

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XVII, Issue II

August 2020

Table of Contents

Raymond Lane, "An Unopened Letter to Shirley"	2
Anna Pisarka, "Pająk"	4
Sarah Boisvert, "The Donation"	5
Neil Fulwood, Two Poems	10
Karen Schauber, "What a Babe"	11
E. Laura Goldberg, "Substitution"	12
Jeffrey Kulik, "Backdoor Pilot"	13
Riley Wood, "The Sample Man"	19
Stephanie Gibbon, "On the Needles"	20
Kathryn Pratt Russell, "Cures for the 1918 Flu"	28
Karen Walker, "Dead Match"	30
Chester Onion, "Rated R"	32
Joy Kennedy-O'Neill, "The Mistake Hoarder"	33
Carla Sarett, Two Poems	36
Daniel Winn, "Freshman Year Did Not Go Well"	37
Contributor Biographies	39

All content is © copyright their respective authors.

An Unopened Letter to Shirley
by
Raymond Lane

Dear Shirley:

I hope that this letter finds you well. My apologies for using such an archaic form of communication, but as you know Earth has yet to join the intergalactic web.

I have missed you very, very much. My therapist suggested that I write to you. She says that I have unresolved grief, as well as other feelings that have been frozen in time.

A lot of this is my own fault, I suppose. I was only sixteen when we met. You were eighteen. My feelings for you were raw and frightening. With my therapist's help, I'm getting better at verbalizing them.

There's something that I need to tell you. When we were together on Earth, I fell in love with you.

I don't know if that surprises you.

As I write this, I'm reliving the first time I saw you. I was new to your planet, and looking for work. You checked my blood pressure at the pre-employment physical. I'd never seen blue eyes like yours--the color of diamonds on my planet, Proxima. And then you opened your oral cavity, revealing ivory teeth gleaming as brilliantly as the ancient relics of Drusen. You asked my name, then laughed when I told you. I never knew I was funny before.

We spent only one night together, but it changed my life. The way you stroked my fur provoked previously unknown feelings in me. I knew then that you were meant to be my mate.

I realize that our joining was awkward. My sexual output organ didn't fit properly within your input receptacle. It's bothered me all these years, wondering if you left me because of that. We didn't talk about it then. I wish that we had.

I want you to know that the mismatch wasn't important to me. I loved you anyway.

When you told me the next day that you couldn't see me again I was too shattered to tell you how I felt. Staying quiet, I've since learned, was also a way to punish you. To hurt you for being so cold, even by Proxima standards. And Proxima is a very cold planet, indeed.

I'm sorry that I ran away. I was just a child. It was too painful for me to be on the same planet as you—what if we'd run into each other?

I have thought of you constantly since then. There is a hollowness in my heart as vast and arid as the polar deserts of Proxima. My therapist tells me I need closure.

I still love you.

My therapist said I shouldn't tell you that.

On Proxima, we don't touch until we've mated. And we mate for life.

By my calculation, you would be one hundred and nine years old now. It's possible that you may no longer be alive, earthlings being short-lived organisms. It's also occurred to me—painful as the thought is—that you may have mated with another human and produced offspring.

If one of Shirley's offspring is reading this letter, please send me a photo.

Affectionately,

Zolthazen

Pająk
by
Anna Pisarka

A lazy glance up from the keyboard and I meet the eight eyes of doom.
Fuck.

My thoughts slip out from underneath me,
Two legs worthless against the icy battlefield of nature.

The sounds of the world amplify,
As my blue-screen-dulled senses kick themselves awake.
Primal instincts seize command,
As I size-up the atrociously unsuspecting beast in its prowl.

I lean forward—*no!*
I creep back, and the creature jerks,
Suddenly alert to the battlefield we're on—*no!*
I'm frozen in place, made minuscule by an insect invader.

I had just pried open the window for a gasp of crisp air—
Not but a few heartbeats ago!
The slutty glass parted wide and had seduced in the enemy.
Traitor.

If one could hear the whispers of the gods,
Senses blade-sharp, honed to each wrinkle of the curtains,
They would sound like eight legs on polyester drapes,
As the emblem of fear breaches your homeland.

Time to end this.
I clench my fists, sticky with chemical-orange cheese.
A lightning glance for weapons of war.
But no shoes in sight—the armory is lacking.

A draw a dusty discarded book,
Sweat and cheese staining the unfamiliar cover.
Itches charging across my skin-
Every brush and touch an invasion of crooked legs and glinting eyes.

I draw my weapons—
Breath skittering—
Drumbeats of war rocking my chest—
I aim to fire—
But I must hurry before it's—

Gone.

The Donation
by
Sarah Boisvert

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," Pastor Pete said as he placed his hand on my son's head, the baby reached for his Christian fish necklace as it dangled over him. My husband, Joe, and I smiled at each other. It was our only child's baptism. Joe and I weren't exactly devout but we decided we would start going to church, a sort of tradition for our new son. The baby began to fuss as water rolled over his fuzzy little head, washing over my hand, cleansing me of my sins as well.

We walked down the aisle to clapping hands as we showed off the newest member of the congregation. Everyone smiled, congratulating us as we made our way back to our seat. We squished and pardoned between the churchgoers, there wasn't an empty seat in the house.

A man in a grey suit came to the end of our pew with a silver collections plate as the people sang. When the dish made its way to us, Joe got his wallet out and removed a \$20 dollar bill. He placed the bill in the dish and then took out a \$10 dollar bill that was on top and put it in his wallet, then passed the dish back to the man in the suit.

"Are you nuts?" I whispered through clenched teeth, smiling. The woman next to us watched him then whispered to her spouse, who was now leaning forward to watch also. The man in the suit cleared his throat as he continued on to the pew behind us.

"What?" Joe asked, completely oblivious.

"You can't make change out of the collection plate."

"I wasn't giving a whole \$20 bill," he said.

"You cheap-ass, they just kept your child from going to hell. I think that's worth at least twenty dollars," I said as the singing stopped and my voice echoed up to the ceiling. I smiled politely as the people turned around.

"Well what do you want me to do now, go put the other \$10 bill back in?" He asked.

"No forget it, it's too late," I said shaking my head.

Once they finished passing the collection plate the music began again, we stumbled to our feet when we noticed everyone around us was already standing, looking down at us arguing.

It was time for the sermon.

"Proverbs 19:17. Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done," the pastor began. He then went on to explain how it is our 'Christian duty' to help the poor and serve others. I elbowed Joe in the ribs.

"He's looking right at us," I whispered to Joe out of the side of my mouth. Joe's eyes were closed so he hadn't noticed. He received another elbow to the ribs.

"Would you please look interested in what he's saying," I demanded under my breath. He let out a yawn and rubbed his eyes.

The pastor continued.

"It takes a lot of money to run this church. People don't take into account all the things we pay for here. For instance, even just to air condition this building today so we can worship comfortably is incredibly expensive. We have an open door policy, and it's through donations that we can make this a place where we can worship together, without judgment. We have people come in who want to get married, or to have their child baptized, who we may never see again. All those things take money." Joe and I glanced at each other.

The following Sunday I had to beg Joe to get out of bed.

"Ugh do we have to go today, babe? It was so awkward last week. I don't think they like us," he whined.

"They don't even know us. And yes we have to go. Don't you remember what he said last week about the baptism and people not coming back. That was directed at us. Now get your ass out of bed, we're going to be good Christians."

"Ugh fine."

We snuck in late and sat in the back, trying to go unnoticed as Pastor Pete took to the podium to start the sermon.

"As you all know the fellowship breakfast yesterday was a huge success. We actually had more people than we expected to break bread together in joint fellowship. So we're going to ask for you all to dig a little deeper in your pockets this week." Pastor Pete said.

This week I planned ahead and got \$1 bills and bunched them together so when I put it in the dish there was a little more padding.

"We're all so fortunate here, we can really afford to do better for those less fortunate," he continued as the man in the suit made his way to us with the collection plate.

I slowly dropped the wad of cash in, making sure everyone saw how altruistic I was.

As the collection plate made its way back to the front Pastor Pete did something I hadn't seen before. He counted the money in front of the congregation.

"We can really do better than this," he chastised. "I'm asking one member of each family to come up and give just a little bit more. Think about all those people we are helping."

The homeless man next to us pulled out the contents of his pant's pocket: a button, a quarter, and bus token. He went up to give the quarter. I reached for my purse and got my emergency \$20 bill. Joe cringed.

"Here, go bring this up," I said.

"No way, you do it. I'm not going up there."

"I'm holding the baby," I said.

"Well it's actually the baby's fault, so he should be the one going up there."

"Ugh," I said as I handed him the baby. I struggled to step over Joe's legs, knocking people in the head in front of us and nearly falling into the aisle, people turned around to see what the fuss was about.

I dropped the bill in the plate slowly, for emphasis. The pastor nodded in approval.

"Ok very good. I'm very proud of you all and God would be too." He motioned to the two men in the suits to unlock the back doors. I didn't even know they had locked them.

"Babe, I'm serious I really don't want to go. It was weird and creepy," Joe pleaded with me the following Sunday.

"Yeah last week was a bit much with the locked doors and stuff," I said. "Let's go out to breakfast instead."

"Yesss," he exclaimed and threw the baby up into the air, the baby squealing with delight.

That afternoon we were enjoying a lazy Sunday, letting our breakfast digest, when the phone rang. We looked at each other across the room. I felt the sweat begin to bead on my forehead. The baby began crying in his crib.

"Who's calling us on a Sunday?" Joe asked me. I picked up the phone, hesitantly.

"Hello..." I said, my voice cracking.

"Hello, Patricia? This is Nancy, from St. Mark's. We noticed you weren't in church today and I wanted to check in on you. Is everything ok?" I looked at Joe, my eyes widening. He was mouthing to me "who is it?" shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh... uh, yeah... hi... the baby wasn't feeling well so we stayed home."

"Oh I'm very sorry to hear that. I'll be praying for him to feel better and for you all to safely return to church next week."

"Thank you, Nancy."

"You're welcome, see you next week," she said sweetly and hung up, the receiver going dead in my hand.

"Ok this is getting weird," I said to Joe.

"I told you I never wanted to go there. This is all your fault," Joe said pointing at me.

"Excuse me! I'm sorry I just thought it would be good for our son to have some religious beliefs, and, oh I don't know, *not* go to hell."

"Well he's been baptized now so he won't go to hell no matter what he does, so we don't need to worry about that anymore. Now can we please just agree to never go back there?"

"Ok," I agreed.

We received several more phone calls that week before we blocked the number.

The following Sunday we stayed home. Having received no more phone calls, a sense of relief came over us. As the baby napped and Joe lay on the couch I pulled out my computer to do some work. An email from an unknown address glared at me from the inbox, 'What you missed' was written in the subject line. I opened it. It was a breakdown of the sermon that morning. I suddenly had the feeling of eyes on me. I looked over my shoulder. Joe was still asleep on the couch. I looked out the windows. Nothing. I shut the shades. But I couldn't shake the feeling.

A short while later the phone rang. "Don't answer it," I screamed as Joe stirred and reached for the phone.

"Relax babe. We blocked their number, it's not them."

"No it's them. I know it is. They're looking for us. Just please don't."

"Okay, okay. Calm down." We waited for the ringing to stop and then there was a beep, a voicemail. Joe switched it to speaker and let it play.

"Hello Patricia, this is Nancy from St. Mark's. Just checking on you all. We were worried it's been two weeks since we've seen you. See you soon."

"How the hell..." I said looking to Joe. Now he looked scared as well.

The next morning, nervous and tired after a restless night of anxiety, I walked to the mailbox. Thumbing through the bills and flyers I came across a thicker envelope with no writing on the outside. I opened it. It was a series of small donation envelopes with the dates on the corner for every week of the coming year. There was a note attached that read:

Since you are unable to come to church I've included donation envelopes so that you can easily mail your donation directly to the church. They've conveniently been labeled for each week so as to not confuse or miss a week.

*Blessings,
The St. Mark congregation.*

As I looked up I saw a black SUV with tinted windows parked at the end of our dead end street. It peeled out as I ran for the house, locking the doors behind me.

That afternoon I received a message on my *private* Facebook account from the St. Mark's page asking if we were ok and that they were worried about us.

"What do we do? Should we call the cops? I asked Joe, crying.

"And say what Patricia, that our church is concerned about us and asking if there's anything they can do for us. Don't be ridiculous." He was right. There was nothing we could do.

Joe started coming with me to the market. I was too afraid to go anywhere by myself. As we unloaded the groceries one evening I saw the black SUV at the end of our dead end street again. My heart beat against my ribs.

"Babe, it's the SUV again," I yelled to him. As he ran back out all he saw were the taillights through a cloud of dust as the truck pulled away.

We drew the shades and began getting food delivery to avoid going out. Taking shifts, one of us would stay up all night and the other would sleep. We disconnected our phones and canceled all our social media accounts. But there were still sightings of the SUV.

We decided it was best for us to stay at a motel.

We peeked out the curtains, the coast was clear, so Joe pulled the car into the garage. That night, wearing all black, we packed the car in the garage and drove to a motel in a neighboring town. We packed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and non-perishable items so we wouldn't have to leave the motel.

"We made it," Joe said with a sigh of relief as we pulled into the motel parking lot. He went to check us in and I stayed in the car with the baby keeping watch. Joe made his way back to the car, giving me the thumbs up. He got the baby and went up to the room as I unloaded the groceries. I double-checked for anything suspicious but the parking lot was empty. I got out of the car and opened the trunk to get my bag. Just then a black SUV pulled up behind me, two men jumped out. One held my arms behind my back as the other opened the car door. "You're coming with us," the man said.

"What did I do?" I cried.

"You know what you did," he said, his Christian fish necklace twinkled under the street lamp as he pushed me into the backseat.

Two Poems
by
Neil Fulwood

Suitcase Ghazal

Holiday tomorrow: I've got to pack.
A fortnight's break—there's lots to pack.

At least a dozen detective novels
Riddled with serpentine plots to pack.

Deodorants, shaving kit, mouthwash,
Tissues in case I get the snots to pack.

Paracetamol. Alka Seltzers in the event
Of too many vodka shots to pack.

Smart dress, casual dress, jeans, t-shirts,
Pyjamas, slippers—what's not to pack?

In short, everything but the kitchen sink
And the chamber pot to pack.

*

An inner voice 200 miles from home:
"Hey, Neil, guess what you forgot to pack?"

The Fickle Muse

The apple fell on Newton's head.
"Gravity," Sir Isaac said.

Archimedes in the bath:
"Eureka!" as he solved the math.

Poet stares at blank white paper.
Fuckin' nuthin'. Maybe later.

What a Babe
by
Karen Schauber

He stands up erect as she approaches the table. She is a vision of sea breeze and morning glory; her stride, a diaphanous runway walk. Subduing a rising blush, he slides out the upholstered chair and catches a tumble of soft brown curl as she folds into her seat. *What a babe!*

Conversation is easy, peppered with delightful laughs in all the right places. She twinkles, like faerie dust. He suppresses a boyish guffaw.

She's studied in France, travelled throughout Spain, and works at an NGO. Candlelight washes over her porcelain skin—his scorecard is filled.

They study the menu. She gladly follows his lead. It's Mongolian rice, scorched rabbit with beet chips, and warm pear with mint. Sipping wine, he fingers her wrist, playing lightly with her gold chain. She worms her way, lacing her fingers in his.

It was only a few days ago that they met online. Light chit chat and playful banter. And here, now, something is beginning.

The dishes arrive, steaming. They exchange 'Bon Appetit'.

At first, he attributes the noises to simple enjoyment. She must find the meal tasty, to her liking, he tells himself. Her chewing, chomping, slurping, gurgling, is boorish, and loud. She seems unaware. He watches her Hoover the medley into her mouth, wide like a midnight truckstop. Her mandible palpates in slo-mo, lips flapping, teeth gnashing, yeast staining the relationship. Transfixed, he dangles his fork mid-air like a Calder mobile.

For relief, he shifts his gaze to the mural baked into the back wall; a sumptuous but serene garden scene. The soulful deer and her fawn graze quietly among willowy pampas grass, the play of light on the water pool fresh, and alluring.

He turns back to the beauty, as she flicks her long chameleon-like tongue to retrieve a burgundy droplet spilling at the corner of her mouth. She throws the sticky lingual out and wraps it around a tender morsel of rabbit. It disappears faster than the click of a shutter button. The crunch of bone, audible.

He wants proof. He pulls out his iPhone and says, 'CHEESE'. For Instagram, honey. She smiles demurely. A thin shiny tail whips back and forth through clenched teeth, like black licorice.

Substitution
by
E. Laura Goldberg

The white square bowls
with their curved sides
align in the dishwasher
neatly overlapping.

If you put your head
to one side
they look like
the Sydney Opera House.

We couldn't afford the tickets,
wouldn't afford the tour,
so now we slant our heads
and look at dirty dishes.

Backdoor Pilot
By
Jeffrey Kulik

I have always loved the cheerful, expository music that greets me whenever I regain consciousness. It sums up the story of my life in just a few bars, plus it's catchy and easy to remember. I am supposed to pull into my driveway just as the music winds down so I can hop out and pose in the doorway with my family for about ten seconds. Today, however, there was another car in my wife's spot in the driveway. I didn't know how to handle this change.

My wife, Darla, opened the door alone. The music was still playing, so I couldn't hear what she was saying. "What are you doing?" I asked. This is not what we usually did.

"I have a surprise for you!" she trilled as the music ended.

"My bowling ball's back from the shop?"

"Even better than that!"

I thought for a moment. There was nothing that I could draw upon to answer this question. "Aunt Mabel died?"

"No, silly! It's your old navy buddy, Vance!"

"*He* died?"

"No! He's inside!"

Darla opened the door and revealed Vance sitting in my favorite chair. My two boys, Dervis and Gorey, sat huddled around him, hanging on his every word. Our dog, Bobby "Boris" Pickett, Jr. was sitting dutifully at his knee, and our cat, Skids, purred peacefully on his lap. Vance and I locked eyes. "Ricky!" he called out, standing and dropping Skids to the floor with a yowl.

"My god," he said, hugging me a bit too hard. "What's happened to you?" He let me go, poked me in the stomach and made me burp. The audience roared with laughter.

"What's new with you?" I asked him.

In the blink of an eye, his smile disappeared. He looked over at Dervis and Gorey. "Hey, why don't you boys help your mom in the kitchen, huh?"

"Aw, do we have to?" they begged.

I nodded and gestured to the kitchen where several gaffers sat smoking cigarettes, and off they went.

Silent puppets danced on our muted TV screen.

Vance grabbed me by the arm and walked me to our bare wall. Standing inches from the plaster, he spoke in a loud whisper. "You get to a point in life sometimes when you realize you just have to make a change."

"I don't understand," I replied, meaning it.

Vance took a step back. "Well, how could you understand? You've got everything a man could ever want. A beautiful house, a big wife, two electrifying children, an entire dog, a cat that smells like pure pine cleanser..." His voice started breaking up. I could see a tear forming in the corner of his eye. "Ricky. I left Roxanne."

He waited a beat for me to say something. There was an awed hush in the room. "But you seemed so happy together."

"Things change, Ricky. Sometimes, things just change."

Darla ducked out of the kitchen and asked, "Are you boys ready for dinner?"

Vance quickly composed himself and spun around. "You betcha!"

I was so confused.

Our table was a cornucopia of waxy food, our conversation rife with pointed one-liners with plenty of pauses for laughs. Sure, we all sat on the same side of the table and none of us actually swallowed our food, but that was all part of our nightly routine. "Did I ever tell you kids we used to call your father Crispy?" Vance asked, playfully.

"Crispy?" my two boys repeated with delight.

"I hope you all saved room for dessert!" Darla announced, walking back into the kitchen to fetch us a big, warm plate of figs that had been chemically coated with varnish so as not to congeal under our intensely hot lights. Just then, the doorbell rang.

Opening the door, I was greeted by an unfamiliar young woman, soaked from rain, makeup smeared and runny. "I'm sorry, I must look a mess!"

"Susie!" Vance said, running over to embrace her. "I'm so glad you made it."

"Ricky? This is Susie Miner. My fiancée."

Applause. I stopped, grinned an uncomfortable grin, and stared at the blank wall for a specific amount of time. In fact, we all stood still for three minutes and forty-five seconds, signifying nothing.

This was the time when the well-spoken men and women who described products did their work. Classic rock riffs blared as shiny, new trucks overtook muddy hills. Voices read off the side-effects of different medications in quick, staccato bursts. Somewhere, there was a boat show going on.

After we burst back to life, Darla pushed through the swinging kitchen doors carrying her tray of spiced treats. "Soup's on!" she trilled, before noticing dripping wet Susie Miner standing there. "Who might this be?"

"Darla? This is..." Vance began. The audience shifted in their seats.

"Oh, where are my manners?" Darla interrupted, putting the tray down. "Here, dear, let me get that wet coat. Take off those wet shoes and dry them on the new shoe warmer that Ricky rigged up. Please?"

Susie Miner obliged and handed over her coat. Darla pulled the starter cord on the shoe warmer, which she'd never quite mastered. "Just a minute," she said. "I've got this."

"Darla, what I've been trying to tell you is..."

"Hold on," Darla said, pulling the cord with all her might. Finally, with a great blast, the shoe warmer chugged to life, its coils burning hot red. Darla, still on her knees, began removing Susie's shoes with an obscenely long shoehorn.

"Darla, this is my fiancée, Susie."

Darla froze. She stood up slowly. "This? This is your fiancée?"

"Darla, please," I pled.

"Oh, no. Fine! Of course," Darla rambled. "I mean, in this day and age, a man is certainly entitled. Who am I to judge?"

Darla ran back into the kitchen without saying another word.

"Is she OK?" Susie asked, unfazed.

"She just needs a little time to process all this," I assured them. "Why don't you go on up to the washroom and get cleaned up?"

My two boys held the figs up to their mouths, then quietly pocketed them, showing great digital dexterity. They made me so proud. Did I mention our house had no toilet?

Vance and I walked out onto the front porch. For some reason that night, the outdoors seemed flat, almost painted on.

"Vance, how old is that girl?"

"Sure, she's a couple of years younger than me, but I love her, Ricky. She makes me feel alive! Here, look at this ink," he said, rolling up his sleeve to show me a *Garfield Hates Mondays* tattoo on his right forearm. "Would the old Vance have done *this*?"

I examined his arm. "Well, the old Vance probably would have spelled Garfield right. And Mondays."

He snatched back his arm and rolled up his sleeve while the audience roared with delight. The joke had been a nice release for them after the particularly heavy scene that preceded this. "You don't understand. This isn't about her. It's about me. I'm trying to get back all that life I missed living!"

I walked to the corner of the porch. Vance put his arm around me, and we stared out into the night. "You're right, Vance. I don't understand."

"Ricky, I've got a new job at a radio station in San Diego. I'm starting over. And one day, maybe you will understand."

After the kids had cleaned up the mess from the old fig switcheroo, I set up Vance on the couch, and tucked him in with a gentle kiss to the forehead. I knew Darla wouldn't want them sleeping in the same bed under our roof. I turned off the lights and cranked up the gas just enough to get a little buzz, then made my way upstairs. I sneaked past the guestroom where Susie was talking in her sleep about killing Vance for his money and retired to my own bedroom just as Darla was fitting her wig for her weekly Natalie Wood routine. I was all keyed up to see some of those patented gyrations when Darla tossed off the wig and pressed her face against our bedroom mirror. Clearly, there was something on her mind.

"What's wrong?"

"Can you believe Vance?" she asked, turning to the blank wall of our bedroom. "Cavorting around with a girl half his age."

I patted her on the shoulder. "Now, now. It's their lives."

"Well, I don't like it one bit. Roxanne and I went to high school together. We're the same age. And now she's been put out to pasture like some old, damp horse. How am I supposed to feel about that?"

I pulled her in close. Gentle music began to swell as it often did in such tender moments. "Don't worry, Darla. Nothing like that is ever going to happen to us. Why, I remember when my mom turned forty, she mysteriously disappeared, and my dad married Loretta. Could that Loretta cook! And sew? Forget it. She was hemming slacks for the whole neighborhood. I remember once I asked my dad what happened to mom. Well, he just gave me a wink and said she ran off with the circus. Sometimes, these things just happen."

Darla sat on the bed next to me, saying nothing. I grew tired and shut down.

The next morning, things were even more different. For starters, the cheerful music that usually accompanied the opening of my days was gone, replaced with some very modern jazz. The names that appeared around the bottom of my field of vision were all different. I didn't see the words McLean or Stevenson written anywhere. This new music continued as I boarded a plane, landed at a strange airport, got in a taxi and wandered up to a tall apartment building by the ocean. It kept playing as I took an elevator up eighteen floors to apartment 18-G. I walked in and sat down, and the music stopped. I waited in the dark while the voices jabbered on about the hardwood barrels in which an expensive whiskey was aged.

The jazz started up again, but more incidentally this time. Two familiar people walked in, ignoring me. They walked up to their floor-to-ceiling picture windows and looked out on an unfamiliar skyline. All their furniture was facing a blank wall of their own. Magazines with ads on their back covers for generic-looking wintergreen gum blanketed their walnut magazine-stand.

"Well, here we are," Susie sighed.

Vance drew her in. "Just think. This is a fresh start for both of us."

"And your mother?"

"You'll hardly even notice her. And I think she's starting to warm up to you."

"She put my car keys in the toilet today. Then she flushed."

"Oh, that's just her way of letting you know she likes you."

"I don't know, Vance. I just don't know."

He grabbed her around the waist. "Baby, this is just the beginning. I think everything's going to be all right from now on."

Someone knocked on the door. Susie opened it and was greeted by a well-dressed man holding a plastic daisy. Applause.

"I'm Jeeves. From across the hall?"

"I'm Susie. Nice to meet you. This is my fiancée, Vance," she said, pointing through me.

Vance rather uncharacteristically folded his arms and began tapping his foot. "Sorry, we're not interested in any magazine subscriptions!"

"Vance! Be nice!"

Jeeves waved amiably through me at Vance. "I just know we'll be the best of friends," he said, before turning around, clicking his heels, and skipping away.

Susie closed the door. "That wasn't very nice."

"What's going on out there?" Vance's mother bellowed from her bedroom down the hall.

"Nothing, ma! Just a door-to-door salesman."

"I don't like being bothered during my foot bath!" she howled back.

Susie's eyes bugged out. "My new dishwasher! Ruined!" She began to run off, but instead froze in place, her legs in the air, her arms flailed crazily. Vance froze as well, a stupid grin plastered across his face. I felt myself disappearing.

They rested there in front of me, unbreathing, unblinking. A small, plucky dog that I hadn't noticed before also hung frozen in the air, suspended mid-jump, tongue hanging out, his paws touching nothing.

The life I knew was gone. The focus had changed and left me behind. The people I felt most comfortable with were offscreen. I feel retooled, reworked, retitled. I didn't know what to make of all this except to think that these two crazy kids might just make it after all.

That jazz played again. The audience roared with applause. I had been taped in front of a live, studio audience.

The Sample Man
by
Riley Wood

Sample man
Sample man
Handing out crackers all day
That's an ample plan
People ran
When his shift began
How you could you not be a fan
Of the sample man
A lucky day for me
At the sample stand
A cup of three in the sample pan
When I tasted the sour cream
It was better than
Any treat from the ice cream van
But that was it
He was about to get trampled and
I left wanting another free taste
Of that great cracker, man
I came back late
Dressed as someone different
From a different land
But he saw through my fake mustache
damn.
He grabbed me by the collar.
"Don't let me see your fucking face again"
Said the sample man
The sample man

On the Needles
by
Stephanie Gibbon

Rarely do life's turning points announce themselves ahead of time. They are typically best seen in the rearview mirror, long after one has made a choice later understood as pivotal. But even as Michon was leaning towards her with one eyebrow raised and THE question on her lips, Lucinda Kerr knew herself to be at a crossroads.

"Do you knit?" asked Michon. Then she raised an eyebrow and opened her tote just a little to reveal two glistening needles and a ball of purple wool.

Lucinda's first impulse was to shake her head, close her locker door, and walk away. But Michon was pretty and popular and this was the first occasion she'd ever spoken to Lucinda who at the time was a plump, brace-wearing, sometimes stuttering 13-year-old battling two-week periods, lopsided breasts, and especially virulent acne. Lucinda wondered why Michon was making this approach. Possibly it was due to the fact that just the day before they'd been standing in the same group waiting for Mr. Hart to unlock the classroom door. The topic of conversation had been a girl even lower down the social scale than Lucinda and Lucinda, fuelled by two cans of Jolt Cola, had made a wisecrack that had drawn the appreciative laughter of every girl who heard it. Michon in particular seemed to enjoy the joke so perhaps this was why she was here now, whispering conspiratorially and suggesting that they be very naughty indeed.

"Well?" Michon sounded a little irritated so Lucinda quickly answered.

"Yeah," she lied. "Here and there, you know." Trying to sound casual. Failing. Her voice wavered and she covered it up with a cough.

Michon's eyes narrowed. "Really? You don't have to lie you know."

"I'm not lying!" Lucinda's mottled skin reddened.

"Uh huh. Well, whatever. Come on. We've still got 20 minutes until gym."

Moments later, they were crossing the school grounds towards a stand of pine nestled near the chain link fence that divided the property from the neighbourhood beyond. Michon strode forward at such a pace that Lucinda, used to travelling only reluctantly, had to occasionally jog to keep up. They reached the trees and there Michon pointed out a large shrub behind which they could conceal themselves. She looked over her shoulder once. No teacher was to be seen and all was quiet. Quiet enough for Lucinda to hear her own blood pulsing through her ears.

Michon zipped open her bag and pulled out the needles and wool.

"Ok, little Miss Experienced. Show me how to cast on if you're such a pro."

Fuck.

There was no other way out of it. Lucinda fessed up. Michon cackled.

"Hah I knew it! So I'm initiating a virgin... sweet. Just don't go and freak out on me, ok? Just a few stitches for you. This stuff is pretty strong." Michon's fingers worked rapidly to generate the first row of an illicit scarf. "Pure New Zealand Merino. Top shelf."

Lucinda knew she should be impressed. "Wow," she said. "How did you get your hands on that?"

Michon laughed and shook her head. Lucinda noticed that her eyes were looking distinctly glassy. A beatific smile spread across her new friend's face and she staggered backwards slightly as one row became two. "Now, never you mind. That kind of thing is shtrictly, I mean strictly, confidential. I will say this though: sure as fuck..."

Michon's eyes rolled back in her head. "Oh my fucking Jesus."

"Are you ok?" asked Lucinda.

Michon laughed again. "Never better. He did warn me."

"Who warned you?"

"My big brother, that's who. Who I currently love more than anyone in the universe. Except maybe you Lucy-Goosey. Can I call you that?"

"Um, sure. Do you think I could try now?"

"Yeah. Oh fuck. I just let the cat of the bag, didn't I?"

"I won't say a word."

Lucinda moved so that she was standing beside Michon and watched as Michon demonstrated the basic stitch. "Needle in like that, wrap the wool around, you see. Like that."

Michon handed the needles over. "Go fucking bananas."

Lucinda knitted her first stitch. And that was all it took. 13 years of accumulated angst magically melted away. Her mind opened and every little ache and pain, psychic or otherwise, simply ceased to be. She was 10 feet tall. Michon liked her! She liked herself. She had the thought that if she reached out her hand just now, she'd touch the face of God like in that poem. She was a natural. While Michon watched with an amused smirk on her face, Lucinda knitted an entire row. The tension in her wool was uneven but that didn't matter. The rush she felt was the most intense hit of pleasure she'd ever experienced.

"Give that back now. If you O.D., I'd be in such shit."

But Lucinda didn't want to stop. She twisted away and grinned mischievously over her shoulder. "No."

Michon gasped. "Look at you! A full fledged addict already. I wasn't kidding though. Give that back."

Lucinda reluctantly parted with the needles. Michon knitted herself a few more stiches and then returned everything to her bag. She looked over at Lucinda and, with an ironic little grin, asked her if she was ready for gym.

Lucinda laughed so loud it echoed it off the trees. Simultaneously she spread her arms wide. "I'm ready to fly."

"Hmm. On second thought, it'd probably be wiser just to skip class. I don't think it's likely that you could maintain."

Like a shadow passing over the moon, Lucinda's expression changed from euphoria to wrinkle-browed consternation. She pointed at the top of Michon's head. "Has that leprechaun always been there?"

"Oh great. You're completely tweaked."

Lucinda giggled. "I know." Then she clapped her hands as inspiration struck. "Let's go to church!"

Michon sneered. "Why?"

"I dunno. I just feel really close to Jesus right now. Do you think He ever knitted?"

"I'd say that's a pretty safe bet."

"I'd love to be the Son of God," said Lucinda dreamily. Then she projectile vomited.

It was the best fucking day of her life.

At first, it was a weekend thing. On the outside there was little to indicate that Lucinda had changed. Her parents in particular remained oblivious to any problems with their daughter beyond the usual teenage stuff. Her marks remained high and those who knew her remained optimistic that once Lucinda emerged from this awkward stage she'd go on to great things. University was a given. Maybe teaching, maybe an academic career. She was so bright and well-spoken and especially adept at mathematics, pure and applied.

But within Lucinda, there'd been a seismic shift. Yes, she was able to go through the motions and perform according to expectation but was increasingly resentful that she should have to do so. Why, she asked herself, couldn't people—particularly her parents—just accept her for who she was?

"It's like I have to be a performing seal," she told Michon during a sleepover where together they worked on infinity scarves into the wee hours of the night. "I beep the horn with my nose and then they fucking applaud. God, I hate it."

"What do you think they'd do if they knew you were knitting?" asked Michon.

Lucinda snorted contemptuously. "Probably have heart attacks. Their little girl, former star of the Allenbrook Public School Mathletics Team, sneaking stitches behind the portables? They'd probably kill me and then kill themselves to avoid the shame." Lucinda laid a hand

palm-down and fingers-spread across her upper chest and said, "Whatever will the neighbours think?"

Michon smiled and shook her head. "My parents are just the same."

"Soul-dead suburban clones."

"White picket fences and wood-panelled station wagons."

"It's SUVs now. Next year coal-burning tanks all the same colour," said Lucinda.

"Must keep up with the Joneses."

"I'll never be like that," said Lucinda.

The two knitted in silence for a while. They got so high that time lost its coherence. Minutes became hours. They both retreated into their technicolour inner worlds and so neither of them registered the heavy footsteps on the stairs until it was far too late. Michon's father, a dyspeptic and frequently sleepless CEO, had been alerted by the tell-tale clacking of needles wafting up through the duct work. He flicked on the overhead light. The incandescent glow that flooded the downstairs rec room where the girls had set up with their sleeping bags overwhelmed them both. Lucinda let out a scream.

"What the fuck? What the hell are you two doing?"

"Nothing," blurted Michon.

Michon's mother appeared in the doorway behind her husband. She took one look and fainted dead away. Her worst fear had materialized.

Her daughter was a stitcho.

Therapy had been her mother's idea. Nip it in the bud, she had said. Stop it now before she's standing on a street corner, selling her body for one lousy ball of coarse-fibre common wool. So both of Lucinda's parents had perused the Web, made discreet inquiries among relatives and had at last found Dr. Murray Chu, an exceedingly expensive uptown psychiatrist and psychotherapist who specialized in the treatment of textile and fibre art related obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Lucinda sulked the entire way there. This was such bullshit. So she liked to knit – so fucking what? Plenty of other people did. Rock stars, accountants, athletes, half the kids in school, writers, poets.

Stay strong, she told herself. This is what you have to do for now. Play the game, jump the hoops, convince them that it's over. In two years she would be graduating and then she could do whatever the fuck she wanted when she wanted. Lucinda looked out the window at all the tastefully lit largesse. It was all so plastic, all so empty, all so devoid of ultimate meaning. Instead of true transcendence, such as was to be found in slipping 2 stitches p-wise onto a cable needle, letting the cable needle hang in front of the work as you knitted the next couple of stitches and then knitting the stitches off of the cable needle, all Lucinda

saw was the very poor substitute of unchecked materialism. The stores offered a plethora of high priced goods and services but it all amounted the same thing: buy shit, be happy. Consumerism had to be most soporific, virulent drug of all. A society-wide addiction yet it was not only legal, it was the new religion.

She wanted no part of it. She had found her own personal Zen and thought it was such hypocrisy that knitting, a truly spiritual discipline, should be illegal and stigmatized while all around her Satan tempted in the form of lead cut crystal and new tits and \$10000 knick-knacks ostensibly from Nepal and Laos and other hard luck places so the people buying them could comfort themselves with the thought that maybe they were funding a brand new spigot somewhere for a thirsty tribe when really they knew that they weren't.

She said as much to Dr. Chu not long after she had settled herself into one of his sumptuous, brown leather wing chairs. The dapper man with a nice watch and a meticulously groomed beard smiled.

"I don't disagree."

Lucinda eyed him warily. "Are you just saying that to establish rapport?"

"No. While that is one of my goals, I said what I said because I meant it. But let me check that I understood you: you see knitting as a rational reaction to and escape from the life our deeply diseased society offers you."

Lucinda considered for a moment. Then she said, "Yeah. That's one way of putting it. Knitting is subversive, you know?"

"Then I agree. As Jordan Peterson has pointed out: psychological questions are often posed the wrong way around. It shouldn't be: why do people become knitoholics? That's obvious. The question should be: why doesn't everyone become a knitoholic?"

Lucinda snorted and looked away. "Knitoholic? Is that my new label?"

"I won't use it again if you don't want."

"Whatever."

"You seem angry, Lucinda."

Lucinda shrugged. "Maybe. Whatever. I don't know."

"It's okay if you are. I mean, I take it this wasn't exactly your choice."

Lucinda stared at her fingernails. "My parents are pretty pissed. Well, not exactly pissed. More like super worried."

"They love you," offered Dr. Chu.

"Yeah, I suppose. Whatever that means. But this is more like ensuring they get a good return on their investment."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Well that's why people really have kids, isn't it? I'm an extension of their egos. If I fuck up and end up, I dunno, working in a factory or something or on welfare or even worse, people will think less of them. It's not for my benefit that they're doing this. I'm just a means to an end."

"That's pretty cynical, Lucinda."

Lucinda scowled. "You don't even know them."

"True." Dr. Chu braced his elbows against the armrests of his chair, made a tent of his fingers and briefly rested his chin on the apex. "But let's return to a statement you made earlier about knitting being subversive. Subversive in the sense that you're rebelling against your parents? Or are you thinking even bigger than that?"

Lucinda thought about it. "I dunno. I guess against my parents in the sense that they like represent society. All the rules and expectations come through them. They, um, encapsulate society. No, that's not quite the right word –"

"Embody?" suggested the doctor.

"Yeah that's better. So I suppose it's both. But so what? I don't get the point of me being here except that it's pleasing my parents. You and I both know what happens next. We shoot the shit for another 45 minutes, you collect your fee, suggest that I see you indefinitely, and I keep on doing what I want to do."

Dr. Chu smiled. "So you knit because you want to, not because you have to."

Lucinda gripped the armrests of her chair and leaned forward. "Hey! I can quit anytime I want. Let's get that straight. I'm not some stupid addict. Those people are pathetic. 'Ooh poor me. I can't help it. I'm out of control. I have a disease.' Please. Give me a fucking break."

Now it was Dr. Chu's turn to shrug. "Ok, Lucinda. Maybe you're right. Maybe you don't really have a problem. But it's easy to lose track of what our real motivations are. The subconscious and all that."

"If you start quoting Freud or Jung I'm going to throw up all over your hardwood floor."

Dr. Chu laughed. "Ok. I promise I won't. How about we make a deal? There's something I want you to try."

Lucinda eyed him warily. "If it's pills, you can forget about that. No way I'm ending up a lip-smacking zombie."

"No, not pills. I want you to go a month without knitting. Or crotcheting. Or sewing. Nothing fibre-related ok? Just for a month."

Inwardly Lucinda screamed. But somehow she maintained her poker face. She waved dismissively with one hand. "Big deal. I can do that in my sleep. Like I said, I'm the master not the slave."

"I hope you're right." The doctor checked his watch. "Tell your parents no charge for today. Make an appointment for a month for now."

Lucinda was aghast. "That's it? We've only talked for like twenty minutes."

"I know. There's no point in going on if you're not the one who wants a change. Give it a month," he said. Then he smiled with half his face. "And then we'll see."

Lucinda pouted. "You don't think that I can do it."

"Not on your own I don't. Remember, I see this every day. You're what? 15? Take a look at your hands. You've got more blisters and callouses than patients I've seen three times your age."

Lucinda glanced at her hands then shoved them self-consciously underneath her armpits. She found herself blushing and quite unable to make eye contact.

"I'm going to prove you wrong," she said without conviction.

"Please do. See you in a month."

By the time her father pulled out of the parking spot they had found near Dr. Chu's office, Lucinda was craving so badly she could barely see straight. She wished she smoked: she started chewing on one of her thumbnails in the hope that would provide some relief. She fidgeted, she sweated, she cursed her skin for suddenly being two sizes too small.

"So," said her mom at last. "Going to tell us what happened in there? Pretty short session."

"Patient-doctor confidentiality," said Lucinda shortly. God, she was so not in the mood for any sort of parental interrogation.

"Great," said her dad. "Over two hundred dollars a session and we're not allowed to know anything."

Lucinda was about to shoot back with 'got that right' when she reconsidered. What was truly the path of least resistance here?

She sighed. "Fine. If you guys must know, he issued me a challenge. Said there was no point in therapy until I really wanted to change. So I'm supposed to go a month without knitting. He thinks I can't do it. Can you believe that? At least he had he decency not to charge for today's session. I'll do it no problem. Hey—there's a 7-11 coming up. Can we stop? I'll get you guys a Slurpee or something for all your trouble."

Her dad shook his head. "Pass on the Slurpee."

"I'll guess I'll have a Kit Kat," said her mom, who started to zip open her handbag. Lucinda reached forward and patted her mom on the shoulder.

"Don't worry mom, I've got this."

"Ok. Thanks dear."

Moments later, Lucinda was out of the car and into the store. It didn't take her long to locate the corridor that led to the storeroom and the rear exit. Soon she was outside again, enough money in her pocket to stay high for a week. A neighbourhood where every alley teemed with dealers was but a short walk away.

She advanced towards the approaching evening and it encircled her and she was gone.

Well and truly gone.

Cures for the 1918 Flu
by
Kathryn Pratt Russell

Open the farmhouse windows in December. Pack the patient in ice. All nurses must wear fur coats.

Crank start the car. Get some medicine, any medicine, from the general store.

If the mother can't breastfeed, give the baby coffee with sugar.

See that the children use Lifebuoy Soap before going to school. Link up with Lifebuoy for Health's Sake.

Wear red. Flu doesn't like the color.

Take a half handful of aspirin. Do it again.

Keep patient in separate room. Hang Lysol-soaked sheets over the doorway.

Pour rotgut whiskey down the patient's throat. Get whiskey from the bootlegger.

Build a fire in the middle of the street.

Bathe the child in Listerine.

It is the duty of every loyal American to buy Liberty Bonds and Savings Stamps.

Apply liniment to the chest (hog lard, kerosene, camphor).

Treat the patient with belladonna for asthma and aconite for fever.

Give an enema three times.

Spray the atmosphere of the Home, Factory, Office, Cinema, etc.

Dip the pills in holy water.

Halt the epidemic! Stop spitting—everybody.

Use a quilt of wormwood placed between flannel layers, and dipped in hot vinegar.

Escape the Flu with a New Edison Phonograph. The phonograph with a Soul. No danger of catching the flu from any of the Edison artists.

Drink cough syrup of boiled and strained cherry tree bark.

The women of your household are already acquainted with the merits of Lysol. Your doctor knows all about it.

Eat oatmeal for breakfast.

Inhale nitric acid fumes and gunpowder.

Prepare a white shroud. It will speed their arrival into heaven.

Dead Match
by
Karen Walker

The date, she hoped, would be a killer, but she was running late. Nails proved harder to drive into his car tires than expected. There was dirt on her taffeta skirt, her knees.

Inside the restaurant, he caressed a small silver vial. Slipped it into a pocket when, at last, she came breathless to the table.

"Hello, Diana," Todd said, rising.

"Di, please." She paused. "I am not disappointed."

So often she had been. Her kind offer of a ride home—"Oh, no! Vandals!"—and a proposal of a meticulously planned happily-ever-after always ending in rejection and screams. A gown, awaiting an elegant shotgun wedding, yellowed in the back seat of her car.

"I'm glad," Todd replied. He kissed her hand, held her chair. "But you're nothing like your profile picture."

Di stared, measuring him for a shroud.

"Much more beautiful in person." Todd liked to sprinkle magic at first.

She fired a smile at him. "I thought for a moment I'd have to kill you before dinner."

"I expect no less, my little pistol," he said.

Di tapped a trigger finger on the table. "Nice that we already know each other so well, Todd."

The dark agency had demanded untouched photos and full disclosure, whether applicants preferred cats or dogs, owned or rented, and what—in summary—had happened to ex-partners.

"Should save time and drama," Todd said. "The hunt can be so tiresome."

"Oh, I'll never give up searching for love. I'm a romantic."

"Let's toast to that, Di. What's your poison?"

His, he wrote in his profile, was a dinner at his pied-a-terre. An invitation in French, lavender roses, vichyssoise—a pinch of powder from the vial finished it nicely—and coq au vin made every lady weak at the knees. Dessert, for one, was a last kiss on blue lips.

Todd ordered the ice water running through his veins. Di guarded her tonic and lemon.

"What's on the menu then?" she asked.

Todd snuffed the candle on the table. "You."

Black hearts, plots embraced.

"We can keep on for the next hour or we can end it now." Di panted.

Todd cocked a finger gun. "Bang. My place."

They laughed.

"Cheeky devil! We'll take my car. Yours isn't going anywhere."

"If I survive the drive, I'll make you my specialty."

Rated R
by
Chester Onion

Talking to you is like being
trapped
in the glare of a
sex scene with my mother
in the room.

The Mistake Hoarder
by
Joy Kennedy-O'Neill

She's the neighbor from hell. Hammers bang, boards pop, saws buzz like electric migraines. She is adding on, which probably means she's invited another ex to move in. Another mistake, another room.

I trudge out to my backyard. "Stop it!" My terrier Sissy barks, agreeing with me.

"Come on over!" Maggie waves from the fence. Today she's wearing a turban and floral muumuu.

I used to see blue sky from my yard. Now, it's all crazy house because I live next to THE Ms. Maggie. Maybe you saw her on *Oprah*. She lives with ex-husbands, old bosses, aging college roommates, and an ill-chosen goat. She wrote those books totally opposite of *Spark Joy* and *Letting Go*. You know, *Never Miss a Mistake* and *Living with Your Past*.

I walk over. "When's it enough?"

"I know," she laughs. "But I bought the extra lots and –"

"You bought off the zoning committee, you mean." I frown.

"Oh honey-child. You sure you don't want to come over for tea?"

"No thank you."

See, *my* house is neat and tidy. I ditch clothes that fit fifteen pounds ago, burn old love letters, and chunk books. Boom, bang. That's how it's done! I don't even keep containers or organizers. Boxes are like full mouths, stuffed with words you don't want to hear. After my divorce, things were either at the curb or UPS. Done. Finished. Signed and sealed.

Why can't she be the same? My god, her house looks like a Lego stack-house. Each new addition a different flamboyant color. Cars slow down to look. People take pictures. This is what I get for not having a HOA.

We used to have a good relationship. She'd come over and ask for rose cuttings. We'd talk. She was only living with one ex-husband then. But I knew Maggie was eccentric, sure. She got upset when I started ripping my plants out each spring to start over fresh.

Sissy finishes squatting and scratches at the grass.

"Look," I point. "That's how it's done. You cover shit up and move on. You don't build it a room and ask it to move in."

"Oh honey." Her hand is warm on my shoulder. It's funny, I've been alone for so long after my divorce, the touch startles me. It moves me through the fence gate.

And then, god help me, I'm in her crazy house. It's Escheresque. No, it's like that Winchester house, where the lady never stopped building because she was afraid of ghosts.

"Some people collect cats or doo-dads," Maggie waves her hand. "I collect my mistakes."

There are people watching TV, cooking lunch, walking through the various rooms. She points to a balding, pot-bellied fellow. "Spring Break in Mexico. Chlamydia. Oof!"

We pass an elderly woman on oxygen.

"My stepmother. Boy, we had some fights!"

We pass a laundry room with two jumbo washers. "We've all got a lot of dirty laundry," she cackles.

Upstairs, a second story door opens to a long fall. "For a future mistake."

I lurch along a narrow hallway. A balcony overlooks a bathtub. Windows face windows.

Stairs ascend, descend, ascend again. She opens an empty bedroom.

"For an old frenemy. He's in Madrid, but he's got a room waiting if he wants. I pushed him to convert," she admits. "I was in my religious phase. Oh, I was a self-righteous twat!"

Something scrabbles overhead in the attic. A cymbal crashes. "Did I tell you I was in a band?" she asks.

"You have a *band* up there?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Just the percussionists." She sucks in her breath and tsks. "Jazz."

Her hallway sports framed parking tickets, court summons, certificates for defunct stocks, old ballet box receipts, and even a tooth in a shadow-box.

"I forgot to floss," she says.

I trip over empty water bottles and Maggie steadies me. "I stocked up for Y2K and the end the world. Boy, what a mistake! Oh, hi Ben." She waves at a man shaving at a sink and he gives her a peace sign. She winks at me as we move past him. "Taking the high road is sharing a bathroom."

A small, yellow-eyed goat dings past us in the hallway, a bell tinkling around its neck.

"I thought it'd make a good pet," Maggie explains. "But it's got anxiety and epilepsy. So now I *have* to keep it."

My head feels like it's sliding off. "No kids? I mean, aside from the goat?"

Maggie laughs again. "Oh honey-child, if I'd had kids, I'd never stop adding on! Everything's a potential mistake there!"

In her kitchen, I see mail and tax papers neatly stacked. She's getting donations from #Better-You-Than-Me!

"Why would anyone—"

"Move in? Why not? Free rent. Notoriety. Shoot, absolution is the best party!"

We end up in a crowded courtyard.

"So here we are!" Maggie says with a sense of finality. "Oh, these are employees and former bosses that I cheated."

Everyone waves congenially.

"Why don't you just have a yearbook of old hairstyles and bad fashion choices," I say. "Like the rest of us?"

She looks at me with pity. Pity!

"Oh honey," she says. "I liked our old talks, when I'd come over for cuttings. Remember all the roses your husband always gave you?"

My throat catches and I stomp off for home. How dare she? But I stop at the fence gate, hesitating. When will we stop? What's the missing piece in her crazy menagerie? The final piece? There has to be *something*.

I turn around and raise my finger. "How about your neighbors, huh? You've ruined any goodwill. Ruined the views. Ruined the peace and quiet. How's THAT for a mistake? Where would you put THAT?"

I cross my arms, triumphant.

But Maggie only smiles.

"Oh sweet-girl, I thought you'd never ask."

She opens a garden gate by the courtyard and there's a beautiful pagoda. Lush and green with rose bushes.

"I built it just for you, from all your old flowers. You can come over whenever you like."

She sits me down on a wooden bench. I'm stunned. Defeated. I can't win.

I'll sell my house. I'll move away.

But the flowers smell as sweet as my new marriage did, and the petals are pillow-talk soft. I burst into tears. It's a heavenly relief. Having those memories so close, so immediate . . . it's the most neighborly thing in the world.

Two Poems
by
Carla Sarett

bad boyfriends v. 2.0

men who are never
in love (until she
is out of love)

who never have time
(until she does not)
who climb mountains

in distant places,
to find themselves (when
they're far from her.)

then write a memoir
lamenting how bad
their girlfriends were.

Gig Economy

In Vero Beach, the old gigolos wear plaid and khakis,
they drive SUVs, they recycle,
they say thank you and please,
really they are such nice guys
until the scam's done.
*Women never learn, the cops say,
women should know better.*

Afterward, the old gigolos share a bottle of
Johnny Walker Blue and smoke Cuban cigars.
*She was damaged goods, the gigolos say.
She was nothing.*

I've heard about the ring in Florida, but
that doesn't mean it's the only game.
I should check Washington, Oregon, California
Anywhere women are lonely, and
really, everyone should know better.

Freshman Year Did Not Go Well

**by
Daniel Winn**

Freshman year did not go well for Andy Hamlin. But he was home for the summer now and could relax and put it all behind him. Sophomore year he wouldn't throw up in his dorm room hallway because he wasn't living in a dorm. He wouldn't get kidnapped and imprisoned in an old lighthouse and fall in love with his captors because after they received the ransom money they had let him go and promised not to do it again. And he wouldn't get abducted by aliens because, well, what are the odds that would happen twice to the same person?

"How'd you like freshman year?" asked his friend Greg, while they drove to the pool hall.

"Freshman year did not go well," said Andy.

Freshman year had gone well for Greg. He had a girlfriend for the first time, he had scored six points at the conference meet in the 400 meters and ran on the winning 1600 meter relay team, and he had finally figured out what to do with his hair (part it on the side).

"That sucks," said Greg. "Have you thought of transferring?"

"I don't think that would help," said Andy. School wasn't the problem. He had gotten a 3.3 gpa, he had decided on a major (astronomy), and made three good friends called Crasher, Rage, and The Hat.

They played eight-ball and Andy won every game, like always.

"It would be cool if we went to the same school again, is all," said Greg. Andy agreed that it would be cool. "Plus Erica has a bunch of pretty hot friends that might like you."

That was tempting, because if Crasher, Rage, and The Hat had a bunch of pretty hot friends that might like Andy, they hadn't mentioned it.

"Well, hopefully next year is just a chill year and you can study and hang with friends and that's it."

Andy imagined having a chill year. Not locking himself out of his room the morning of finals and running barefoot in pajamas to get a spare key from the other building, slipping and falling in mud, the spare key not being there for some reason, taking three finals barefoot with mud down his leg because he didn't know you could request to space out finals if a bunch of them fell on the same day, not getting in such a big (albeit petty) argument with his roommate that he had to move out and live alone and alienated the second semester, and not having to plead to get makeups for the midterms he had missed while he was imprisoned on a planet that can best be written in English as Rekswakferfveka. Just studying, joining the rec basketball league, going on dates (even though he's bad at dates). It sounded... boring.

"You know what?"

"What?" asked Greg.

"Maybe I did have a good freshman year," said Andy. "I just didn't realize it at the time."

"That's cool," said Greg, as he balanced the pool cue on the tip of his finger. "I had a good year too."

Contributor Biographies



Raymond Lane is a writer, physician, and father of six. He enjoys writing speculative as well as mainstream fiction. In his free time he keeps two dogs, two cats, and numerous plants alive. Previous works can be found in *TulipTree* and *Altered Reality Magazine*. He is currently working on a satirical dystopian novel.



A bit about the author: **Anna Pisarka** recently returned to her home in the USA after years of living abroad. She only lasted two months, re-packed her bags, and ran away to Europe in pursuit of love. Anna currently spends her days eating absurd amounts of Polish donuts and daydreaming about dragons. She can be found at her website pisarkanna.wordpress.com/ "



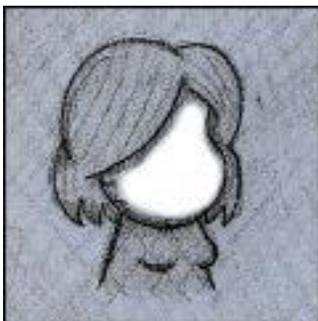
Although a new writer, **Sarah Boisvert** has been making up shit as long as she can remember. She has no social media but can typically be found wandering the streets of Austin, drinking beer, and laughing at her own jokes.



Neil Fulwood was born in Nottingham, where he still lives and works. He has two poetry collections with Shoestring Press: *No Avoiding It* and *Can't Take Me Anywhere*. He also co-edited the Alan Sillitoe tribute volume, *More Raw Material*.



Karen Schaub is a flash fiction writer obsessed with the form. Her work appears in 50 international literary magazines and anthologies, including *Bending Genres*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, and *Spelk Fiction*. *The Group of Seven Reimagined: Contemporary Stories Inspired by Historic Canadian Paintings* (Heritage House, 2019), celebrating the Canadian modernist landscape painters, is her first editorial/curatorial flash fiction anthology. Schaub curates *Vancouver Flash Fiction*, a flash fiction resource hub and critique circle, and in her spare time, is a seasoned family therapist. A native of Montréal, she has called Vancouver home for the past three decades. "What a Babe" was first published in *Eliipsis Zine* in October 2018.



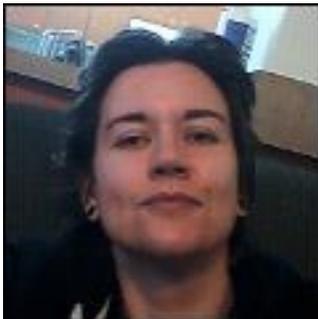
E. Laura Goldberg's poetry will be published in *Rattle* in December 2020 and has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *The Laurel Review*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Spillway*, *RHINO*, and the *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, among other places. She is completing her first collection of poetry, entitled *Commitment*. Her web page is www.ELauraGolberg.com/



Jeffrey Kulik is a state employee and lifelong Chicagoan who has been published in *The American Bystander*, *The American Bystander Quarantine Cavalcade*, *Literally Stories*, *Arcturus*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and *Public Organization Review*.



Riley Wood has wanted to be a writer since second grade. He remembers selling his poorly drawn comics to anyone driving by the street corner for two quarters each, and hey, he's still basically doing it! He wishes everyone still thought he was as cute as they used to think he was because now they just look at him with hollow smiles saying "A writer? Wow. That's greaattt." If you find Riley's stuff entertaining, try picking up his book of short fiction titled *The Circuitry Might* on Amazon.



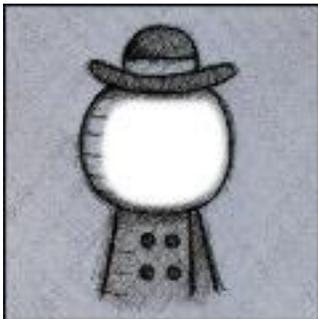
Stephanie Gibbon grew up in Canada. At the primary school she went to there was this big tree in the corner of the yard that everyone, especially the teachers, called the Big Oak. Every spring, the Big Oak would shed hundreds of maple keys which twirled to the ground while everyone watched and made appreciative noises.



Kathryn Pratt Russell teaches literature at Clayton State University, to students who are much funnier than she is. She has a poem forthcoming in *Gargoyle* magazine, and she has also published in *Black Warrior Review*, *Red Mountain Review*, and *Chelsea*.



Karen Walker writes short fiction and flash in Ontario Canada. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in online magazines and anthologies including *Spillwords*, *Reflex Fiction*, *The Brasilia Review*, *Commuterlit*, and *Blank Spaces*. People say Karen is fun and frustrating even at a distance, and her chicken lasagna is pretty good once you get past the taste.



Chester Onion received his degree in professional writing from Purdue University. He enjoys the works of Barry Yourgrau, Richard Brautigan, and William Carlos Williams.



Joy Kennedy-O'Neill teaches English at a small college on the Texas Gulf Coast. Her works have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *the Cimarron Review*, among other places. More of her work can be found at JoyKennedyOneill.com. "The Mistake Hoarder" was first published in *Eureka Literary Magazine (ELM)*.



Carla Sarett's recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Third Wednesday*, *Prole*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Bluepepper*, and elsewhere; and her essays have been nominated for Best American Essay and the Pushcart Prize. Her comic novel, *A Closet Feminist*, will be published in 2022 by Unsolicited Press. Carla lives in San Francisco.



Daniel Winn lives in Brooklyn, New York, drinks water with his head upside down to get rid of hiccups, has never been exiled, and is considered "tall" by many. Daniel is a very, very freelance writer and has had work published on *Citius Mag*, *Literate Sunday*, and *College Humor*.