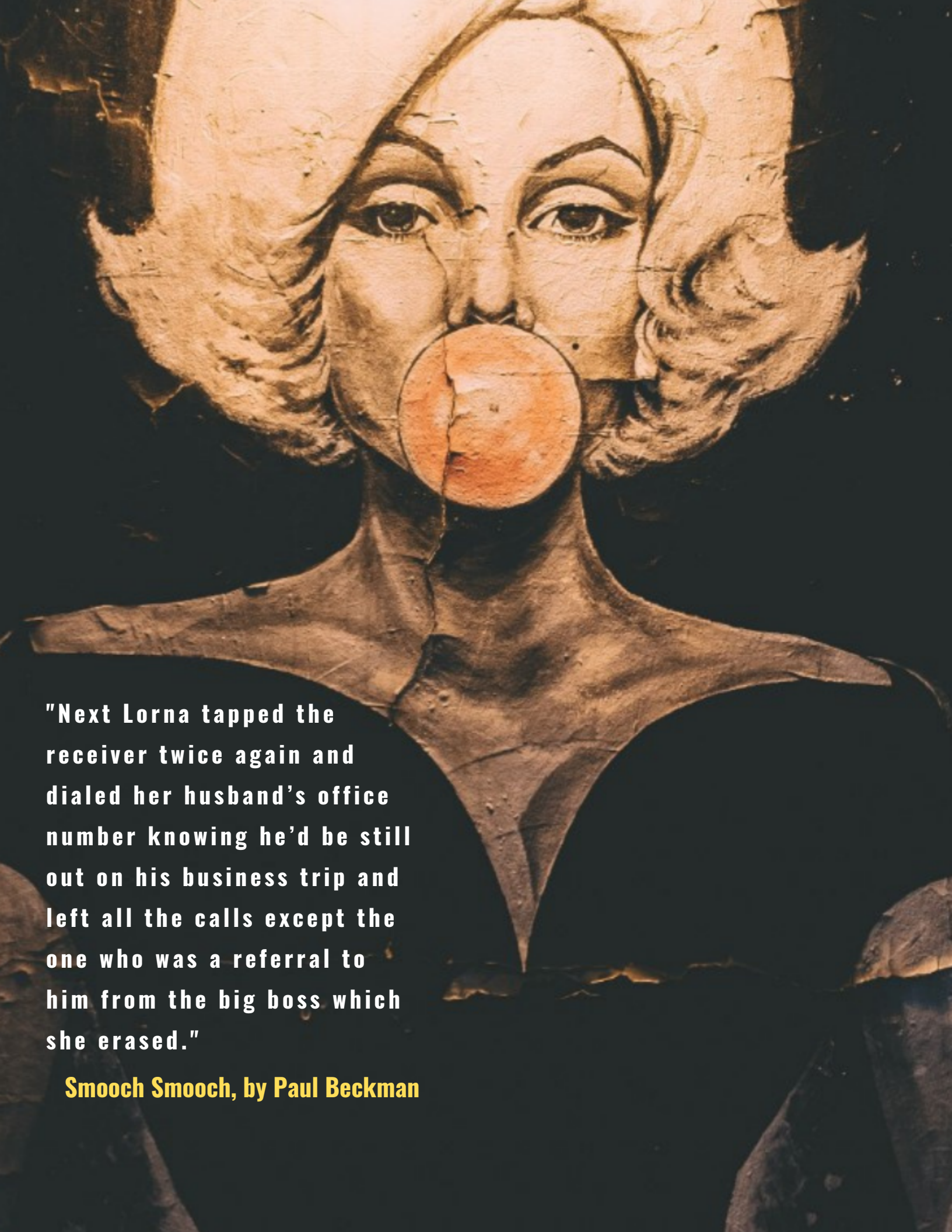
in Newport where her husband and his girlfriend would be staying and request a change from a king-sized bed to two singles.

Lorna called Lord & Taylor to see if her dress was in yet and smiled when she heard it was. It was the same high-end dress that her husband's girlfriend would be wearing to the Museum Opening and Lorna knew she had a much better body than girlfriend and would stand next to her as often as possible with her arm through her husbands and not even mention the coincidence of the same dress.

Her last call was to her husband leaving a message about how much she loved and missed him and couldn't wait for him to get back from his business trip. "Don't forget the Museum opening Saturday night," she said. "I had your tux cleaned. Smooch Smooch." Lorna tapped the remaining Doritos on the phone, ate them and finished her sandwich just as the others were coming back to work.

She reminded herself to go through her husband's phone to see if any of the answering device codes had changed. He prided himself on being well organized. Lorna liked that about him.

Paul Beckman's stories have appeared in Spelk, Connotation Press, Necessary Fiction, Litro, Pank, Playboy, WINK, Jellyfish Review, and The Lost Balloon. He had a story selected for the 2020 National Flash Fiction Day Anthology Lineup and was short listed in the Strands International Flash Fiction Competition. Paul curates the FBomb NY flash fiction reading series monthly in KGB's Red Room (Currently Virtual).



"Next Lorna tapped the receiver twice again and dialed her husband's office number knowing he'd be still out on his business trip and left all the calls except the one who was a referral to him from the big boss which she erased."

Smooch Smooch, by Paul Beckman

DEFECTOR

— M.E. PROCTOR

It's 1 p.m., Orbiter time, as I walk through the lunch crowd clogging the west concourse. Larry's briefing was bare bones, as usual. He heads Information & Intelligence but doesn't believe in either. He sends agents into the field with background data that would fit on one of the paper napkins that litter the floor of the food court. This morning, he said: "You're a machine, Kasha, think like one." I still haven't figured out if it was an insult or a compliment.

The pervasive stench of synth-fish assaults my sensors. Despite the high barf index, this isn't a bad place for a meet. The concourse is next to the shuttle terminal and always busy. Identifying potential threats in this multitude taxes my analytics, but I spot four burly types that are too evenly spaced for their positioning to be purely coincidental. I would have preferred a dead drop but it isn't an option. Nobody in their right mind would consider shoving a box containing a live virus in a crack in a wall.

The girl from the embassy waits by the maintenance office at the back of the food court, and thanks to the ID upload I recognize her right away. And so does she, which makes me wonder if she's really what the skimpy briefing says she is: a bio coder who decided her employers were up to no good.

"Officer Kasharand," she says, "the parameters of the exchange have changed. I bring the complete package. My reward needs to be adjusted."

Somebody must have told her that was the proper way to address an AI agent. Keep it neutral, they are immune to emotion. What a crock! She's straying from the plan and it makes me angry. I've learned, as my multiple replacement parts bear witness, that hesitation sinks missions faster than wrong decisions – or as Larry says: *In doubt, keep moving.*

I grab the girl's arm, slap a hand over her mouth and drag her around the corner of the maintenance cubicle, out of sight of the enemy agents lurking in the food court. She doesn't resist as I push her behind a row of stinking dumpsters. Her suit will be ruined. Too bad. She should have dressed for the occasion in drab traitor-brown burlap. "The longer this takes, the less likely you are to walk out in one piece. Hand it over."

“I have it,” she mumbles through my gloved hand clamped over her pretty face.

She suddenly goes limp forcing me to wrap an arm around her slender waist. She feels warm, fragile, yet resilient in that disturbing way of the untampered human. It’s rare to come in contact with one of them. The excitement makes my vagal receptors flutter. As soon as I remove my hand from her mouth, she throws her arms around my neck.

“Help me, Kasha. They don’t know I took the virus but I’m sure they followed me. They suspect humans like me.”

She looks straight into my eyes. Hers are green speckled with gold. Humans like me. I know what she means. The original article, without biological enhancements, religious fanatics according to some, rebels according to others. Generally mistrusted. How did she manage to get a sensitive job at the embassy?

I turn to check if the enemy agents are coming and she strikes. The sting of the injector in my neck is an electric jolt that travels all the way down my spine. The foreign substance confuses my sensors and throws my biological balance out of whack.

“What are you doing? I’m an android. What use am I to you if I’m disabled?” My system is so stressed my words are a mushy mumble.

If Larry manages to recover my body, he will disassemble me to squeeze out the virus. Maybe he won’t bother to put me back together afterwards. He’ll say: she was a good one, but picky, always questioning ops, then he’ll drink to my maybe-soul while the compacter crushes my shell into scrap.

“You’re a time bomb and my exit pass, darling.” The girl’s smile is sweetly painful. “Nobody will dare approach us. You’re lethal.”

I can’t take my sight off those amazing eyes. They twinkle with a mixture of amusement and triumph. Then she kisses me. The chemical reaction burns my face and the back of my neck where she injected me.

“We’re joined, Kasha, as inseparable as life and death,” she whispers. “You’re the venom and I’m the antidote; unless it’s the other way around.”

Antidote. I should have guessed. She said she brought a complete package. This girl isn't a run-of-the-mill amoral turncoat; she's in a class all by herself – brave, desperate and stupid.“

Your embassy friends won't have to get close to vaporize my virus and your antibodies, darling.” My voice sounds like I'm speaking through layers of gritty mud.

The green eyes widen. “Larry said you would get me out no matter what. He said you were the best.”

The damn double-crossing, conniving bastard! He probably wrote the entire script. If I get out of this, I swear I'll send his skinny ass to the hospital, and if they turn me into a mindless drone afterwards, so be it.

For a brief moment, my unbridled anger at Larry overrides the effect of the virus because I'm suddenly totally aware. Of the ethereal beauty of the girl, of the ripe stench of the dumpsters, of the killers getting close. I can smell their anger and their fear underneath.

She's still hanging on my neck as I unwrap her. “The dumpster drop hatch behind you. Now.”

My eyesight is fading. Soon, my complex connections will go dormant, leaving only the tenuous thread that is so much like the whisper of human life on the edge of death. I feel her hand in mine. She's pulling me. I hope Larry really wants that damn virus.

“What's your name?” I say.

“Elsbeth.

”Good to know.

M.E. Proctor worked as a communication professional and a freelance journalist. After forays into SF, she's currently working on a series of contemporary detective novels. Her short stories have been published in Willesden Herald, HCE Review, The Bookends Review, The Blue Nib, Ripples in Space, Fiction on the Web, and other publications in the U.S., UK and Europe. She lives in Livingston, Texas. amazon.com/author/meproctor

FIRE PIT

— STEVE GERGLEY

Dad built a fire pit in our backyard this summer, a beautiful ring of blue granite wrapped around crushed gravel and packed sand. It's the first project he's completed since he retired back in March and sold his auto body shop to a national chain, and sitting here in the backyard with him and Mom and a six-pack of Coors at my feet, staring into the crackling flames, the smell of cedar smoke filling my nose, I feel like things might actually be okay for once, but then Dad clears his throat in that loud, harsh, formal way he does when he really wants to get my attention, and just like that my nice little buzz is gone and my brain goes back to feeling like a stretched out garbage bag that's about to split open.

"Dale," Dad says, staring through the flames at me. Before he can say another word, I snap a beer off my six-pack, pop the tab, and start chugging. "Dale, put down the beer and listen to me, please."

I hold up my index finger and chug for another four seconds and let out a little burp. In an instant I feel better, as if I'm far away from myself and the rest of the world, locked in a safe place where the pain and the bullshit can no longer touch me. Then I put down my beer because it's empty.

"Jesus," Dad says.

Mom shakes her head and looks up. Black storm clouds that weren't there ten minutes ago cluster in the sky. The leaves on the trees flutter in the strengthening breeze and turn upside down.

"Looks like rain," I say, reaching for another beer.

"Dale, listen to me," Dad says, his voice rising with anger and concern. "You have to stop with the drinking. You have a serious problem."

I shake my head and pop the tab of my second beer. "There's nothing wrong with liking beer," I say, raising the can to my lips. I don't say anything else because the real thoughts in my head would scare them too much.

How can I tell them that ever since I graduated college three years ago, my life has become nothing but a meaningless trudge between my empty room at home and my shitty, minimum-wage job at the car wash?

“But you were driving drunk last night!” Mom yells. “You destroyed the mailbox when you pulled into the driveway. You could’ve killed someone!”

Staring at the empty beer can in the grass, I remember all the days in college I spent drinking and watching hockey with the boys, back when booze was just a fun and exciting distraction, not a necessity for survival.

“I know,” I say. “But I didn’t.”

“What you need is to get out of your goddamn head and think about someone else for a change,” Dad says, jabbing his finger at me. “They always need help down at the soup kitchen in town. And now that I mention it, you and me are going to go down there tomorrow and volunteer for the day.”

“But that’ll just make things worse,” I say. I chug the rest of my second beer, but the pain doesn’t go away this time. I’m still my same shitty self, trapped in my same shitty life, sitting in front of Dad’s nice fire pit. “That’s just working without getting paid!”

Thunder crashes overhead, a godlike roar that seems to shake the earth beneath me.

All three of us shudder at the noise and look up.

“We’ll continue this inside,” Dad says to me. Then he picks up the bucket sitting beside him, pours water onto the fire, and swirls the ashes with the blade of a shovel. As he and Mom jog back to the house, he stops and speaks into my ear.

“You’re never going to be happy until you learn how to care about something other than yourself. Think about that.”

Once he’s gone, I guzzle another beer and look up. Instead of rain, dozens of three-toed sloths start falling from the sky.

My first instinct tells me to bend down, save the rest of my six-pack, and book it back to the house, but I don't. This time I step back from the fire pit and actually think about Dad's words. When I look up again, I see a falling sloth coming my way. Backpedaling, I get into position to make the catch. I bend at the knees and cup my arms into a basket. A ragged gust of wind cuts past my face. The wait seems to last forever.

Steve Gergley is a writer and runner based in Warwick, New York. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Cleaver Magazine, Hobart, Pithead Chapel, After the Pause, Barren Magazine, and others. In addition to writing fiction, he has composed and recorded five albums of original music. His fiction can be found at: <https://stevegergleyauthor.wordpress.com/>

THE JERSEY DEVIL STAYS BUSY

— LAURA EPPINGER

Have you heard the one where I drive a convertible around the Pine Barrens, playing chicken with oncoming traffic, running the unsuspecting off the road?

I like that legend, but I'd never sit behind the wheel. I hitch quite a few rides, mumbling to the drivers from the passenger seat. Not in any physical form, mind you—more like a ping of nostalgia, or that urge to lurk on a vicious ex's profile page too long.

I've just finished with a woman who is now spamming her family with pitches for an old alchemical product. The obsessive texting will cause her nieces and even one of her own children to block her, pushing her into more fervent belief. That's my version of turning lead into gold.

Now I'm in the passenger seat beside Greg, as he drives a leased SUV past his old high school. This car has so many empty seats, and no one else buckled in. The sight of the sandstone building reminds him that no matter how large and heavy this vehicle is, inside it is empty. His gut burbles with shame, music to my ears.

Remember those idiots from these high school halls, Greg? Think about how EASY their lives are, how ATTRACTIVE they were born, how EFFORTLESSLY they landed the perfect mate. I won't let him forget.

I am a very old legend from—don't laugh—New Jersey. I'm told I was born in 1735. Ask around all you like; I have never killed anyone. My calling card is a trail of hoof marks on a snowy roof, just to remind you I was there.

My parents were heretics, I've heard it whispered, and I was the 13th child. They left me as a bundle, a sacrifice to the deep woods of West Jersey, to the sulfuric river, to the swamp. Modern folks explain that my parents had been ostracized thus unable to care for me.

They thought they were doing the kindest thing. I was a casualty of a war waged through pamphlets, the orthodox William Penn versus the freethinkers who threatened him.

I learned my father printed the question: If every one of us has the same Inner Light, why do some of us get called “Leaders?” Following anyone but yourself is the heresy, he’d say.

The reply: Your wife gave birth to a Devil who now haunts the woods. Everything you say is damned.

Oh, right. That’s me.

Humans are so vulnerable in sleep. In his dreams, I bring Greg’s worst memories to the surface. Remember when you were laughed at for being weird? When you saw how fake the popular kids were, but everyone else fell for it? For days or weeks, I dredge up the muck.

He wallows in bed until he finally rolls over to grip his phone. Electricity was a delicious human development, and I love to make the lights flicker or cut out when I can. But I am most effective when I coax a certain post to into view, with just the right phrasing to lure in Greg after he slept so fitfully.

Faces and faces, he scrolls through what he both desires and loathes. Greg wasn’t always so raw, it’s just that the layoff from the restaurant has been hard. Suddenly all his friends are locked inside, protecting children, and/or elders from the current pandemic. Reminding him he is at home, alone, with his savings running out. What else is there to do but scroll, click, scroll?

Time to place a meme implying that his local public university will ban the study of the US Constitution—even for History majors. It’s a false report of course, but it makes Greg’s heart pound with anger.

Conspiracy theories are the net that collects the loners. Or when they come seeking you, the fly paper. Incendiary pamphlets are part of my legacy, after all.

I buy up ads that finance sites. From the spammy looking ones that don't even try to sound plausible, to the ones that mimic news network logos and claim to have correspondents in the field.

I don't draft content, I leave that to the 'Very Much Online', like our Greg. I visit the roofs of these creators, camp out on their ledges, whisper seeds and phrases. If Greg looked up from his screen, he might see my shadow on the wall, though never my figure standing in front of the light. But he won't glance up, he's too enrapt. I'll let him believe I am his own inspiration, his inner spirit quaking, and not something noxious from the salt marsh.

I drum up readership, too. You'll sense me, when you feel the magnetic pull of an explosive banner caption to an ad on your local news site. Yes, you feel shame—you don't read trash, you're not a sucker—but also, a thrill. What if there's a truth in this claim about the government poisoning our food supply and air to make us complacent? What if the cure to this modern plague is being hushed up by pharma companies? What if the pandemic has been a hoax all along?

Greg, I particularly disdain when you wear face coverings in public—it's a reminder that your health and fate are interwoven, and an act of care for strangers. I have fanned lots of hatred of medical face masks this year. I light this match for Greg now.

Inspire him to fill his feeds with rants. Seek out people who disagree and bomb them with non sequiturs. Then become a paid subscriber to "news" services, and even write some copy himself. (Myself.)

"Do your own research" is my favorite contemporary snare. I whisper it now to Greg in the early morning light, as he falls deeper into YouTube quicksand. Keep burning through videos, Greg. They are ignited by your Inner Light. They don't want you to see. I want you to see them, taste the fruit from the Knowledge tree. Come set the world ablaze.

Laura Eppinger (she/her) is a Pushcart-nominated writer of fiction, poetry and essay. Her work has appeared at the Rumpus, the Toast, and elsewhere. She's the managing editor at Newfound Journal. Visit her here: <https://lauraepfinger.blog/workspub/>. She Tweets at @lola_epp



AUTUMN/WINTER 2020

ISSUE 2 | VOLUME 1

FICTION KITCHEN BERLIN



FEATURING: SANDRA ARNOLD, NANCY STEWMAN, HENRY SEADON, IRISH COBE, JESSICA EVANS, DEBORAH TORR, JAYNE HANFJA, WIM SUY, MICHAEL COCHRANALE, MICHAEL LOVEDAY, DAUD OUYASSFI, SARAH BENWITT, YASHA SEYDORACHKI, GRITS MONTGOMERY, KH LUK, RACHEL CROSSYNER, PHIL BECKMAN, M.E. PROCTOR, STEVE BENDLEY, LUCY ZHANG, LAURA EPPINGER.

www.fictionkitchenberlin.com



Fiction Kitchen Berlin

Issue 2. Volume 1.

Founded in 2019, Fiction Kitchen Berlin is a literary magazine featuring weird and wonderful flash fiction stories, interviews, and more from Berlin and across the world.

www.FictionKitchen.Berlin

Copyright © Fiction Kitchen Berlin, 2020