

Swansong

a flash fiction collection

Swansong

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Original Sin

Gaynor Jones

Mother always said that if you ate an apple without shining it first you left a door open for the devil. I never did. I let their peeled skins dull in my room, air thick with woody scent.

Mother always carried a dried blossom in her left pocket, for a good harvest, and a bible in her right, for everything else. I never asked why she was allowed to mix and match her belief systems while I was made to pray, kneel, shrink.

Mother always checked the moon before planting seeds, and mother never missed a sermon, and mother never cared that her child might grow up to hate her.

I never told about the punishments. I believed her when she said people would never believe a girl like me.

Mother always said that pips spilled on the floor meant bad luck.

I never thought I'd have the strength to leave. I believed you when you said I could.

I placed a dozen pips outside her door the night I finally did. I imagined them, dark dots like eyes, staring up at her like the demons she said surely lived in me.

You always ask if I'm okay. You always remember my favourite songs. You always give me space and time and love. When you bring me an apple, I pull my sweater down over the faded marks haunting my wrist. I don't polish it before taking a bite. Sweet juice and white flesh on my pierced tongue. You taste it when we kiss.

Lot's Wife Makes Her Case at the Pearly Gates Tribunal

Marie Gethins

Look, what we've got here is a simple misunderstanding. A *prima facie* situation where your guy on the ground—let's call him Angel X—I know, just doing his job, but at first *glance* what he thought he saw wasn't exactly the real deal. No one is denying that Sodom and Gomorrah had issues. I'd even concede that you could call them 'party towns' but honestly, the number of extremists—swingers, stoners, mainliners—would be maybe 5%, ok 10% tops? So, is it true justice that everyone suffers over a few lowlifes? Here I was playing the perfect hostess after Lot insisted Angel X bunk at our place. Weeks of him in the best bedroom, laying out a major spread each evening, preening his wings in the mornings…and MY GOD (sorry, sorry) even Lot was all in for offering our two daughters, *our precious girls*, to the baying crowd to 'do with what you will' after Angel X got the populace all riled up threatening brimstone and whatnot. I mean, we were lucky to escape! And as for that whole 'don't look back' business, no one told me. Or at least Lot wasn't clear on the precise consequences. There I am running with flaming rocks pelting all around us, I check that our girls are keeping up and BOOM I am Saltlick-of-the-Year. Hardly fair. A mother doing her job and typical, *typical* she gets the blame. You call this fair dealing? After all my service to Lot, Angel X, not to mention the Big Guy…I should be reclining on a cloud, but nooooo, I'm here, defending *my actions*, facing eternity in the mouth of a volcano. Meanwhile, from what I hear, with the price of salt through the heavens, Lot is rolling it in. Come on, seriously?

Oxygen

Patricia Q. Bidar

Gina and Nidia sit in the cool sand of RAT Beach. As planned, Nidia's brought along a thermos of diet ginger ale. Gina brought her father's special scotch in a bota bag. The girls had mixed the liquids up in the jeep.

They wear their swimsuits beneath their clothes. It's too early for the beach, but Nidia's brother and his friend Chris Gonzalez are surfers.

In her brother's jeep on the way over, Nidia asked Gina loudly whether she'd gotten her period. Gina said no. Nidia said Gina was lucky. She didn't have to worry about getting pregnant. Then she called out to Chris Gonzalez in front that it was Gina's 15th birthday and prodded, "Isn't she hot? Doesn't she look older?"

"Too much bounce to the ounce," he'd answered lightly.

Nidia cried, "Be nice to my charity case!" She'd given Chris Gonzalez a playful shove.

Gina only knows Nidia from a distance, even though the two girls are next door neighbors. Nidia is older, sixteen. Her mother works. Has frosted hair and French tips.

Last night, Gina was curled on her dining room floor, weeping to Rock and Roll Suicide and feeling that David Bowie and only David Bowie would ever understand her. Then the phone rang, and then her dad was looking down on Gina with his hopeful eyes. It was Nidia from next door. Did Gina want to go to the beach? Gina's father acted as though Gina got invitations to activities all the time.

"Go," her father urged. "Get out of the house. Some fresh air."

Gina's dad is a butcher. A union man, so the family has great insurance. Gina sort of knows that, but it sounded different coming from Nidia on the way to the beach. She must have heard it from her mother.

Two blond guys traverse the sand in candy-colored Speedos and rubber sandals with socks. They chatter in another language and flash white teeth. German, maybe. They set their ice chest down closest to Gina and lower themselves to the sand. One pulls out a can of Heineken. The guy beside Gina reclines on his back. As discreetly as she is able, she watches. That's when she sees it: the tent in front of his bathing suit. A straight up boner as though in salute. She has never before

seen such a thing. A salute to Gina. He grins at the sky.

Heart pounding, she ducks. Peers again. He takes his time turning onto his front. A fullness blooms in her lower belly.

"We are totally, like, merrrmaids," Nidia is saying. She slowly pulls her sundress over her head. "Drunk mermaids!" she cries, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. Her bikini is crocheted, the same parrot green as her brother's Jeep. Gina's—which Nidia's mother loaned her, saying it was Nidia's from last year—is strapless and nylon. The top barely covers her.

Nidia turns to Gina. "C'mon, air them titties out." Her voice in that higher register she used back in the jeep.

"I call this the wonder spot," Nidia continues, overloud. She smears her shoulders with Hawaiian Tropic. It smells good, like cookies. "Because when I sit here, wonderful guys appear!" She cuts her eyes to the two blonds.

Nidia lies down on her front; reaches back to unfasten her top. Gina takes her time doing the same. Slowly she turns her head. Her guy is looking directly at her. He has a cute crooked front tooth. This time, Gina stares until he turns away.

One of the reasons Gina stays inside was that her mother never learned to drive. She breaks all the rules of how to be a cool Southern California mom. Inside, Gina and her mom read. Try new recipes. Watch the Million Dollar Movie. Her mom, in full makeup and a hostess gown, pronounces them "indoorsy."

Everything is okay as long as they stay inside.

The sunlight breaks through the clouds. Gina is no mermaid. Just a perfect, wobble-legged mammal unaccustomed to the scene. She is at RAT Beach with a popular almost-16-year-old. Most importantly, a college man has chosen Gina to reveal his most intimate physical feeling to.

"Isn't it weird how they call this beach Rat?" Nidia asks in her normal voice. Her glance slides over the lifeguard station, and Gina realizes: Nidia thinks it was because there are rats here.

That's when Gina sits up. Her bathing suit top remains on the sand. She feels her nipples crinkle. "It's an acronym," she says. "Right After Torrance. Get it?" She gazes at the water and holds for a beat.

"Oh. My. God," Nidia breathes, staring at Gina's breasts.

Gina gives a fake-surprised chirp and reaches for the bathing suit top. She takes her time situating the front, then inclines her head for Nidia to hook the back. The older girl obeys.

The warmth of the sand feels wonderful under Gina's feet. Pure. From the

corner of her eye, she sees the European boys rise. These college men from halfway around the world are about to follow her into the sea.

Gina will enter the water with Nidia close behind. And then Nida will grab Gina's wrist. Mutter that Gina is bleeding; that she thought Gina claimed she hadn't yet gotten her period. That Gina has ruined her bathing suit and would need to pay.

With the worldliness and manners of older men, the college boys will take off jogging down the beach as though that had always been their plan.

And on the surfer's side, Nidia's brother and Chris Gonzalez, sleek dark heads in the water, will wait for their waves. And Nidia will say with her mouth in a hard line, get in and wash off or else, and Nidia will also say sharks.

And an ache will begin behind Gina's eyes and she will obey and the seawater will sigh, "Ah. Ah. Ah." Endless wavelets releasing oxygen.

Catcherpeanuts

Marcy Dilworth

I'm my father's only child, only son, clad in a cup that chafes and a too-large leather glove, ready for Little League ballparks and Big League chewing gum, not strikeouts and bobbles and black eyes and benches.

Backyard practices till dusk, till dark. Dad's curt encouragement, his too-fast grounders, his wall-eyed pitches, his crumpled beer cans on the summer-browned grass, his stumble up the stoop.

A sweltering Independence Day, a mandatory invitation from Dad's boss; fathers and sons, fathers and sons, biceps and ballcaps and recaps of ballgames.

Me.

A Star Trek t-shirt, an over-sized Sox cap, unclipped tag nagging at my ear. A field strewn with uniforms, inconstant constellations of men, a third out, a green void. All rise in the skybox, except me and my Game Boy, my view full of chino shorts cheering for homeruns or fly balls or—. Dad, red-faced, fist-clenched when I leave his high-five hanging. His stony profile as he forges through traffic, speeds down highways. The dead-quiet ride home.

Late start thanks to rain delay, a lengthy trip, the red glare of taillights. A bumpy road, a gravel parking lot bereft of cars. A rolling park graced with perfect sod.

A solitary walk, a Dad-engraved stone. I doff my pristine cap, clasp it to my chest, rest it on the gleaming maple box above a rectangular hole. Fresh dirt under foot, the toe of my loafer scuffs a red-brown clod that bursts into dust, settles. Safe.

In Search of Black Gold

Sarah Wallis

She moves her bulk with deliberate precision; towards the goal and safety of her prophesy, while he steadies on a tree stump, dreaming of fortunes made in the world's finest restaurants, his name known by the best chefs, chapeau'd straight to the window nook table with a bitter kiss to the air, lagniappe for his black gold in their star dishes, a sommelier summoned with a snap of the fingers...

Many would offer high sums to learn their secrets but the farmer and his prized pig, Goldilocks, keep schtum; adventuring into autumn to tread the mulchy soils and explore the undergrowth. She with quiet insistence, they must be here, they must be, and he with quiet desperation, she must earn her keep, she must do.

Out in the forest, bargaining near forgotten, man and pig stare out at stars; he at sky and she at soil - this patch too riddled raw with hard lardering, that patch not ready, dig here, this patch of earth is just truffle ready, just ripe. She is certain this time.

The man fetches out a tiny gold trowel from his collecting bag. He digs careful as an archaeologist and finally they sit back on their haunches and consider the uncovered globe, small black planet, complex little puzzle piece. The farmer breaks a piece off for the pig; her prize, a winning perfume that keeps her snout in tune with the earth and they give out a synchronised sigh at good fortunes landing.

Southern Baptism

Kathryn Healy

One night a few years ago, I met God at an old gas station just outside the city of Luverne, Alabama. He didn't look like much, but I could tell it was him right away, sort of like how you would be able to sense which car was yours in a sea of identical vehicles. There was a solid familiarity to him, and as soon as it occurred to me who he was, I didn't question it.

He came walking down the side of the road towards the station, around a bend in the tree line that snaked back down towards the city center. Despite the darkness of the night and the lack of streetlights, I could see him quite clearly. He raised a hand in greeting as he approached, and seeing as my hands were full with the gas pump, I thrust my chin up at him in return. He was at my side in a moment. He was shorter than me.

“Can I get you anything from the store?” he asked me. He was generous. This must be the New Testament God.

“I'm alright, brother, but thanks. I think they're closed up now, anyhow.” I knocked my elbow back towards the shuttered building behind us. They sold Pepsi-Cola, according to a neon sign flashing above the door. I remembered passing a Pepsi bottling plant in town, so the brand must be unavoidable in these parts. Weird to encounter God in Hell.

God smiled. “They ain't closed to me. What brings you out here, anyway?”

I shrugged. “Lost my job, but I had a car. I figured I'd drive as far as I could and see where I ended up, then go from there. Trying to cross the next state line by sunup.”

“So you're just passing through?”

“Yup. Couldn't live here long, anyhow. Pepsi town.”

God laughed, and I laughed too. The gas pump thumped its completion, and I nestled it back into its cradle. The deed was done, and I could leave now if I wanted to. I planted my feet in the sandy dirt and stayed. “Does the Devil live out here, too?” I asked.

“Devil's more of a 'seven vacation houses' kind of guy. Nearest one's in Pensacola. His favorite's out in Nevada.”

“Las Vegas?” I asked.

“Yucca Flat, but good guess.”

I nodded. “Maybe I'll head out there next. See if he's hiring.”

“You'll need more gas. Sure you don't want anything from inside?”

“Positive.”

“Alright, brother. Good to see you again.”

“Take care.”

God flashed a peace sign at me as he made his way towards the store. I turned around, sensing that whatever would happen next wasn't for my eyes to see. I could tell when he was gone because I could hear crickets again.

I popped the driver side door open and climbed into the car, but didn't turn it on yet. I just sat, not even thinking, just breathing. Eventually, with a jolt like waking from a dream, I cranked the engine and peeled out of the dusty lot, speeding down the deserted road as if I had something to outrun. Didn't I? Was there a point? Should I slow down? Go back? As I reached for the gear shift, my hand knocked against something cold that sent sticky liquid spilling across my lap. I cursed and glanced down. Tipped over the side of the cup holder, spilling its guts onto the floor of my car, was an open bottle of Pepsi.

The Crystal Palace

Eric Farrell

Every day starts the same. I wake up and get pissed off that I didn't wash out the coffee pot, then force myself into the shower where the water doesn't drain properly. Then I drape a noose-shaped tie over my head and synch the bottom so it somewhat depicts an eager, studious employee.

At work, I worm my way through the cubicle maze until I find my station, and log onto the computer. A blank white page blinks before me. There's an anchor in the bottom left corner. I click on it, and drag it across the screen.

The work day begins.

And almost immediately, I begin to daydream. I recollect the sweet images of youth, a flurry of rosy cheeks and awe. I can play certain memories in my head, and happily tune the world out. Sometimes it feels like they're the only thing keeping me afloat at this dreadful job.

But there's one memory I find myself getting lost in, day in and day out.

Matty and I were digging holes on the beach next to Abalone Cove. We were both six. It was one of those rare weekends where my mom had custody, so my mom called Matty's mom and asked for a playdate. This was fine by me. Ma was always bringing some new character around that I didn't care to bond with, and Matty was my best friend. It made sense.

Her current beau was named Clive, and of course she brought him along. Once we parked, he led mom out past the slippery tide pools, beyond the abalone and urchin holding sanctuary. They tip-toed around the lone tree growing stubbornly out of the rocky point, and disappeared.

Matty and I were in search of Indian clay, aka the ancient earth beneath the sands of our local beaches and playgrounds. The dirt was gouging deep beneath our fingernails, and our hands were getting sore from the digging. But we got a big hole going. The funk of brine and dirt swamped us as the pit grew deeper.

I continue pulling the anchor across the screen, through an increasingly difficult set of obstacles. After an indeterminate amount of time, my reflexes fail me and I guide the anchor straight into a wall. I failed the task, the screen says. Try again.

We still hadn't found any Indian clay after the hole doubled in depth. Matty was getting frustrated, but he was determined. I peered up over the rim of our hole, back to sea level. No sign of mom.

I got back to it. I dug quickly for another minute straight, until my fingers hit something hard.

As I brushed the sand away, the luster of a sparkling pink crystal was revealed. Matty marveled at the football-sized rock in my hand, the shine bringing him to his feet.

We locked eyes and smiled, and furiously kept digging.

"Look!" Matty cried out, after staking a spot on the other side of the cavernous hole we'd created. He fisted another chunk of crystal, the glow emanating through his hand. "What is it? Are we gonna get rich?"

I still don't know the answer to that, even after all these years.

I've dragged the anchor through a few hundred obstacles at this point in the day. This company preys on people like me. They know I'll keep showing up, since I'm mentally clocked out anyway. This whole office is filled with folks fine with their mundane lives, bereft of any amount of genuine joy. I can't help but feel Matty would hate everything about this job. This life.

Someone is going to come around the office with a coffee cart any minute now, a supposed perk of the job. The coffee I get always tastes dull and lifeless, but it provides the miniscule amount of energy required to do my work.

Matty was convinced we were onto something, collecting progressively larger crystals in our hole. Our little lungs were howling, and our dirt-flecked skin seethed with goose pimples. We were getting deep.

I stood up, barely able to see out of the hole. The ocean was eating away at the sand. The tide was coming in, and quick. Whatever our end game was amongst the crystals, our lives were certainly more important.

"Alright, it's time to go, buddy," I urged, still peering out over the rim. But he was trying to heave a huge slab of crystal over, the biggest we'd found yet.

He turned to face me, his cheeks beet red, his eyes filled with tears and determination.

"This is it!" he cried, "this is what we've been working so hard for!"

I kneeled down, and grabbed an edge with him. We thrust the massive slab aside, and found a staircase leading down, made of the same glowing pink crystal.

Matty was already several steps down when he called up to me. Then he reached a door at the bottom of the stairs, and passed through.

And that was the last I ever saw of him. He was gone. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

I saw the tide rolling in. I saw my life flash before my very eyes.

My memory of that day ends, right as the great wave races up the shore. According to mom, Clive drove me home while she waited for the authorities and Matty's parents to arrive. A month later Matty was pronounced dead, the tide having taken him out to sea.

The anchor's still blinking in the bottom left corner of my screen. I tow the company line until my time's been stamped, and head home.

I know Matty's still out there, pitying me for staying behind, anchored to this place I dread. An idle hour passes, then the next, and eventually I try to sleep.

Only there do I see Matty again, and find the crystal palace.

Journey to the Hole in the Sky

Michael Carter

As I looked to the evening horizon, I saw a hole in the sky. It was confined by storms on each side, and dotted on top with a layer of clouds. It was framed, almost perfectly, like a picture.

Red, yellow, and purple bands of light beamed through. Who is on the other side looking back? Can they see us, our whole selves? Can they see our personal heavens, our personal hells?

I marched toward the hole with a ladder in hand hoping that when I arrived I could climb in. I crossed barley fields, the alpaca farm, bridges over freestone rivers, and pine barrens. I reached the foothills of the Spanish Peaks and from there I climbed.

The trees and vegetation transformed from green to white as I ascended. When I reached the top I saw before me my full life, the good and bad. And, looking back, I saw how insignificant my problems were in the grand scale of things. The world, with or without my worries, went on the same.

I did not find that hole in the sky in physical form. But it was there and it had changed me—I left old, and I came back young and free. In the end, perhaps, it was just a gateway to understanding.

Will you find that hole in the sky and by what manner will you deliver yourself to it? Stepstool or rocket ship, or something in between? Will you leave behind your anger and the things that hurt, or will you mistakenly leave your goodwill and dreams? I hope you come back with the things that make you only better.

Those colors are still there, waiting. Can you see them?

Leaves

Jan Kaneen

Stumbling outside toward the sunset, tear-blind and lost in the aftermath of you, when the face-slap colours startle me back, way too intense for deep midwinter.

I lift my chin to the fiery sky where a naked sycamore claws at the crimson its twig-sticky fingers scratching the sun, telling your tale in dry-tipped semaphore. Tap-tap-tap, the sun, too hot. Tap-tap-tap, burned itself free.

I sigh out loud in powdery pools, my gaze sinking to the leafy footpath where piles and piles of brittle vermillion lie crisp and haunted, or sugared white, and suddenly, suddenly I find myself stamping - crunching and stamping like the child I was, dancing and laughing like me before you.

Christ in the House of Martha and Mary

Fiona J. Mackintosh

Eyes wet and sore from chopping onions, I pound the garlic in the pestle. The sauce needs more flavour, and the fish won't cook themselves. The man in the blue robe is still talking, and Mary sits at his feet, gazing up at his face like he's the Lord God himself. What is it in his words that she drinks like a draught of wine? Mother's too old to do more than scold from her place by the fire. "You must break the eggs with care, Martha, or the whites will taint the yolks." As if I haven't known this since my eyes were only as high as this table.

When I heard the prophet had come to Bethany, I hurried into the street and asked him to step inside our house for refreshments. We do not often see such men as him, and he looked footsore and weary besides. Mary brought him a chair and a goblet of well water, and I began to prepare him a fine meal, kneading the dough for the bread and salting the fish.

Meeting the needs of the body is the greatest gift a woman can give. I watched my mother tend to our father and brothers, and as Mary and I grew, we became her helpers. Mary used to grumble, and more than once she ran from the house so she wouldn't have to bathe their blackened feet when they came in from the fields. Mother found her hiding among the goats and smacked her hard around the ear. Mary wailed, "How is it our lot to serve these good for nothing men?"

"Good for nothing?" Mother shouted, "Do you not see how the sun burns them and the sweat falls from their brow? Do you think we'd have this food to eat without their labours?"

"Then send me to the fields. I'll die of it if you keep me chained here to this women's toil."

One night in our bed she told me she'd rather know how to read and write the words we speak than learn how to skin and roast a goat. "Words can lead us to a better world, sister," she said, and I told her, "A world without a banked hearth and a full stomach doesn't seem much worth having."

And now this man is here keeping her from her work. I wipe my eyes with the corner of my sleeve and go to interrupt his sermon. He turns to look at me, and I see he has not touched the dates and figs I have laid out for him to eat. Why would he not accept this small mark of hospitality? He claims to be the keeper of the

flock of men, yet he seems to care little for those who wish to serve his needs.

"Sir, I ask you, how can it be right for Mary to leave me to do all the work of the kitchen by myself? We have many mouths to feed, and a meal must be prepared. Shouldn't you tell her to help me?"

He takes my hand in his, gently touching the calluses with his finger. His eyes are kind, though he is thin in the face and sorely needs a good dinner.

"Martha, Martha," he answers, "You are worried and troubled by many things, but only one thing is needed, which Mary has chosen and should not be taken away from her. She has chosen to use her mind to serve the Lord. Man cannot live by bread alone, but every word of God will feed our souls. Come and sit by us and listen."

Mary draws me down beside her. It feels good to rest, to take the weight off my legs for a moment. As the prophet speaks to us of the love of the Father and life everlasting, I try to lose myself in contemplation of his words, but when I hear Mother snoring by the fire, I can't help but grieve for the fishes charring to ashes on the spit.

Beached

Philippa Holloway

How do you pick up an octopus?

The sand is wet, concrete hard, the rippled ridges from the outgoing tide stiff enough to turn an ankle. Miles of it stretching out either side and the grey water retreating towards a steel horizon, and I'm alone with salt wind in my eyes. The question surfaces without expectation of an answer. It's a question for me, barely whispered.

The octopus is a huge orange tangle a few feet beyond the lapping water. Already the gulls are circling.

The dog approaches again, creeps in, sniffs, cannot file the smell as anything other than alien and therefore a threat, and jumps back again. He yaps, *danger! danger!* Then he's distracted by the gulls and gallops off.

I stand still, staring at the octopus, at its deflated mantle and the two golf-ball eyes closed aside its head, the inert swirl of its tentacles, silted and mucky. The tide is going out, and with it the chances of survival. I crouch, can see the saltwater draining from the sand, the sun and wind already making dust of the peaks. It's drying out. Its rubber skin will harden, and any spark of life will be snuffed by the sunshine.

But how do you pick up an octopus?

I get up, circle it, try to gauge its size. If it were tiny, I could cup it in my palms and take it a few steps to the waves. I'd even wade in deep, let my shoes fill up and jeans become sodden to give it a chance, to see it bloom and flex in the water. But this beast is too big for cupped hands, too big for arms even. Each leg, I guess, is four or five feet long if unknotted and stretched, the head and mantle the size of a floor cushion. I walk around it, stepping carefully so as not to tread on a suckered tip.

Alone, even if I could bear its weight, I could not contain its form. It would slip, tipping through a gap in my grasp, between elbow and armpit maybe, weight shifting. Any attempt to contain one limb would cause another to slide free, slapping my ankles, tripping me. And that's if it doesn't move.

I scan the beach again for someone to share the responsibility. If I had walked the other way, if I had thought the orange mass to be rubbish, a nest of fishing line

or a stranded buoy and ropes, I'd have walked right past at a distance and this would not be my problem. But now it is. I'm snagged by the situation, culpable if I leave.

There is no one else close enough to summon. A lone walker has appeared about half a mile or more upwind, their dog also chasing gulls, but when I stand and wave like a mad thing, like one of the offshore wind turbines on the horizon with arms wheeling in the wind, they don't even wave back. They are walking away, getting smaller, and this creature at my feet is demanding attention.

I stride away a few paces to see how it feels to leave it, and my stomach cramps. My mouth fills with saliva and bitter guilt. My brain races with images of wheelbarrows, of wet blankets and a team of people in polo-shirts with a charity logo emblazoned on the breast. Something reassuring, like a leaping dolphin, cartoonish and smiling. I pull out my phone and start scrolling for animal rescue charities, sea-life centres, and the signal dips and disappears, comes back again and then flits away. I walk further away, and my chest tightens. Thumbing the screen, the dog dancing around my ankles. It's Sunday. I click on a link and hear two distant rings, then the signal cuts again.

All of this might be a waste, I realise, if the octopus is already dead. I stand on a teetering branch of driftwood and lift my phone high, ask it with chilled fingers how to tell if an octopus is dead, and sunlight dazzles me. A headline on the search says it could survive for up to sixty minutes out of water, but the page won't load. It must be twenty minutes or more already.

Back at its side I crouch and reach out a tentative finger, touch the jelly head and seek out signs of movements, of breathing. It flinches. The sea has retreated further away, and I'm running out of time, but can't just walk away. No. In the quivering sides and gentle coil of it, there is life, and I'm as trapped here as it is.

I wonder if I can drag it, shudder at the thought of a leg stretching and snapping, a noise that could only be a scream, or that maybe only the dog could hear, but that I'd feel through its skin. But I have to do something, at least until someone else comes along and I can trap them here with me, demand they assist.

I crouch and start to dig. Make a moat around it at first, then push my hands deeper underneath to make a pool. The water seeps in as the creature sinks, and my back aches with the effort. I kneel and soak my jeans, but keep digging, until I'm lying down and my shoulder is pressed into the sand, both arms underneath the cold wet rubber of it. I can feel its weight, and the tentacles curl and respond. We are both in this pit, but at least it's buying some time. I slither out, stand up

and stand back. I am thirsty and sore and my eyes sting with frustration, but I still can't leave. I know the water will drain away as the tide retreats.

So I do the only thing left. I walk to the waves and cup my hands, carry the trickling gift back to the pool, and pour. Back and forth, waiting for the tide to turn.

The Bear

Dave Gregory

I hallucinate. You know that. My episodes began with a few chili peppers hanging from the ceiling. I stood and reached up. You asked what I was doing. “Trying to get a pepper,” I said, while you watched with fascination, telling me I was dreaming and nothing was there.

But something was there, right up until I grabbed a tiny red jalapeño and it vanished in my hand.

There have been many apparitions throughout my seventies. Faces pressed against the window, looking in, watching television with us. Relatives rising through the floor and asking for a beer. Dogs curled under the kitchen table.

Sightings are so frequent you don’t raise an eyebrow anymore. I’ll ask, “Can you honestly say you don’t see a skunk sniffing the fruit bowl on the counter?” You’ll sink into your magazine, determined not to look, and try to convince me I’m smelling the pickled eggs I ate earlier.

These waking dreams should scare me but they don’t. If someone were to peek in the window or rise through the floor, I’d leap through the roof. My heart, if not all of me. That’s how I know they aren’t real: I’m calm. I invite them in, get the beer, shoo the skunk away. I only have to turn and see you deliberately focused on your magazine, avoiding me, to know I’m having another delusion.

Each vision is different, except one: the bear.

My bladder can’t last the night, or even half, so whenever I get up, the bear is waiting in the hallway. He smells of cedar and honey. All I see is his big furry behind, wide as the hall and taller than the doorknobs. I step toward him and he takes one step forward, then looks back to make sure I’m following. That’s when I see his face and the light in his eyes. He winks. I’m close enough to touch but never do. I take another step, he takes another step. He looks at me again and nods. I nod too. That goes on for ten paces, until I get to the bathroom. I stop there but the bear keeps going without looking back. He walks to the end of the dark hall, then climbs the white, slatted, linen closet door. In silence, he effortlessly disappears through the ceiling.

If I get up a second time, the bear is there again. Gentle and protective, he leads me to the bathroom before scaling the wall, up to the sky.

Doctors can't explain my hallucinations but I have a few guesses.

The four specialists I visit and the twenty-seven pills they prescribe are taking their toll. None of them help. My back hurts so bad I can't bend. I can't even wipe. Diabetes restricts my circulation, so I can't feel my feet. Surely some pill interacts with another to make my brain flip and spasm, and the dreams project onto my pupils like a feature film.

The injection in my eye every month is also suspect. I see a kaleidoscopic burst of sparks when the syringe slips in. All that energy reforms into outlandish images. I wish I'd never mentioned the dark spot in my vision. If poking my eyeball helps at all, I can't tell. As a kid, the worst thing imaginable was sticking a needle in your eye. Cross my heart, hope to die.

But most likely, my mind is breaking down, fading like my vision. The line between waking and sleeping is as blurry as shapes in the distance. That's why my hallucinations only come at night, when I'm dozing in front of the television or lying in bed.

You think I'm half-crazy but I need to convince you of my sanity and sobriety. I don't have a long time left. We both know. My dad died at sixty-five, his brother at fifty-six. Here I am almost eighty, way past my best-before date.

Nothing could be more peaceful than dying in my sleep beside you, but it won't be that way. These visions never reveal the future but I know exactly how I'll go.

The bear will be there, leading me down the hallway. For once, for the first and only time, I won't stop at the bathroom. Naked, my toes sinking into the ivory carpet, I'll follow that bear all the way down the hall.

You'll wake and find my side of the bed empty and cold. When I don't answer your call, you'll turn on the light and get out of bed. From the doorway, you'll see me slumped and facing the linen closet, expired but upright, on my knees, wedged into the corner.

Don't scream, don't even worry, just know that I followed the bear. I reached out and took hold as he climbed the closet door. My body collapsed but my spirit, my soul, or some effervescent part of me, nestled into that long, brown, lustrous fur and hung on for the ride. I let the bear carry me through the ceiling, across the sky, high into the heavens.

Souvenir de Porto Rico

A K Scotland

I'm not sure there's ever a good time to find out your grandmother's a drug dealer. But if there is, I can confidently say it's not while they're swinging open the door to the cremation furnace and sliding her inside.

'Black tar heroin,' my cousin, Benny, stage-whispers.

The door slams closed with a shudder.

'And lots of it.'

I allow my eyes to glaze as the fire licks the casket. In the blistering dance, a cloven-hoofed creature with a pitchfork drags sweet Peggy Finneran to her eternal damnation.

Tinny and distant, Gottschalk's 'Souvenir de Porto Rico' plinks through the crematorium's speaker system. Suddenly, it's Christmas Eve 1995.

The fire crackles. There are real chestnuts, and a mug of cocoa with one white marshmallow and one pink one, bobbing like flotsam in a churning, chocolate sea.

The adults are talking in low whispers. Arguing. I can't hear what they're saying.

Nan tiptoes in to kiss me goodnight.

'Benny told me Santa isn't real,' I say. My voice cracks, though I hadn't meant it to.

'I'll go him one better…' she replies, smoothing the crisp white sheets under my chin. She cups my face in her hand and her milky eyes search mine. She's a homesick traveller and my innocent eyes are a speck on the horizon.

'Neither am I.'

Three Reasons Why Killer Whales Kill Porpoises But Don't Eat Them

Rosaleen Lynch

Orca is a big guy, knows his business, no mistaking him for anything other than the killer he is. And he likes letting you know. He'll play around at first. Make you laugh. Poke at you. And you might startle, but he'll convince you he's only messing about, not to take it seriously. It's learnt behaviour, the environment he grew up in. He says his dad taught him everything. How to get his own way. Be the Alpha male. Not gaslight. He's upfront about it. Says it like it is. And what it is, as his Dad warns, is that he's part of a dying breed. He's got to play and dominate the field, stay top of the food chain. Orca kills it as a killer.

Orca is a smart guy, goes out on the hunt, hones his skills, learns to bait traps, hide, wait for prey. Then strikes, makes his move, and you're caught in the wave. Practice makes perfect, his dad says. When you go fishing, catch 'em but throw them back. Watch them swim off, none the worse for wear. Maybe a little bruised, but bruises heal. Maybe in a little pain from the hook piercing the cheek's skin, but pain passes. Maybe a little tired from the fight, but alive. Orca won't leave them alive, but won't eat them either. Orca is not an animal.

Orca is a caring guy, tries to give the love he wanted when he was small to something smaller than him. Tries to protect you. Keep you safe. Away from others. Even if you don't want it. He knows what's best and does what's best for you. Knows you're not a kid, but he's bigger. No point putting up a fight. He won't stop until you stop fighting back. Orca will always love you, no matter what.

Still Life

David Cook

In 1976, following a dare from her friend Sharon, Marianne had slipped into the window of Forte's, the fashionable department store in the centre of town. From the mannequins there she'd borrowed a pair of sunglasses, a floppy-brimmed hat, and a brooch to zhuzh up her sundress, and she'd simply stood, unmoving and resolute, for the rest of the day.

Marianne had always loved people-watching, so boredom didn't set in. She concocted life stories for each passer-by: the scruffy-looking chap in the cheap chinos over there was really a spy; the two older ladies on the bench outside the ice-cream parlour were secret lovers; the young man with the goatee picking his nose and eating it was a secret millionaire. She became so absorbed that somehow she hadn't noticed the shop had closed and she'd been locked in. Sharon, typically enough, hadn't come back to find her. In fact, though Marianne went on to stand in that shop window for decades and watch thousands of passers-by, she never saw Sharon again.

The following morning, when Forte's opened at 9am sharp, Marianne had been too embarrassed to reveal herself (for how could she explain?) so she ended up staying another day, watching people stroll past and enjoying the warmth of the sunshine through the glass. And, as she liked it so much and had little to go home for – only a mother and father who were entirely disinterested in their quiet, bright young girl and were desperate to marry her off as soon as possible – she stayed yet another day after that, then another and another. The days bled into weeks and months, and summer morphed into autumn, winter, spring and back again. At night she'd wash in the staff toilets, snack on whatever was left over in the office kitchen, and snooze on one of the sofas in the furniture section on the top floor. Then, come morning, she'd be back in position again. The staff never seemed suspicious. She even sometimes heard the store manager boasting to one underling or another that she knew about 'everything that goes on in this shop'. If she wasn't being observed at these moments, Marianne would roll her eyes and permit herself a grin.

When a new season came along, one of the shop girls would change Marianne's outfit, for which she was always grateful. It was a delight to be draped in posh

clothes that she'd never have been able to afford in her previous life. Expensive cocktail dresses, ballroom gowns, chiffon scarves, business suits, she loved them all, although there were some outfits she preferred not to recall. Mostly from the 1980s.

The stores in the town centre changed as rapidly as the fashions. Other clothing emporia came and went. A toy shop opened in her direct line of sight for a number of years, and watching so many sticky, wailing, wanting children and their harassed, tetchy parents didn't make Marianne regret her life choices one bit. Then there was the electrical store with all the TVs in the window showing the news and sport. She'd been sad when that closed, for it had allowed her to keep up with current events. Then came a rush of fast food establishments, followed by charity shops, pawn shops, and, finally, many shops that shuttered and simply never reopened at all. The metal grates across their windows soon became festooned with graffiti in the sort of crude language and cruder spelling that made Marianne, by then in her sixties, wonder what they were teaching young people in school these days.

Then came the end. One drizzly autumn day at around noon, the entire staff of Forte's assembled in front of Marianne's window. Several sobbed heavily and were comforted by their colleagues. There was a click. The lights all around the store switched off abruptly. Then there came the noise of the front door being slammed and locks clicking into place. The store manager appeared and approached the glass. She looked at each of the abandoned mannequins in turn. She left Marianne until last. She gazed at her for a second or two longer than the others. Then she winked at her, reached for the metal shutter above the window and yanked it down with finality.

Marianne was left alone, plunged into shadow. She'd played a mannequin for so long that she felt compelled to stay rooted to the spot for another hour before she eventually turned to face the looming presence of the empty store behind her. She ran her fingers over piles of abandoned clothing and looked at her fellow mannequins, who looked back at her stoically, far more stoically than Marianne felt right now. Tears nibbled the corners of her eyes. A fire exit sign, once neon bright but now the dull green of dying grass, was affixed to the back wall.

Weeks later, a pack of labourers turned up to clear out the store. One of them, much older than most of the others, had a goatee and picked his nose as he worked. Together they gathered armfuls of clothes and threw them carelessly into bin bags, and dismantled the fixtures and fittings with much clattering and banging. They had no idea that one of the mannequins had disappeared. The others gazed into nowhere. They were covered in dust.

Coda

Electra Rhodes

It's the finale of Dad's life, and he's noting down birds, still composing dude-lists after ninety-something years.

Keeping score from frost-rimed staves, he conducts each evening's melody:

Blackbird;
Robin;
Starling;
Thrush.

Maybe the quartet's dusk-dense serenades overture fiddlesome arrangements.

But, perhaps, they're just rehearsals for this dip-out birder's swan-song.

The World is on Fire

Tamara Lebron

“Luisa, a donde vas?” The summer air is thick and feels heavy on the bare skin. But this does not bother Luisa. She runs across the street, where demolished buildings and the rubble of fallen bricks and broken, discarded television sets plague her neighborhood. She ignores her mother. She carefully makes her way through the debris while her mother’s voice becomes a cry in the distance. She looks back at her mother’s silhouette. A shadow of a small, thin woman.

Her mother, questioning Luisa’s muliebrity, surrenders and goes back into the dark, solitary apartment building. Luisa is not like the other girls. She is hard to tame; rather than play with dolls, she prefers to run with the boys.

Luisa treks forward, bouncing from brick mound to brick mound like a skilled hiker. She’s a native of this wasteland and knows no other place. The mid-morning sun reflects off the top of the carcass of a smashed-up Chrysler, whose parts have been ravaged by hungry scavengers.

As her mother watches the news on the color television set that her brother-in-law gave her last week, Louisa ducks behind the car to watch Pedro and his friends jump off the fire escape of an abandoned building onto a pile of moldy mattresses. Once they land, one of his friends, the taller of the three, grabs a brick and tosses it as far as he can. It lands with a thud, and he clutches another one. The other boy is chasing stray cats.

The newscaster reports on the latest fires in the dilapidated Bronx, and Louisa’s mother stops her daily routine to listen, clasping her withered fingers together with hope for change.

Meanwhile, Luisa remains fixated on Pedro, who sits down on a pile of discarded wooden planks. He looks pensive. She admires Pedro's reddish-brown skin. His shaggy brown bangs loll straight across his forehead. She gathers the courage to approach him. “Hey.”

Pedro glares at Luisa, his brows furrowed. She stands between the sun and him, waiting for a response. “Do you think the whole world is on fire?” He replies.

Luisa shrugs her shoulders and digs in her denim’s pocket. “Gum?”
The temperature is rising as the day moves towards noon, and Pedro accepts her offer by taking the gum from her extended hand. Luisa sits next to him, as he

discards the wrapper carelessly on the rubble. Billows of smoke move across the sun's face, and the acrid smell of fire slowly makes its way towards them. Together, Luisa and Pedro watch the unheeded flames burn in the distance.

Noughts and Crosses

John Holmes

His breath tickled my ears when he whispered: 'You know, I used to be the world champion.'

Grandad put a slightly crooked finger to his lips, as if preventing the cheeky smile from escaping.

His declaration wasn't a great surprise to me. However well I played, he would always beat me. It didn't matter if I was the noughts or the crosses or whether I went first or second. The result was always the same: Definitely world champion stuff.

We played whenever there was a scrap of paper available, his stubby pencil magically appearing from behind his back. Our little scribbled grids could be found on the back of old Morrisons' receipts, corners of newspapers and, when we were really desperate, inside the covers of Grandma's books, stored under the bureau. (Don't tell her). But, wherever the battle took place, Grandad never lost.

'Think straight,' he'd say, shaking his head like a laughing clown.

'Line those crosses up,' he'd advise, crossing his arms like a super hero.

'Focus on the centre.' Then he'd draw a small circle in the middle square adding a couple of dotty, happy eyes and half moon lips.

Today, I forced my eyes to focus on the centre, but I wasn't able to recreate those happy eyes or half moon lips. And I definitely couldn't think straight.

There, lying on top of the freshly turned earth, were two small, floral crosses. Mum, with her shaky hands, had put one down in the middle of the mound. Dad had quickly dropped his near the bottom, not too far from his shiny black shoes. I slowly knelt down, smudging mud onto my new dress and gently lowered my cross in the top left hand corner.

I'd made a winning line!

As we turned and followed the vicar down the moss covered path, I knew this was no victory.

It was the heaviest loss I'd ever suffered.

Grandad would always be my world champion.

Rearrangement

Sandra Arnold

First, the fridge switched itself off and mounds of sludge poured out the door into a decaying heap on the floor. Then the clock stopped ticking and Poppy couldn't find the key to wind it up again. When the switches refused to turn on any lights and the house stayed dark, Poppy had an overwhelming need to sleep.

When she finally got out of bed, after so many days - or was it weeks? - she looked in the mirror and decided some changes were needed. She showered. Popped in her new teeth. Arranged the wig to cover her stringy hair. Adjusted the blue lenses over her cloudy eyes. Pasted on the false eyelashes and the fake lips. Stuck the long silver nails at the end of her fingers. Fastened the push-up bra with wire reinforcement. Yanked the corset to nip in her waist. Then she slithered into the red silk dress and black high heels. She took a step back and twirled in front of the mirror. Snapped a selfie and posted it on Facebook

After giving herself twenty-four hours to count the likes and read the comments, she removed all her adornments, wrapped herself in a warm blanket and limped out into her overgrown garden. She found the hollow tree, climbed in and drifted off to sleep wondering how much gossip would be generated when her friends and neighbours discovered she was missing. Would they call the Police? Her family? She drifted further back, picturing her once beautiful garden, feeling her pride in it, her joy in her children playing hide and seek, the sound of their laughter bouncing from tree to tree. Then the disappearance of her youngest who'd undoubtedly thought it a huge joke to slide to the bottom of a hollow tree so the others wouldn't find him.

Waking to the song of a lone blackbird, she realised she'd lost track of how long she'd been sleeping in the tree. She strained her ears to listen for the ringing of the phone on her desk in the house, the rapping of the brass knocker shaped like a lion on her front door, the shrilling of the doorbell, a Police siren, screeching brakes outside her gate, the clatter of footsteps on her driveway, the consternation in the voices of friends and neighbours calling and calling her name. But there was only silence.

The Icing

Jude Higgins

I'm in my bedroom, listening to Dad's favourite Bob Marley song— 'Three Little Birds.' Mr Sims, Dad's teddy from when he was a boy, lies next to me on the bed. Most of the stuffing has come out of him and he can't sit up straight. Dad was like that when the ambulance took him to hospital.

This morning, I found an earwig in the cream puff Mum bought for me from the bakery. She said she'd get down there and read them the riot act but she had to visit Dad first. I wasn't allowed to go. She gave me a whole packet of Jaffa cakes and asked if I would be okay on my own for a couple of hours. Her eyelid twitched.

I prop up Mr Sims against the pillow.

'What if that earwig had crawled into my ear and laid eggs in my brain?' I say. I'm being silly. Dad told me ages ago earwigs help clean things up in the garden by feeding on what's rotten. They're not interested in ears. I wish I could ask Dad if surgeons are good at cleaning up rot in people's insides.

I play Bob Marley again and sing along about not worrying, while I stroke Mr Sims' poor old bald chest. The stitches Mum tacked over the hole where the stuffing came out are in red cotton and look like blood. I turn him over so I can't see them and eat all the Jaffa cakes.

'Your dad might be a little bit better,' Mum says when she gets back. Her eyelid's still twitching. A week ago the first rose on the bush Dad planted for their tenth wedding anniversary flowered. Mum spent ages sniffing the perfume. When the doctors told her the operation went okay, she said if Dad came out of hospital before the petals dropped on their special white rose, it would be the icing on the cake.

I've been crossing my fingers and inspecting the rose every day but since it's been raining its petals have sagged. I go outside with Mr Sims and take another look while Mum's lying down. A lot of Dad's daisies have fallen flat. Today it's only drizzling but I daren't touch the rose. The petals are just about hanging on, like one of Mr Sim's button eyes, which is dangling by a thread.

Broken Roses

Fiona McKay

You stitch me to your side, opening our flesh with a thin blade so our blood flows. First a trickle, then faster. Quickly you take needles from your mother's work basket, from a yellow cardboard packet arranged into darning, embroidery and sharps. For this job, you always choose sharps. You divide the embroidery floss again and again until you have single threads in a rainbow of colours. You thread your needles and stitch us together in great looping stitches you then pull tight so that we zip together like two sides of a jacket, zipping closed to keep out the cold, to keep in the blood, to keep out the world.

Later, in the hospital, they take us apart, sliding a scalpel between our stitches, cutting us loose from each other so they may clean our wounds; disinfect us from each other, let us heal up and scar, each of us zipped closed with a pink and puckering line of skin that leaves us whole and broken.

We answer questions in a grey cube of a room, bad coffee in polystyrene cups cooling in our hands. Separate rooms, so that we don't answer for each other. You long to get away from there, to get back to me, as I long for you. I stitch together my story using words in place of vibrant silks, closing my eyes; sending a web of silken thoughts to you, so that you might spin your own into flowered words. Eventually, they let us go.

The rising sun sees us vampire-pale and bloodless, staggering through back streets and alleys that bring us home; taking separate routes, but converging, converging, converging.

When we are alone again, you lay out all our tools, all our fine and rough blades, all the needles and the threads. As you cut and slice, I thread up and weave a garden of delights stretching between our bodies with jungle-dense foliage, screeching parrakeets, lilies, amaryllis, birds of paradise. Passing the threads in warp and weft, over and back and all around us, cocooning us in strands of cotton, all the while to hide our scars.

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The Three Dots

Nick Black

Oh my god, we were inseparable. Immediately, from the first read-through. Soul sisters. We shopped together, ate, worked out. We went… the producers wouldn't let us get tattoos, there was a clause, this was thirty odd years ago, remember, but we went ahead and got three tiny dots on the inside of our wrists, whichever hand we wore our watches on, one each for each of us, you can see them in some scenes if you look really close… Went together somewhere off Wilshire before the first season even went to air.

And the boys? On fire! We were family, I'm telling you. Except family you can stand! That's why we're here today, right? To remember… Well, we all adored him. The second he walked through that rehearsal room door. We all knew. You don't meet talent like that… and such a huge heart! Too big a heart. Too big a soul.

I was the most famous of us before the show. I'd done that video… Anyway, it didn't matter, we were all… So close. It was exciting! A brand new show, a young, good-looking cast, great time slot. We three girls, it was like 'Charlie's Angels', there was one of us for everyone, whatever your tastes, and the guys, they were so funny… Everyone had high hopes for it, the scripts were great, they brought in a director who'd worked on, what?, so many classic shows… And all six of us, put us in a room, we never stopped laughing, and the crew… I don't know how anything got filmed.

And then, you know, we aired.

And the media, they just… what's the word? Fixated. They utterly fixated… It was like some of us on the show didn't even exist, I mean we existed, but all they wanted to talk about was the Hair, and the figure, the… And yes, I guess it did change things. You know? All those magazine covers. All those chat shows. How could it not? Before the end of the first season even, there were offers of pay increases, because everyone wanted more of the Hair, and the figure, the rest of us… And we had less time to hang out after shooting, the three of us, because… It can't have been easy for her. Or for any of us.

Yes, we ran for years and of course…. The boys had it easier. No-one cared so much if their weight ballooned or suddenly dropped off, or if they had bad days.

They probably should have, huh? My mother had a way of putting it. Every woman, she'd say, has their time in the window frame, moving across it, you know, one side to the other, left to right, whatever. Some get to move slower than others. Some zip across like their tush is on fire. Once you're out of the frame, though, that's it, nobody sees you. Um... Did I mind that people said I looked middle-aged and dowdy by season...? Really, that's your question? I didn't even...

People said that?

Of course, what's happened is... a tragedy. A tragedy! None of us would have... I mean we all knew there were issues, it wasn't exactly a secret, but this.... Have you spoken to any of the others?

Oh.

You have? Already? You've spoken to.... But I was his onscreen wife, I... We did more scenes together than... Seriously, you've....? Right.

I think...

I'm sorry, this is a very emotional time. I...

Still?!!

...

