

# ◇ Defenestration ◇

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**Leg Shark**  
by  
**Maxwell Shepherd**

A fire cracked in a small cottage amid the trees of a green forest. Chet sat on a sofa reading the novelization of *Jaws: The Revenge* in front of the fireplace. His roommate, Benjamin, approached.

"Want to go for a stroll down the walking path?" Benjamin asked of Chet.

"A stroll? You dipshit, you know I'm deathly afraid of sharks," Chet said.

"What? But we're on land, how could there be a shark?" Benjamin said.

Chet thought about it for a moment before conceding, "Yeah, yeah I guess you're right. Let's do it." He closed his book and hopped off the couch.

\*\*\*

Thirty minutes later the two strode abreast down the pleasant, well-traveled path which wound in a loop through the lush woods.

"You know you were totally right," said Chet. "There was no reason to be afraid of sharks out here. Look around us, not an ounce of water. Not even a drop!"

Benjamin nodded, "Yeah, this drought's pretty bad. Climate change is like, slowly killing the world."

Echoing down the path came the distinct pattering of jogging feet. Distant, but growing closer.

"To the side of path, Benjamin, let's allow the jogger through," Chet said.

They both cleared some space for the runner to pass by them and looked down the path waiting for them to round a corner of thick forest. But what rounded the corner was no jogger. Or, technically it was, because it *was* jogging. But it was no human jogger. No, instead it was a 25-foot great white shark. The massive white shark was propelled swiftly down the path on two very toned human legs clad in running shorts and Nike sneakers. Both of their eyes grew wide with terror. Chet's darkest dreams had come to pass.

"Benjamin! It's finally happened! The day has come! We must flee!" Chet shouted.

He turned and ran down the path, gripped in a wild horror and screaming a high-pitched scream the whole way. Benjamin ducked into a thicket which the shark's giant body would be unable to access.

"Chet, no, you'll never outrun it on land, follow me!" he shouted at his roommate.

Chet couldn't hear him. Because of the screaming, you see.

The leg shark pursued, feet pattering against the ground at a quicker and quicker pace until it was sprinting—closing in on its prey. Chet looked back in time to see the abyssal maw of the leg shark stretch open and close around his hip and thigh.

"Ahhh fuck!" he screamed. "Aahhh fuck this fucking leg shark aaaahhhhh!" Oh, did he scream.

Blood poured from the bite wound and the leg shark began rearing up and slamming Chet against the ground and swinging him into trees alongside the path. His ribs were reduced to dust and his spine wound up coming out of the top of his head. Brains and bits of skull wound up in the high branches of the trees and were eaten by birds or used to help construct their nests. His limbs snapped in thousands of places. His whole torso rotated 720 degrees launching his organs in a tornado of viscera. Several times he was flung as high as fifty feet into the air and then when he was about to hit the ground the leg shark would swat him with its tail. It approached and kicked Chet's dead "body" before it ripped off his legs and devoured them.

Benjamin heard the infernal screaming of his friend and the thumping of his body being flung like a ragdoll into hard surfaces again and again. He was also forced to endure the tearing of flesh as the leg shark began feasting upon its fresh kill. He dared not move, all he could do was cover his ears and pray. Pray to whatever God it was that fought leg sharks.

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A day later he was found wallowing in his own poops and pees, still cowering in the thick woods. The police had come after an elderly couple on a walk found Chet's body and called to report it. And then were also killed and eaten by the leg shark.

Benjamin was taken to the hospital where he was visited by Detective Bill Nicholson who looked and spoke exactly like Jack Nicholson but was not related to the thespian by blood nor marriage and in fact the two had never even met. Though they *would* meet one day when Bill gets wrapped up in a kidnapping plot in which he is enlisted to pretend to be Jack Nicholson on the set of a blockbuster film in order keep up appearances to prevent the studio from torpedoing the movie after the real Jack Nicholson is abducted by white nationalists. It's quite the story, it really is.

Nicholson stood at Benjamin's bedside. Benjamin sat looking at his smart phone, apathetic to the presence of the police officer.

"So, can you describe to me exactly what happened?" Nicholson asked.

"We were out for a walk and this fucking..." Benjamin paused, thought for a moment, then shrugged, "shark with legs ran out and killed him."

"A shark with legs?"

"That's right, yeah, that's what I said," Benjamin nodded.

"What kind of sh—"

"Great white."

"Oh, well of course. And, uh, how big was it?"

"Twenty-five foot, probably about three tons of him."

"Uh huh," Nicholson jotted something down in his notebook, seemingly a note regarding what Benjamin had just said, but actually was a doodle of a turkey with a wiener.

"And the legs, uh, what kind of legs were they? Was it bipedal? Was it quadrupedal? Were they like a crocodile's legs, a bear's leg's, a horse's legs, a cheetah's legs, a crab's legs, a bird's legs, a penguin's legs? Were they like a penguin's legs? People don't realize they have legs, but they do, lemme tell ya..."

"Just regular human legs. It liked Nikes if that helps," said Benjamin.

"Well Christ, Mr. Benjamin... based on what you've told me here today I'd have to conclude that what we have on our hands in this fair little burgh of ours is a *motherfucking* leg shark."

"A leg shark indeed!" A heretofore unheard voice erupted from the doorway.

Benjamin and Nicholson looked to see the owner of the voice; it was Jane Wackman. Former Olympian and current legless leg shark vigilante.

"Who the fuck are you?" asked Nicholson.

"My name is Jane Wackman, former gold medal winning figure skater. I was the best of the best at figure skating until my legs were bitten off by a leg shark during the 2014 winter Olympics."

"Oh, I remember that," Ben said. "I saw it on the news. You were doing pretty good. Until that shark skated over and uh... ripped your... ripped your legs off..."

"I was doing better than good, I was doing fucking rad. Until, as you said, that shark ripped my legs off. And since that day I decided if I couldn't be the best at skating with legs, I would be the best at killin' leg sharks without em'."

"It's nice to have that out of the way," Bill said.

"Detective!" Jane continued. "You need to cancel every leg-oriented event in town. Squat competitions, soccer matches, Taekwondo tournaments, the leg juggling classes at the jugglers academy... literally anything involving legs."

"What?" Bill said, incredulous. "Do you have any idea how much manpower I would need to pull something like that off? This community has one hundred and forty-six taekwondo tournaments scheduled for this week alone."

\*\*\*

Elsewhere that day at the squat competition and expo at the local gym. A competitor with crazy big legs struggled on stage under over a thousand pounds of weight on a barbell he held across his shoulders, shaking, and sweating and groaning like he was deucing a sizable baked potato hot out of the oven. Finally, he stood up all the way; his massive and powerful legs propelled him to victory. *Fuck you, gravity. Fuck you... metal bars with metal plates on*

*them. You're not the boss of me no matter what you say*, he thought. He allowed the weight to fall behind him where it crashed to the ground with a loud crashing noise.

"Oranges!" he shouted in triumph; the crowd went wild.

He exited the stage and was replaced by a Master of Squatting Ceremonies whose legs were similarly bulbous and engorged with muscles upon muscles. Each one of his legs was, in fact, as large as his entire upper body. His hair was spiked and had FROSTED TIPS and he wore sunglasses and a skintight tank top – the kind that Jean Claude Van Damme wore in Kickboxer. He spoke to the crowd through a headset microphone while making EMPHATIC hand gestures.

"Alright alright alright, let's give it up for Leggert McSquattington! Coming up next, we've got Big Legs O'Brien but first—what makes a good squat?" The crowd was silent. "Legs," he said. The crowd all nodded and gave a collective "ahhh" of comprehension. "I know as well as anyone as a six-time power squat world champ—to squat in the world of squatting, if you ain't got legs, you ain't got... nothin'. Name me one legless squatting champion? You can't. Is it because people who don't have legs are worse than people who do have legs? Yeah. But it also comes down to something else. It also comes down to the muscles in your legs. How many muscles you have and how big they are. You got more leg muscles than the other guy, you got better legs, you got better legs you got better squats, you leg better squat legs you see what I'm say—"

His legs were bitten off by the leg shark. He fell onto his back.

"My legs are gone!" he screamed as the blood shooting out of his leg stumps propelled him across the floor and off the stage.

The leg shark hopped into the throng and began to massacre everyone in sight. It bit off heads, arms, hands, fingers, wrists, and ears. But mostly legs. *The leg meat is what sustained it.*

\*\*\*

Jane, Bill and Benjamin all sat in the latter's hospital room watching the bloodbath as it was broadcast on local news.

"Called it!" said Jane, pointing at the screen.

The news anchor held her finger to her ear and frenziedly described the scene to a shaking camera. The leg shark ran to and fro, into and out of frame in the background, throwing body parts through the air, swatting people with its tail, ripping and flinging body parts this way and that and gorging on legs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, here at the one hundred and eighty-ninth annual squat competition all hell broke loose when a shark—that's right, a shark—burst from backstage and began brutally murdering attendees."

The leg shark grasped Big Legs O'Brien in its jaws and shook him like a dog with a squirrel. A squirrel that had totally jacked legs. O'Brien became an omnidirectional spatter of guts and limbs. Some intestines landed across the anchor's shoulders. She continued her report unperturbed.

"If you're asking yourself how a shark is doing this on land, well folks, this shark seems to have what appears to be a pair of small—but quite toned—human like le—"

The anchors entire torso was bitten off by the leg shark. The camera dropped to the ground and continued filming the havoc.

"Saddle up, dick turkeys, it's time to ride!" Jane shouted before wheeling herself from the room and down the halls of the hospital, screaming, "Vengeance will be mine!"

Bill turned to Benjamin, "You're just a dude so there's really no reason for you to come along."

"No reason?" Benjamin scoffed, "This goddamn thing killed my roommate of six weeks. You think I'm the kind of person who lets that shit slide?"

"Well, I know next to nothing about you, so..."

Benjamin threw off the covers and climbed out of bed, clad only in a hospital gown, he looked Bill dead in the eyes, "I'm... not."

"Alright... do you want to put some clothes on first?"

"I... don't."

\*\*\*

Not long after, Jane wheeled herself across the blood-stained ground, surveying the carnage at what was once the Squat Competition but was now like, the Being Dead with No Legs... competition?

"My God." she said.

Bill pulled up behind her and got out of his car followed by Benjamin still in his hospital gown.

"Looks like these fellas popped their last squats." Bill said.

"What? Oh, because they're all dead. Yeah, I get it," Benjamin responded.

"I warned you, goddamnit, but you wouldn't listen to me," said Jane.

"Well, I'm listening to you now," said Bill. "What do we have to do to make sure this leg shark doesn't go on a second killingspr—"

Benjamin interrupted, "I'm seeing on my twitter feed that the leg shark wiped out the high-schools river dancing club. Ninety-two fatalities."

"What do we have to do to make sure this leg shark doesn't go on a third—"

"Leg shark just seen murdering a group of elderly speed walkers at the park."

Bill sighed and shook his head, "A fourth—"

"One hundred and fourteen people dead after the leg shark wiped out the international hacky sack championship at the—"

"PUT YOUR GODDAMN PHONE AWAY!" Bill screamed.

"You two need to get your shit together and listen to me," Jane said.

"My shit's been together, bro," Benjamin shrugged and went back to his tweetings and Instantgramms.

"I have a plan to stop this thing, but I'm going to need help," Jane said.

"What do you need me to do?" Bill asked.

\*\*\*

A dump truck full of severed legs backed up slowly to the edge of a local outdoor swimming pool resting in the backyard of Mary and James Mansfeld. The loud BEEPs of the trucks back-up alarm echoed rhythmically as Bill signaled to the driver via their side mirror. The Mansfelds watched in slack-jawed horror.

Bill turned to the couple. "I'm sorry we had to commandeer your pool folks, we'll have this wrapped up soon I promise." He nodded and smiled. The couple simply stared open mouthed.

Benjamin filmed the scene with his phone then turned it toward himself, "That's a fucking dump truck full of legs, bro. I have had *the weirdest* weekend," he said to the camera.

"What are you doing?" Jane asked from near the pool.

"It's TikTok."

"It's what?!"

"It's TikTok—"

"Dick. Cock?"

"What, no—"

"Why are you still wearing that gown, your balls have been flapping in the wind all day."

Benjamin was indeed still wearing the gown. He didn't know how to respond. He turned back to his phone.

Bill held up his fist and shouted, "Hold it! Hold it!" The truck came to a halt at the edge of the pool. "Alright," he shrugged, "...dump those fucking legs in there."

The truck followed his command and poured the massive quantity of bloody corpse legs into the pool until it was filled almost to the top. Bill walked over and joined the other two.

"This plan of yours better work, I've got a lot of bereaved family members asking me a lot of questions right now about the whereabouts of their deceased loved one's body parts."

"Don't worry detective," Jane said. "It may take hours, it may take days, but sooner or later that leg shark is going to—oh shit, oh it's killing the Mansfelds," she pointed.

Everyone looked to see that, yes, it was indeed killing the Mansfelds, with Mary already dead and James being held horizontally in the beast's jaws shouting as it bashed his head against the side of the house repeatedly until his skull just sort of exploded like a big grape.

"Well shit," Bill said.

It tossed the corpse aside and sniffed at the air, finally homing in on the smell of the sweet, sweet legs. It began jogging toward them.

"Okay, does everyone remember the rest of the plan?" Jane asked.

They both nodded.

"I think so," Bill said.

"Hold steady, guys," she said.

The leg shark grew nearer and nearer until it ran right past them and straight toward the pool.

"Yes, it's working," Jane said as she watched with anticipation.

The leg shark approached the pool, it looked at the bounty of legs before it, it tentatively sniffed at the legs for a minute and then opened its jaws and began to feast.

"YAAAAH!" Jane screamed as she rolled her wheelchair toward the leg shark, harpoon held aloft, and then hurled the harpoon into the side of the leg shark's head. "Burn in *he!!!!!!*!"

The leg shark stumbled around for a moment, harpoon jutting from its skull, before it tipped over into the pool and died on its back with its two little (but very toned) legs kicking up toward the air.

"Vengeance is mine!" Jane threw her fists to the skies.

Ben and Bill walked over to her, they both looked down into the pool at the dead ass leg shark. The coroner hopped out of the dump truck and shouted from across the pool, "Can I take these legs back and re-attach them now?"

Bill nodded. "Please do." He gave the coroner a thumbs up.

A moment passed as they all savored their victory, Benjamin broke the silence, "Sooooo... is anyone looking for a room to rent?"

\*\*\*

Some days later, Jane sat reading a book by the fireplace. The head and the legs of the leg shark were mounted and hung over the mantle. Benjamin approached,

"Would you like to go for a stroll down the path?" he asked.



Jane shrugged and set aside her book. "Sounds good," she said.

She grabbed her leg shark killing harpoon just in case, and the two set off toward the woods. And Ben was still in the hospital gown.

**E.T.**  
**by**  
**Linda Lowe**

We all wondered what in the world when a spaceship materialized over the cul-de-sac, unfurling a rope ladder like a foreign flag, both sturdy and friendly. We all thought of the movie, E.T., except Francine, who remembered it was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abduction of her Aunt Sylvia from a park in Poughkeepsie. It was a balmy Saturday morning, so we grabbed our coffee and plopped down in our lawn chairs to wait it out. Bets were taken. Odds went five to one it was an alien verses Francine's Aunt Sylvia. Meanwhile the kids played craps in the street.

**Wrinkles**  
**by**  
**Cori Steinberg**

My steamer died  
I'm so depressed  
I have to wear a wrinkled dress

My cat threw up  
I'm so depressed  
Now I have to clean the mess

I bit my tongue  
I'm tho deprethed  
Now ith hard to thay an eth

So on it goes  
So every day  
Things get us depressed

What if—I thought  
Just for a lark  
I try the opposite?

I woke up!  
The milk's not bad!  
The old roof has no leak!

The sink drained down!  
I like my mom!  
The garbage doesn't stink!

I give a laugh  
And start my day  
No longer in distress

I clean the puke  
I nurse my tongue  
And wear my wrinkled dress.

**Thank You, Lil Wayne**  
**by**  
**Alex Dermody**

*"Real G's move in silence like lasagna." ---Lil Wayne*

Behind St. John's Pediatric Hospital, a crowd of red-eyed men and women gathered around a large metal box, watching as Amanda Nunn fed the Waynerator+ the fuel it required to create electricity:

"You a beaver allergic to wood," Amanda said, her voice hoarse. "Call that a dam shame."

The generator buzzed. A metallic Lil Wayne voice said, "The fireman coming!" And five minutes of energy added onto the red digital clock at the center of the Waynerator+.

"Let's have sex in the Swiss Alps," Amanda said, left eye twitching. "Call that a Mountain Dew."

"The fireman coming!" said the Waynerator+.

"You a cop carrying a pig," Amanda wheezed. "Call that a pork shoulder."

A pause from the Waynerator+. "Be more on-brand," it said.

Before collapsing on the cement, clothes soaked in sweat, Amanda said, "You a cop carrying a pig—call that a family reunion."

"The fireman coming!" said the Waynerator+.

Two men dragged Amanda to the back of the crowd as Grant Brown took her place. Grant was about to launch into an analogy about wax statues and axes when he was interrupted.

"This is crazy!" shouted Donald Rub. "We can all agree the Waynerator+ is a revolutionary electrical power source. But it's been two days since Hank hit, and we've only generated a few hours of energy. We need another strategy to save our kids."

Grant Brown placed a dirty hand on Donald's shoulder. "Listen to me. The Red Cross. The National Guard. They've got bigger fish to fry than a small children's hospital. We're the only shot these kids've got."

Donald Rub looked at the twenty other tired faces. He gazed around at the sparking powerlines and uprooted trees and overturned sailboats, finally accepting the situation in front of him. "Oh," Donald said, voice distant. "I see."

A silence fell over the crowd, silence except for ambulance and police sirens howling in the distance. Then, as if from nowhere, the sound of a thumping hum. A black dot in the sky grew more and more defined each passing minute, each passing second, until finally a helicopter hovered over the hospital. Clothes and hair whipped every which way as the chopper descended, and when it finally touched down, a man with a backwards hat and a skateboard hopped onto the concrete. "It's a bird, it's a plane!" Lil Wayne shouted over the propellers. "No, it's Weezy F. Baby!"

"The fireman coming!" said the Waynerator+.

The rapper skated through the crowd of awed faces until he reached the Waynerator+. "I don't trust elevators 'cause they bring me down-arino," Lil Wayne said, his voice confident and raspy. "My room smell like money in the morning. Call that a cash-uccino. Young Mullah, baby, we ain't a mob, we a casino. In Miami throwing touchdowns, call me Dan Marino."

"The fireman coming! The fireman coming! The fireman coming!"

The group of parents, jaws on the pavement, watched as the rapper worked his magic:

"Waive my wand and move water, call me Harry Potter," Lil Wayne said. "The wizard of New Orleans, I am Dwayne Carter."

"The fireman coming!"

"Rollie 'round my ankle, I look like Bill Gates on house arrest."

"The fireman coming!"

None of what Lil Wayne said was written down.

"Life's an emotional rollercoaster, that's why my Nina's never in her holster."

"The fireman coming!"

"She took my breath away. She my Grand Canyon. I brought her home and made a movie. James Cameron."

"The fireman coming!"

Wayne worked for five hours straight, only pausing to drink water.

"Just bought a bulldozer to lay ya ass flat. Chuck-E-Cheese doing chest presses, call that a gym rat."

"The fireman coming!"

Grant Brown clapped slowly. "It's like watching Picasso paint."

"Pink grill, flamingo. I'm drumming like Ringo. You boys are like Kinkos. I howl like a dingo."

The orange sun slowly sank lower.

"Like a fat kid in a candy shop, it's a sticky situation. Let's do a full body exam, I'm the doctor, you the patient."

Sweating, panting, Lil Wayne gave up. He draped a wet towel over his head and crashed down on his skateboard.

The soupy purple night exploded with cheers. Strangers kissed. Hot bottles of champagne popped. Eighty-year-old Arlene Hill fired her pistol blindly in the air. Lil Wayne generated over a week's worth of energy for St. John's. The group's prayers had been answered.

A small child shouted out her window on the hospital's second floor: "You showed up. No foolin'. You *actually* showed up."

Lil Wayne winked at the girl. "Weezy F. Baby, and the F ain't for foolin'."

"The fireman coming!" said The Waynerator+.

"I wish I could stay," Lil Wayne said, climbing to his feet. "But there's a flood in Zimbabwe, and those good people need my help."

The helicopter's propellers kicked up wind as they again began to spin.

"Weezy," said Amanda Nunn. "How can we ever repay you?"

Lil Wayne's body hung halfway out the helicopter. "Everyone knows I'm a rapper and a skater. What people *don't* know is I'm also a philanthropist." Wayne had to shout over the propellers now, the chopper no longer touching the ground. "Repay me by helping people. Help people, and don't brag about it."

As if realizing something, Amanda Nunn said, "Real G's move in silence like lasagna..."

The red-eyed men and women held hands and danced in a circle as the helicopter ascended. Smiles splitting their faces. The chopper climbing higher and higher until it was once again a little black dot.

There was only one thing left to do.

Donald Rub stepped up to the Waynerator+. "I'm the matador, you the bull. Check your diaper, I think it's full."

"The fireman coming!" said the Waynerator+.

Finally. Energy inside and outside St. John's.

**The Standoff**  
**by**  
**Adrianna McCollum**

My dog wakes herself with a fart,  
eyes filled with accusation  
that I had played a nasty trick,  
her glare cold, convinced.

I don't back down,  
spaghetti western music plays  
in my ears, I can almost feel  
the cracked earth under my feet.

Accusation turns to hurt,  
sadness now welling in her eyes.  
My resolve begins to falter,  
a creep of guilt I can't explain.

Then she turns to lick her anal glands  
and we both know the jig is up.

## Housewarming by PS Zhang

My sister Mindy recently hosted the type of party where acquaintances posing as friends compliment you while simultaneously judging your life decisions and aesthetics. The dialogue is predictably catty. "It's so ambitious to take on a fixer. You must not be too busy at work." "I love these floor-to-ceiling windows. What a view! Must be a nightmare to clean."

At last, Mindy found the right home for her fiancé Wendell, herself, and her dog Birdie, a spirited English Setter with one black eye and a predisposition to slobber from excitement and exhaustion. My sister lives in San Francisco where finding a place to live is a high stakes digital shootout among white and Asian people. Whoever has the most money and the best LinkedIn profile wins. People there love diversity but not enough to actually nurture it within the temperate marine layer geography.

She and Wendell were looking for a dog-friendly one to two-bedroom abode with parking. They found a detached 1910's yellow bungalow in Bernal Heights. The house is unremarkable in its interior and exterior but is valued at almost 1.5 million dollars. It's a one bedroom, one bathroom with an open finished attic space which they use as a guest space, lounge, and gaming center. Parking is something they're always discussing. They have a one car garage that is slightly too small for Mindy's Prius. For Wendell's Audi convertible, it didn't go well. New to the street and blocked in, Wendell called the cops to have the offender towed. Later he realized it was his neighbor's car. Now Mindy and Wendell both park on the street and like much of America, use the garage as storage. In case you're wondering, Wendell is not white though that probably seems a very white thing to do.

The best feature of the home is that it is spacious (1200 square feet) with hardwoods throughout. It is a standalone structure and has a private fenced in backyard with grill, built-in outdoor furniture, and fire pit. Not to mention the house faces onto Bernal Heights Park, a place they visit with Birdie on a nightly basis. Some of the best views and most pampered pooches of San Francisco can be seen from that vantage point. Most of the time Birdie goes in the park. My sister scoops the dog's business with a California approved biodegradable bag and then drops the satchel off at the park's entrance before heading home. But sometimes, *a dog's gotta go when a dog's got to go*. In those cases, Birdie goes in the backyard.

She likes to make her transactions in the tall lily and hay grasses. Her setter nose and legs stalk around the backyard, flushing the vegetation, on the scent for the best place to squeeze out brown and mustard yellow logs. Occasionally, Birdie likes to go in the raised fire pit. The first time she did this, I was awestruck. What a strange and entrancing sight to see a dog bred to wander several miles in drizzly Anglo-Saxon heaths and marshes, hunch herself over like a speckled pinto bean, treating a modern granite gas fire pit as her porcelain throne.

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My pug Beans spun around in front of the backdoor, whimpering to be let out. I thought again of my sister's housewarming and the call she gave me afterwards, how she had prepared the home from top to bottom, made plans regarding the chores, the guests, the



food, and on and on. The chore that escaped her was to clean the backyard. And when she remembered, she shrugged it off.

Mindy hadn't wanted to ask Wendell for help. Although Wendell liked Birdie, he wasn't raised with dogs. Asking her fiancé, whom she's just begun living with, to pick up bags of old dog shit wasn't really the most romantic gesture a young woman in love would bestow onto her life partner. Besides, she had consoled herself, Birdie's presents weren't anywhere a person would step and probably no one would notice anyway.

"Callie almost ate some of Birdie's poop at the housewarming," Mindy had casually recounted over FaceTime as she unloaded the groceries from her canvas tote bags.

"What do you mean a child almost ate—"

"Well we gave her an ice cream cone and she kept, kind of, dropping it, you know," my sister tilted her palm over and looked surprised by the imaginary ice cream splattered on her floor. "She's little; she was a bit distracted. I mean, Beck, kids are nuts. Some of them tried to tear down all the cheese and crackers from the dining table. One of the parents gave his son some cambozola, and the kid went manic."

"Uh-huh," I dutifully commented. I don't really like kids but everyone's having them these days.

Mindy's hands groped through the air at more imagined oddly shaped items. "The little boy was so powerful, like physically, he tasted the cheese and went fucking berserk. Like Hulk, you know. Rawr! He got all panicky; it was gross." I imagined my sister witnessing such hedonism in tiny individuals, eyes ravenous, mouths agape, and arms grabbing at her.

"And this was Callie?" I picked up Beans and held him in my arms. The excitement people feel for babies is what I feel for this scrunched-faced-destroyer-of-slippers. Beans pawed at my arm and I fed him a piece of chicken off my plate as if on command.

"No, no, Callie had the ice cream cone. Well first she laid her cone down on the patio stairs and I asked her dad, David, 'hey should I give her another ice cream?' I was thinking to myself, these people know I have a dog...and we're in my backyard. But David said no, it was fine. Kids will end up eating lots of dirt. There's no way to prevent it. Honestly, I was kind of shocked, but you know, men." She looked in the direction of a pile of Wendell's dirty soccer gear in the background.

"Yeah," I wasn't in the mood to remind her I am also a man and I had never let children under my supervision eat dirt let alone excrement. "It's hard to see a mother being okay with that but what does that have to do with eating dog presents?"

"Oh yeah-yeah. Callie dropped her cone *again*, except this time the ice cream touched some of Birdie's poop." Mindy's head disappeared as she rummaged for something in the kitchen cabinets.

"Huh?" I shouted, temporarily forgetting she'd hear me at the same volume on her laptop regardless of how I said it.

Her head popped back into the frame, "So, Callie was really interested in the fire pit and playing in the gravel and she put her cone down again and it might have touched some of Birdie's poop."

"Mindy, why would that have happened? Didn't you clean up before people came over?" My sister started chopping a salad while looking past her screen and pulled a cookbook into view.

"Yes of course, like all of the inside but I forgot about the backyard. I don't go out there much, it's really for Birdie." The knife glinted as it caught the kitchen's recessed lighting. She used it like a telescoping pointer flicking it to her garden's door. "Plus, I had a lot of stuff going on and making food for thirty people. And besides, how was I supposed to know that a child would want to play in a fire pit? How is a person supposed to know that?"

Her knife chopped hard against a green pepper then a red onion. I felt us sliding back to childish ways. It's strange, though she's the elder (and most responsible) and a successful chemist, a profession which demands literal microscopic attention to detail, outside the lab she's a free-spirited loose and breezy type. I, on the other hand, am the baby and though I could have gotten away with a lot more, I love procedure and straight edges. It didn't surprise anyone when I became a rigid corporate lawyer whose greatest daily attribute is spotting and correcting inconsistencies.

"Anyways," Mindy plopped the vegetables into a steel bowl, "just when Callie was about to lick the ice cream with poop sprinkles, David sprang into action from seemingly nowhere and grabbed the cone from her mouth."

"Wow, talk about fatherly spidey senses."

"Yeah I didn't even notice any of this happening until David reacted. *Men.*" She winked and gave me a knowing smile.

I acknowledged her apology with a grin then moved on to more logistical matters, "Next time, I guess clean up the firepit. I still can't believe you had people at your house and the stuff was in plain sight."

"Dude, is that seriously all you took from this conversation?"

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Rain pelts down on my London flat. In the kitchen, the wet streams sideways on the garden's glass and iron back door. I look up at the cream ceiling, the color indicated as "Magnolia Beige" on the rental agreement, and wince about my neighbor on the fourth floor of this Victorian townhouse.

*Pop, pop, pop* on my window and a finger pointed at my low nose, black hair, and creased eyes, somehow missing the six-foot-four-inch brunet beside me. "4<sup>th</sup> Floor" had found something unpleasant in the garden—a lot of it—and as if that wasn't offensive enough, the blasted stuff was on the doorstep. He had almost stepped in it.

My husband Charlie had lost the coin flip during our first month in the flat (ironically calling tails) and earned the official designation of *Scooper*. This was his steamy pile to clean up. Of course, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor couldn't have known this, but my question remains, why with Charlie and I before him, ready to be barbequed, did he have only one skewer? I guess I was the one seemingly small and docile enough to fit on the fire pitch. That must have been it.

We had been told no one uses the garden and when we moved in, it was in a completely abandoned state. There was no evidence anyone took an interest or responsibility for the space. The garden had two entrances and the door for the upstairs' flats was covered in cobwebs. Our first weekend together, Charlie and I cleaned the grounds, organized and tamed it, removed several giant garden bags of yard waste, and though Beans used the garden every day, we never saw a single neighbor.

Selfishly, we hadn't given our sporadic cleanings any thought until the day 4<sup>th</sup> Floor confronted me. I got a good dressing down—much more than a *tut*—and accordingly established a consistent schedule to rid the garden of Beans' beans.

Even with this, Charlie would often miss several. Once, I noticed 4<sup>th</sup> floor had hung some clothes low to the ground and one of them if scooted a centimeter would have touched a calcified log. I stealthily removed the evidence, did a scan for any others in the yard, and unfortunately found several more.

Although I knew the solution—watch Beans during every bathroom break and do the pick up immediately after, or walk Beans and don't let her go in the garden—I could never bring myself to do either even though I was accustomed to both practices while living in Chicago and New York City. Something about London's constant rain, the convenience of the garden, my own inconsiderate behavior and laziness, and that 4<sup>th</sup> floor very seldomly appeared—only during the summer when it was sunny and only for the purpose of drying laundry. If you live in London, you know sunny summer days are few and far between and to combine that with weekend laundry day, well maybe my sloth could be explained if not excused.

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Today is a rare one for London. The sun is out on this town without a cloud as his plus one, the air is warm enough for printed shorts, and my friend Carey is visiting. The garden door is open. "I'm going to let Beans out," she says. My yard is spotless; I am confident.

"Take my garden clogs," I holler from the living room. When I don't hear her coming, I make my way through the kitchen. Carey is already outside, standing barefoot. In fact, she is in one of the more popular areas that Beans likes to pee in.

My cheeks burn with shame, and I apologize urgently, losing my sense and stating the obvious, "You know Beans goes to the bathroom out here right? I have some shoes. You should put on some shoes."

She laughs and says it's fine, "I have dogs too and I know, I told you I'm letting her out."

I back myself into the flat, hands almost up as if in tenuous surrender. *What am I responsible for here?* I scan the kitchen's wooden floor and feverishly cannot stop blinking. Surely something wrong has happened and it is my fault. Through the door, Carey saunters across the concrete, avoiding the damp but otherwise exploring and enjoying the garden.

After Carey leaves, I FaceTime Mindy and ruminate about soapy toes and un-savored brown sprinkles. "If you had picked up after Birdie, would it still count? What if some other kids visit and you make s'mores and one of them accidentally drops his marshmallow stick onto the flaming gravel, but everyone says *five second rule*, what do you do? Do you let the kid eat the marshmallow even though you know where it's been?"

"Yeah, I get where you're going with this," the knife flicks back into view. This time she slices up potatoes for gratin.

"Isn't something left behind, even in fire? Something always is." I look past my screen and onto the garden in full bloom. The creeping jasmine is out, like tiny white stars have gotten stuck in a deep green sky. The camellia tree bends deep with pink flowers, and the lavender has won its claim over the herbs. It couldn't be more perfect.

"Your obsession with purity has to stop. Poop dust on fire, it's just dirt at that point."

"Right...right..."

She stares at me not moving although the connection is fine.

I stare back.

"I wouldn't tell that kid Birdie shit in the fire pit," she admits with a sly smirk.

"Me either," I agree, feeling terrible but honest.

"What you don't know can't hurt you," Mindy jokes. She cackles as she forces a block of cheese against the box grater. I cough out a laugh too, knowing we'd say nothing, only look at each other and raise an eyebrow.

**Two Poems**  
by  
**Corey Bryan**

**an unfortunate analogy**

I think last night I caught a glimpse into your soul in the same, unlucky way strangers catch a glimpse of you through the gaps in the doors of public restrooms in America. It was pure, unadulterated panic in your eyes when our eyes met through the metal door, and like the panic that sets in when someone knocks on the doors of public restrooms in America, you said "I'm in here" as if that would solve any problems at all. I know this might be crude, to compare your soul to public restrooms in America but until you open up it's the only analogy I have available so it will have to do.

**amateur zoologist**

I want to get to a point in my life where I won't have to look up animals to describe her, I'll have read enough zoology to know that if I say she is just like a frog wearing spectacles I should describe her with clammy skin and the ability to breathe underwater for extended periods of time or to describe her as more of a field mouse who's so warm and elusive and tiny and sweet, taking naps in the heads of flowers, bees knocking on her door to tell her she can't sleep there. Or if I describe her like a carrion crow, feeding on the leftover remains of my 400 previously discarded poems that she's only doing it out of necessity. Although it might not matter how accurately I describe the animal she is or whether or not she wears glasses because you understand what I mean when I say she's just a kangaroo carrying around my soul inside her flappy little pouch, as she jumps around and shakes all my insides up until I can't see straight. Though not even that can really do her justice, there's something else, too. I love her in a million different ways and there is an infinite possibility of animals she could be, I'll just need to study up to properly express my love. I just want to get to the point in my life where I can recall exactly what a blue-footed booby is without using reference material because who knows? she might be a marine bird native to subtropical and tropical regions of the eastern Pacific Ocean and is easily recognizable by her distinctive bright blue feet, which is a sexually selected trait and a product of her diet and if she is I want to be able to tell her that.

## **Men's Rights Activists Resurrect Charles Bronson**

**by**  
**Austin Wilson**

"We're men... we fuck... we're powerful and tough... We're men... we fuck... we're powerful and tough..."

Charles Bronson's corpse lay at the feet of four men in the Rest-Go back room. Their chanting covered the sound of the freezer humming to keep the ice cream sandwiches from melting.

The dead man was covered in a genuine WWII U.S. Marine coat they bought on Etsy and a pair of 1970s Levis from someone's granddad. A .457 Wildey Magnum rested near the desiccated right hand. It was possible the smell was from the coat instead of the rotting corpse, but it didn't matter. It was a masculine musk, Alpha as fuck.

Originally, the east wall of the room was plain white and forgettable. Now it took hold of your face and wouldn't let go.

Charles Bronson posters overlapped, framed his knife-like features. It was a crisscrossing quilt of the Manly One's visage. Although the productions ranged from the 60s to the 80s they could've all been created in the same week.

Those eyes accused you of weakness from every sheet. His perfectly trimmed mustache slashed darkness across his face. That jaw stayed clenched like a third fist. Smaller, but pasted in the center of the wall, a black and white photo showed Bronson walking next to a nameless Flower Child. They held hands, his chest and biceps taut. His shirt wanted to give up.

He was a Presence. There was no such thing as "personal space" when he was near. He owned it all.

"It's time," one of the chanters said.

Another crouched, pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and picked the firearm up, keeping his skin away from its sacred surface.

"The world needs men," he said.

"The world needs men," the others repeated. "The world needs men... the world needs men..."

Rhythm took hold, their voices rose.

"We need a man," the one holding the gun whispered as he placed the cold metal into Bronson's skeletal palm.

Creaks and pops rolled through the corpse, like distant gunshots and grenades going off inside tanks. A Viking bellow sizzled in the chest. The group stared as the body writhed. They chanted faster, louder, manlier.

Charles Bronson opened his mouth and inhaled, a breath like fire across the rafters of an enemy stronghold. His hand flexed, almost dropped the gun. The finger knew home was near, sensed its closeness. The chanting stopped when that yellowing, dusty bone settled against the curve of the trigger.

"Mr. Bronson?" Asked the one who'd placed the weapon in his hand.

A faint voice slid through the door behind them, some asshole unaware the world had changed, disrespecting the moment with some bullshit. Bronson would kick his ass first.

One of the men stepped to the door, pushed it open and said, "Dude, it's pay at the pump."

"I don't need gas. I want a lottery ticket."

"Fuck you, how about that, huh?"

"Bro," one of the others said, "forget him. Bronson's *alive*."

They looked down at the great man, then at each other.

"It's time for people to understand some new shit," one of them said.

Charles Bronson lifted his arm and brought the room to silence. He moved the gun to his face, although he had no eyes, no eyelids, only pits of black. Finally, he spoke with a phlegmy static.

"...wwwhhhyyy...?"

The door swung open and a guy poked his head in and said, "-Mega Millions at four-hundred—"

"Grab him!" One of the men said, and two of them did. They wrapped him in a headlock, told him to shut up, watch what all the pussies had coming their way, including him. Fucking bullshit lottery tickets, bullshit *everything*. Bronson was back.

Hisses, short bursts like leaking pneumatic hoses floated up from Bronson's throat.

"Mr. Bronson, what-?" The one who'd given him the gun crouched again, tilted his head and lowered his ear near the Manly One's mouth. He heard.

"...why... it was... was a song... why d'you bring me... it was a song..."

"What was, Mr. Bronson?" The man asked.

The lottery fan pissed his pants and fainted, went limp in the men's arms. They dropped him and his head hit the floor like a bowling ball.

"What'd he say?" One of them asked.

And finally Bronson answered as he started weeping. No tears flowed from his flaking eye sockets but his sobs were unmistakable.

"Death," he said. "Death was a song."

He wept all night as the men asked him questions, gave him enemies' names, told him to get up and beat someone's ass. But he continued to weep, tears dried up forever.

The men's rights advocates had to leave eventually, either to go to work or because they were tired. They locked Charles Bronson in the backroom of the Rest-Go where he cried and continued asking them to hear the song again.



**Pen Pals with Benefits**  
by  
**J.M. McBirnie**

How did I win this privilege  
you all bent on my chest?  
As windows watch us breathless,  
your text might know the rest.

The secrets lie within  
your sheets, but all can see:  
books have the only spines  
that'd ever sleep with me.

**Scrapes**  
**by**  
**Trevor Conway**

I walked into a pole one sunny afternoon. It was the makings of me. Never saw the thing. One of them tall, slender, grey yokes that melt into the background if you're not paying attention. I felt like it did something to me. Whether temporary or permanent, I wasn't sure. But change was afoot. I could feel it. Could end up with a job by the end of the day, I reckoned. Which frightened the life out of me.

I had one eye on the waters of the Corrib river as I went along. Fast and lumpy it looked, the colour of lead. Strangely alluring. But there was still some wandering to be had.

The first hint of a cloud sent me into the pub. The problem is, when I drink, I get notions. Not grand ones. Daft ones. And it rains frequently in this town, where the only proper place for a bit of shelter is the aforementioned public house. There was something about that phrase, "public house". It drew me in. As if your own family were waiting beyond the squeak of the doors. Of course, we don't always get on with our families. But that's another story for another afternoon.

This pub was big, wide-open, not like the type that have lots of nooks and corners where men can hide from their wives or whatever else they might fear.

I took a stool at the bar, ordered a stout and closed my eyes. Today was a day for lounging around in my own thoughts, I figured. But others have ways of spoiling such notions.

I could see one such other approaching. He looked like a proper eejit in a white flannel suit and hat. Bit like a tall, emaciated snowman. He wasn't your average brand of eejit, I'd soon find out. He cultivated a persona that'd leave a sour taste in anyone's mouth. One of those fellas that have stupid ideas about women. Not that we don't all have stupid ideas about women. But in the case of this fella, it was a defining characteristic. As if he genuinely believed the world was better off without them.

"They just can't help themselves," he pronounced. "They have to change a man, make him into something he isn't. It goes back to their fathers."

I blinked slowly, hoping he'd be gone by the time I opened my eyes.

No such luck was to be had.

"All of them?" I said with a raised eyebrow.

"Every single last one of them, practically. It's in their make-up. Genetics. We're nothing but projects to them." He had a strange way of over-pronouncing his words, as though he'd had a brief dalliance with elocution lessons.

I had a notion to get away from him, but I'd already committed to sitting on the stool. Didn't want to cause a diplomatic incident. Just keep the head down and get through my pint.

"I don't know," I said after a solid ten seconds of him staring into my face.

"You don't know what?" He tilted his head so his dark, hairy nostrils were bearing down on me.

"I don't think it's fair to generalise," I said.

"Ha!" He threw his head back. "I heard you in here once. You had no problem making generalisations about the English."

"When?"

"A fortnight ago. Maybe more."

"Ah, but that's the oppressor," I explained. "They're a different breed altogether."

He folded his arms. Sent a blast of air through his aforementioned nostrils.

"Tell me," he said, "do you actually *know* any English people?"

"I do."

"And are they all... What was the word I heard you use?... 'Pathetic empire-huggers', wasn't it?"

"It might have been... And no, they're not all of that ilk. The ones I'd be friendly with aren't real English, though."

"What are they, so? Artificial English?" He threw a sly smile at the barman, a hefty fella with short hair and an unhealthy redness to his skin. My own skin was getting as red as his, I fancied, my blood working up to a simmer.

My persecutor suddenly took a different tack:

"What is it you do, anyway," he said?

"This and that," I answered.

"This and that," he repeated slowly, like a retarded parrot. I was in no mood for birds of paradise.

The truth was, I'd been collecting the dole for a good fifteen years without interruption. I'd tried a bit of work when I was nineteen or twenty, but it turned my stomach. Not so much the work itself. The repetition. Boredom. That was my chief vice. Same as my father. Neither of us could sit still for more than a grand total of five seconds. However, I won't waste my breath on that fella.

"And how do you earn your own crust?" I asked.

"I lecture," he said. The corner of his thin lips looked like they had ambitions of forming a smirk.

"Right," I replied. "I gathered that already."

I thought I'd seen him somewhere before. It came back to me—he gave a lecture on Irish history that I hopped into once. I like the idea of college, you see, especially universities. All that learning swimming around the place. It's just the notions it gives people that I don't like. And the cost. So I prefer to dip in and out of the place every now and then. Take a few notes if I feel like it. I have a certain gravity pulling me towards history and science. Occasionally, I dabble in a bit of architecture. But I need to be in the mood for it.

He somehow got back onto the subject of women, despite my attempts to navigate him towards the Celts.

"I think it's important to recognise the differences between us," he said.

"Between me and you?" I said. (This was before I realised he was back onto women, having returned to that furrow with neither preamble nor the good manners to inject even a shift in tone.)

"No," said he, "between us and the ladies."

I widened my eyes, waiting for a bit of elaboration.

"And?" I said finally.

"They like pretty things, for instance," he explained.

"Do they?"

"You don't think so?"

"Not all of them."

"True. But the majority."

The pain in my head was growing. Not so much from listening to him. More from the lump that'd formed at the top of my forehead. I heard the clang of the pole through my skull again, as clear as when it happened.

"And they're not the best at positions of authority, I think it's fair to say," he went on, "even though it might not be popular to say it aloud."

"Which is why the majority of senior lecturers are men," I countered.

"Exactly," he nodded. Seeming to think I was agreeing with him.

I'd had enough.

"It's just a pity it's bullshit," I said.

"What's bullshit?"

"Your hypothesis."

He pulled his pointy chin back a little.

"I... I don't think that's fair," he said.

"What's not fair is gobshites like you preaching from the pulpit to young ones that have twice the sense you have," I said.

"That's not very polite." His forehead scrunched up into lines like the kind you'd see on a heart monitor. I couldn't tell whether he was angry or confused. Probably both.

And then the notion just took me. Before I could think any different, I'd slapped him across the cheek. His daft glasses flew off his face. He looked down to them, then back at me. I hoped he'd swing. But his head shook. That was all. I considered following it up with another. Or maybe a proper punch. My pint was finished, though. And I wasn't the fighting type. So I hopped off the stool and pushed him out of my way.

The fresh air felt good, though I didn't know what to do with myself. I just rambled down by the curving canal and up towards the noise of the buskers. Kept going till I saw a bunch of tourists at the spot where they start the walking tour. There was a good dozen of them, looking at their watches, wondering where the tour guide was. Germans, I guessed. And I summoned up a shallow drop of the bit I'd learned in school.

"Deutsch?" I said.

"We are from the Netherlands," said one, looking briefly toward the woman with him, wearing an identical green rain jacket.

"Are you the tour man," she asked. I sensed from the hesitation in her voice that she had a lesser command of English.

"I am," I nodded. "Sorry I'm a bit late. Quick stop in the toilet. You know yourself."

More and more of the group starting turning in our direction. Until they'd all gone silent and were looking at me like I was the second coming of the lad from Nazareth.

"Must we give to you the money now, or must we do it at the finish?" the woman asked.

"Now'd be great," I said. "I sometimes forget at the end."

"How many?"

"Ten euro. It's twelve usually, but ye're a fairly big group, so I'll give ye a bit off."

I collected the heap of notes and coins. Luckily, I got plenty of change from the first few, so I was able to break the twenties and fifties I got after that. I still had a good clatter of coins left at the end, though, so I balanced them out between my two pockets.

"Right," I said in the most official register I could muster, "are ye all ready?"

They were plenty of nods in reply.

"Sorry, what is your name?" one of them asked. More Scandinavian than proper continental, I reckoned. I wasn't in the mood for giving the right one, so I gave the first name that came into my head:

"Gabriel," I said. And I found myself holding my chin a bit higher, as if the name itself lent me some extra respect. Of course, it could've been the newfound role I'd landed myself in. "Are we all ready to get lashing into it?" I asked. There were less nods than before. Thankfully, no-one asked me to explain what I meant.

Off we went. Through narrow streets. Finally, after a good five minutes of walking—and many nonplussed faces among the group—I thought of something to say.

"This here wall," I said, standing at a decrepit piece of cement, "was built by the Normans in 1462."

"Excuse me, but who?" a short, sweaty fella asked from the back of the group. The one who was always trailing behind.

"The Normans," I said, expecting he was about to correct me, since I had no idea what I was talking about. It turned out he just hadn't heard me right. Buoyed by this lucky escape, I chanced a few more spontaneous facts:

"They came from Normandy, in northern France." (This one, I was pretty sure, was true.)  
"They got this name since they came from the north, from the perspective of those who named them, in the middle of France. And they arrived on a Monday, "Mandy" being the old name for Monday back then." (This one, I was even more sure, wasn't true.)

I blathered on and eventually got the heels moving again. I took them over the bridge, towards the cathedral. It was only when one of them stopped—one who'd had the cheek to walk ahead of even myself – that I figured I should say something about it.

"The green dome is supposed to symbolise the breast of the Virgin Mary," I told them. "The colour green, as ye might guess, is a nod to the very land ye're standing in."

The short fella at the back asked me to speak up for the third time. In fairness, the loud gurgling of the traffic going by didn't help matters. I tried to speak above it all, but I could tell they were getting more and more frustrated.

"Let's move on!" I shouted in my chirpiest tone.

We came to the university. I walked them over by the great big lawn, lied about the date the university was founded, the number of students and the typical cost of a year's tuition.

"Did any famous people attend the university?" one of the Scandinavians asked.

I'd gotten tired of making things up at this stage.

"You know, I don't have a notion," I said.

The response was more curiosity than disappointment:

"Notion—I have heard this word many times here. What does it mean?" he asked.

"Oh, notions. Well..." I tried to think of all the different ways we use the word. Maybe I could actually impart some real knowledge here, I thought. Something of value, that you wouldn't get on your average tour.

"If you don't have a notion, it means you don't have a clue, no idea," I said. "You're far away from the answer, like. And then, if you *get* a notion, you just want to do something, on the spur of the moment. Usually, it might involve a bit of mischief. Then, you have a different brand of notions. The kind some of the people around here might have. They're high ideas about yourself, thinking you're better than others."

This brought out a few smiles, so I was getting pretty chuffed with myself. Until, that was, a bearded fella who'd been quiet all along piped up with the question:

"For how much time are you working in this job?" He said it in a way that really stuck in my craw. As if he reckoned it was my first day on the job. Of course, he'd be right, but that's beside the point.

"A decent while," was all I could think to answer.

He looked confused, his little ponytail shaking ever so slightly. Another joined in, the Scandinavian-looking woman:

"But you had done this previous, yes?"

"How do you mean?" I asked, thinking I could come up with a satisfactory answer given some time.

Her husband did some interpreting for her:

"You have done this work before, have you?" he asked, looking more serious than he had throughout the whole tour. "You didn't decide to be a tour guide today," he smiled. Though I was full-sure he only meant it as a joke, the reality of the situation was getting a bit too close for my liking.

"Ha!" I broke out into a rash of laughter. I didn't know when to stop. To the point that it got pretty obvious what was going on. At least so it seemed to me. "It's been a long time since I had a group as fun as ye," I said. It seemed to allay the fears of the more gullible ones. "I'll be sad when this ends," I went on. "But I'll need a quick break. Back in a jiffy."

I headed for a big, modern building. Probably the newest one on the campus. Lots of glass and unnecessary frills on the outside. As I came to the door, I could see in the reflection that a few of the group were following me. Bent on joining me in the bathroom, I surmised. Or confronting me. Once I got around the corner, I headed for a corridor that led to the back exit. Slipped out of the building and high-tailed it for the college bar.

I took a corner there and made it my own. Great pint. I had it gone in five minutes. No lying. So I went up for another. Gravitated towards the same woman who'd given me the first one. A woman with shortish hair dyed a kind of deep maroon colour, not far shy of black. Odd choice, but we're all entitled to our oddities.

I always like a woman to pull my pint of stout. They have a way of taking care with little things. Men just grab the tap like they're flicking through channels on the TV, or hopping down off the wife after thirty years of practice.

There was one lad in the far corner, a sheepish-looking fella with black hair that looked like it hadn't seen a comb in all its days. He had his head planted in a book. Not some textbook, I reckoned. He handled the thing with too much care for that. Turned the pages slowly, like

he was trying to prolong the experience. I'd say I've read only a handful of books like that, where I didn't want to finish it. Most times, I'd devote half the reading experience to checking how many pages are left in a chapter. I don't read as much these days. There was one time in my life when I'd read a couple of books a week.

If someone was to land into the pub there and then ask me to name a job—the perfect one for myself, like—I'd probably say something to do with books. Writing those descriptions on the backs of them maybe. In fact, I did have a job connected with books once. More than a job—I was a proprietor, no less. Took over a small area at the back of my aunt's tea shop. Twelve foot by ten. Had it stacked with books from all corners of life. Sewing. Knitting. Biographies. Tibetan philosophy. Plenty more. There was a queer mix lumped in together. Trouble was, I kept giving the damn things away. I'd spend a good ten minutes enthusing to a customer over some book, only to find he or she'd turn cold at the thought of actually paying a bit of money. So, I was happier seeing them trundle off with a free book than going away with two light paws.

I was at the business end of my second pint, glass tilted like a muzzle around my face, when my focus shifted to the front door of the bar. Three of the tour group had entered. They were looking around. For my good self, no doubt. I quickly turned and headed for the beer garden. Despite my evasive manoeuvre, one of them spotted me. They pushed through the crowd as I wandered through the beer garden. I hopped over the fence. There was a bike just lying against it. No lock or anything. I wasn't the type to do such a thing under normal circumstances, but the tour group were still on my tail, and I needed something to facilitate my escape. So I threw the leg over the saddle, and with a few quick grunts, I was off. Fully intending to return it later in the day.

I got pedalling, and was vexed to find that two lads from the group were still following me a couple of minutes later, shouting obscenities only they could understand. They must have been pretty fit, as they'd lost only a little ground. Or they were just determined to get their 10 euros back.

They were still within sight when I came to the first bit of student accommodation. And then, as you might've guessed, the chain started jangling. I looked down. It was hanging looser than my poor granny's neck. I dropped the bike and looked back. The two lads jogged on with renewed enthusiasm.

I disappeared around the side of an apartment. Looked for anything that might offer me salvation, having no idea what the two lads would do when they caught me. Though I had a fair idea they wouldn't be offering me a cup of tea.

The only thing that bore any resemblance to the aforementioned salvation was an open window. I surprised myself with the agility I mustered. One leap, and I was hugging the window frame. It would've been great if I could've held onto it, but my momentum kept me going till I came to an abrupt stop on the floor. On my back, to be precise. It took the wind out of me. As I waited for it to come back, I listened. Both to the sounds outside and those within the abode I found myself in. There appeared to be no-one here. Just your average student place. Lots of beer bottles stacked on the TV. Little evidence of cleaning. Then, I noticed there was a laptop lying closed on the sitting room table.

As regards the sounds outside, I heard footsteps and heavy breaths. It was the two lads from the group, I was sure. They soon jogged out of earshot, but their steps sounded slower. As if they were coming to a stop. Potentially hanging around, waiting for me to reveal myself.



A good six minutes later, I slowly got to my feet, clutching the window frame for support. I peered over it and couldn't see any sign of the two lads. It didn't mean I was home and dry, though. I was in no rush to get out into the open. And besides, I started into reading what was on the laptop—a journalism essay on the portrayal of terrorists—and I was fascinated. It made some very interesting points on how readers are influenced in subtle ways. Of course, there were a few weak parts, so I changed some words here and there. It was totally lacking in any kind of conclusion. The student—Jessica Denman, 1560472—seemed to have given up. In fact, she even admitted as much at the end of the document, just after the few one-word notes she'd managed to gather:

*I give up!!!!!!*

I always hated to see a woman in distress, so I went about the task of getting the poor girl a decent conclusion. Only took me five minutes. I suppose that was a testament to the clarity and the flow of her paper overall. I ended with a sentence pointing out that everyone around us is a potential terrorist. Our neighbours. Our colleagues. Our family members. Even ourselves. We're all capable of justifying violence, and acting on it, given the right circumstances. At least it was a different ending to most of the essays the marker'd be reading.

I became aware of footsteps coming down the stairs. I know the sensible thing to do would be to get myself back through the window from whence I came. But sense was always a thing I had terrible difficulty with. I stood up. Into the room walked a pale, slender girl of about nineteen, who looked like she'd been sustaining herself on a diet of beer and crisps. She froze. Gave me one look and stumbled backwards before racing up the stairs.

I called after her. Eventually, I walked up the stairs and put my head to the door I'd seen her disappear behind.

"Look, I'm not here to hurt you. I just hopped in the window to get out of a bit of bother." I waited for some kind of reply, but there was nothing. "I read your essay," I said. "It's very good. You had at least a good solid C there. Maybe a B. I added a wee bit to it. Hopefully, you'll get up into A territory." I thought that might bring a few words out of her, maybe even a thank you. I even imagined her coming out and reading what I'd written, giving me a big hug. But that was just another daft notion.

"I called the police!" she shouted.

"Ah, there's no need for that," I said. "I was just trying to help. I'll be on my way, anyway."

I didn't think she'd actually called the police: there was a phone—or something resembling one—near the laptop. That thought was soon dispelled when I saw two guards walking around outside.

I slipped out the window again. Don't know why I didn't think of leaving through the door. Anyway, the guards came towards me. I decided there and then that I'd give up the drink if I got arrested.

They stopped me.

"Do you know where seventeen B is?" one asked. He looked dopier than your average guard, a tall lad with more hair than brains coming out from under his hat.

"No idea," I said. Almost shaking with the nerves.

As I walked on, I thought about my vow to give up the drink if they arrested me. It crossed my mind to turn around and tell them what I'd done, breaking into the apartment and all. Maybe even the bike I commandeered. Just to get myself arrested and get off the drink. But what would that do? It'd only make me into someone else, someone society wanted me to be, other than what I wanted myself. Although I wasn't sure what that was, to be honest.

I did fix on another idea, though. I'd go back to college proper. Not just sit in on lectures. Actually take notes. Do the exams. Get the qualifications, if I had the stomach for it. It'd take an almighty effort, hours in the college library, thrashing into books that might not throw up anything decent. Trying to stay awake during boring lectures. Making sure I didn't veer towards the pub every day. I didn't need to give up the drink, just add something else to my life. Of course, that would require employment of some sort, in order to fund the experience.

When I got a decent distance away, I looked back at the apartment. The girl opened the door to the two guards. She looked in my direction. The sweat thickened on my skin, but she looked away again. And I was off for a walk by the river.

I thought about the lad I'd slapped in the bar. The tourist group. The window I'd jumped in. I'd never get into such scrapes under normal circumstances. But it's not every day I walk into a pole. And the thought hit me: we should all walk into poles a bit more often.

**Petty Little Poem**  
by  
**Emma McNamara**

so you're really gonna play with a poet  
and then act surprised when you get poem-ed about?  
darling, don't be delusional

you never even took me on a real date  
but that's ok cuz your dear friend did—  
you're a student in STEM,  
you should know Newton's laws—  
"an object in motion stays in motion"  
and that's all you ever saw me as anyways  
(an object)  
so I reckon I'll stay in motion  
(with your friend)

you shit-talk me to your pals,  
I real-talk you in my publications  
(we are not the same)

so go ahead and pretend you don't see me  
on campus—I'll see you  
in my next petty little poem and pretend  
to feel bad knowing you're staring at a screen  
thinking "wait, could this *possibly* be about *me*?"

you see, I hate that you're such a good kisser,  
but I'm an even better disser—  
darling, let's not pretend  
that if you could deliver  
and you weren't with her,  
you wouldn't slither over hither

and I'm so done blasting *Writer in The Dark* by Lorde  
or *Bitter* by Fletcher  
or *U Can't Touch This* by MC Hammer  
alone in my room while stalking your socials  
and calling that Healing—  
so I guess we're doing *this* now

and so my friends and family  
and therapist and wax lady  
and favorite ex-situationship  
and that one girl who overheard  
me rambling at the dining hall say

"but Emma, don't do *this*—  
be the bigger person"  
No.

"but Emma, you should have just trusted your gut"  
I can't, I have Crohn's Disease

"but Emma, what would you do if the  
muse of this mess hit you up right now?"  
I can't answer your inquiry at this time, this is  
supposed to be a petty LITTLE poem  
and I'm running out of space  
and I have people to see, places to be, things to do  
(with your friend)

**Do Buddhist Dogs Have Fleas?**  
by  
**Gail Mackenzie-Smith**

It happens fast.

First you refuse to eat anything with a face.

Milk, eggs, and cheese soon follow.

You trade your leather Louboutins, an anniversary gift from Michael, for shoes made of plastic. They scream cheap but you suck it up feeling superior to everyone at the office with their shoes made of animal skins.

Neanderthals.

You acquire handbags from companies called Namaste and Big Buddha.

A bee in the kitchen or a spider in the bedroom are gently caught and released outside.

You watch countless animal videos on Facebook and share them all. Several people unfriend you but you don't care. Elephants can cry.

You get email alerts from dog rescue sites and work late at night finding homes for abandoned pit bulls and geriatric labs.

Oreo, your beloved terrier, lies at your feet as you repost pictures of dogs with names like Trooper, Samson, and Nemo. He gnaws on his paw and tears at the fur between his pads. You watch him for a moment then notice a hot spot on his rear flank. You take a closer look.

Tiny black specs flit across pink, raw skin.

Oreo has fleas.

Momentarily flummoxed, you realize that fleas were Michael's department. Now that you've separated it's yours. No problemo.

You Google "flea med ingredients" and read: Pyriproxyfen, fipronil, (S)-methoprene, and spinosad are chemicals that target the nervous system of the flea causing involuntary muscle contractions, tremors, hyper-excitation, inability to fee, paralysis, then death.

Holy shit.

You Google "natural flea remedies". Diatomaceous earth comes up. Non-toxic. Safe.

Relieved, you continue to read: Diatomaceous earth is the powdered remains of diatoms, ancient, sea dwelling algae. Composed of millions of tiny, jagged edges, it cuts up the flea's insides causing it to dry up and die.

You feel sick.

Oreo nips at his rear end then slurps his left leg. You run a bath. As you lower him into the warm water you stop.

Can fleas swim? A vision of hundreds of drowning fleas floats into your mind. You can hear their little screams. Oreo squirms out of your arms and hides under the bed. He grunts as he scratches and licks.

You find a cigarette in the back of your desk drawer and smoke it outside.

The next day you drop a hundred bucks at the hipster doggie boutique around the corner and come home with spray bottles of peppermint and clove oil, Brewer's yeast tablets, and odorless garlic capsules. That night you work the pungent oils into Oreo's skin and mix the Brewer's yeast and garlic into his kibble.

In the morning, you notice that Oreo's flank is now hairless and his breath smells like sour eggnog. A puddle of vomit lies under the kitchen table.

Later, on the way home from the vet with a six-month supply of Frontline for dogs, you stop at Whole Foods and pick up a couple of grass-fed steaks and a red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting.

You text Michael.

**Dick Tea**  
**by**  
**Ariel Castagna**

Anita envied the wind-chimes. Their moans taunted her as she knocked on the oak door. She needed to steady her breath, so she allowed herself to slump, back flat, against the frame of the house. She hadn't made much progress when the door creaked open. Anita leapt off of the siding, but she didn't see who she was expecting. "Sorry. I must have made a mistake. I—"

She was standing in front of a shirtless man with thick brown curls. He stayed silent, but Anita heard a familiar voice from inside of the house.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to invite her in?!"

Shirtless slid to the side and gestured toward the foyer. Anita transitioned into the room slowly, to give her eyes time to adjust to the candlelight. Once it did, she saw Serenity sitting down in an arm chair.

"You found it," she said, gesturing around herself. There were about thirty-five bangle bracelets on her left arm and they clinked together as she did so.

Anita nodded. "Yes. Thank you." She stayed frozen in the entryway.

"Don't be shy. Please." Serenity snapped her fingers.

The sound echoed against the wooden floors. Shirtless sprang to action, latching onto Anita's arm and guiding her toward the seating area. Anita's breath hitched in her chest. She didn't exhale again until she was sinking into the upholstery of the seat across from Serenity.

"So, what can I help you with? You didn't say much over the phone."

"Well..." There wasn't an easy way for Anita to explain it. Beyond that, she was distracted by the sight of Shirtless shrinking down on all fours so that Serenity could prop her feet up onto his back.

"I promise. There's nothing you can tell me that I haven't heard before."

"It didn't work," Anita muttered.

Serenity's eyes widened. "I stand corrected."

The word 'stand' triggered Shirtless to shift, but Serenity was quick to dismiss it.

"Not you."

He sunk back down.

"Okay: Who's the mark?"

"His name is Tom."

"Star sign?"

Anita's foray into this area of expertise was infantile. "Scooorpio?"

"What's his hair look like?"

"Kind of short, but kind of—"

"Pieces," Serenity concluded. "Alright, realistically: we probably just need to tweak the formula according to his pH. But to make sure: I need you to tell me *exactly* what happened last night."

Anita took a deep breath in. "I asked Tom to come over to my apartment for *dessert*." She made air quotes with her fingers. "But then he said he'd had a big dinner. So I sent him a picture of my vagina, and then he said he'd be over in twenty minutes."

Serenity clenched her jaw together.

"I started to get the room ready. I followed all of your instructions." Anita pulled a small piece of paper out of her purse and unfolded it. "Five spritzes of vanilla essential oil in the air. Sprinkle of cinnamon around the bedframe." She listed a couple of more highlights before coming to the most important point, "And then I started the tea."

"Were you stressed at that point?" asked Serenity. "The steeping process is very sensitive to your chakra."

"No. Honestly, I think I was..." Anita giggled, and her hand shot up to stifle it. "Excited." Tom was the most elusive man from her office. The idea of sharing an intimate moment with him made her stomach do a backflip. "He texted me for my apartment number right when finished brewing."

Serenity instinctively leaned in at this point of the story.

"When he came to the door, I took his coat, and offered him something to drink. He asked for water at first, but then I pitched him the tea."

"Sorry," Serenity held her hand up to interrupt. "Can we go over that part again?"

"I... I told him I'd just made some tea I thought he would like." Anita shrunk down in her seat a bit, sensing that she had just made a mistake. "He said he'd like to try a cup, and I went and grabbed it."

"You brought him the tea. In a cup?"

"Yes."

"And he *drank* it?"

"Yes."



"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Serenity's outburst caused Shirtless to leap up from the floor. He snatched a handheld fan off of the end table and batted it in her direction at a hummingbird's pace. "It's not for his *mouth*. It's for his *penis*."

"I... I didn't..." Anita looked at her list of instructions again, but that particular detail was missing.

"Christ, Anita. It's called 'Dick Tea.' What'd you have for lunch, today? A ballsack sandwich?"

"I didn't know '*dick tea*' was the technical term," said Anita, barely above a whisper.

"Well, it is. It most definitely is." Serenity exhaled deeply. Shirtless yanked a hankie out of his shirt pocket and wiped her forehead clean of sweat. "I can't finish this conversation unless I have some snacks."

It was Shirtless' cue again. He fled to the kitchen and brought back a tray of various finger foods. Serenity sucked down six chocolate covered strawberries while Anita nibbled on a cracker with a smear of hummus on top.

"Alright, how invested are we in this 'Tom' character?"

"Why?"

"My advice?" said Serenity. "Start from scratch. Tom's body chemistry has been comprised. It'll be hard to bounce back." She pointed down at the coffee table between them. "There's a drawer on your side. Open it."

Anita found the drawer and inched it open. There was a thick accordion folder inside, and she began fingering through its contents. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of photos and fact sheets of various men from across the country.

"Take your pick. All personally curated to optimize your success."

"I don't know," said Anita, thumbing through her first few options.

Some juice from the strawberries had dripped down the front of Serenity' blouse. She waved Shirtless over. He unbuttoned her top and went to work slurping up the mess.

Anita accidentally glanced up from the pages of her potential admirers. She tried to look away again, but her eyes only widened instead.

"I know it's scary," said Serenity. "After all, results like these," she patted Shirtless' back as he finished licking the outside of her breasts. "require a huge time commitment."

"How long?" croaked Anita, reaching for the snack tray again. She decided on a tortilla chip with guacamole. A glob of the latter fell onto her open-toed shoe when she took a bite.

"Oh, this one's been on the Dick Tea for a *long time*. But trust me: it's worth it." Serenity jerked the napkins away from Anita's reach and pointed out the spill to Shirtless.

The man plopped to the ground and crawled toward her feet.

"Oh! No!" Anita crossed her legs in the other direction and held her hands out in an attempt to prevent him from getting any closer. "You don't have to..."

"It'sth my pleathsure, missth," said Shirtless, mid-lick of Anita's big toe.

"What was that?" Serenity stood up from her seat, causing everyone else to freeze. "Did you just *speak* without permission?"

Shirtless flattened himself against the floor, a stance that Anita guessed was an apology. She hastened to verbalize one on his behalf. "It was my fault. I—"

"Nope! It's clearly time for another dose." Serenity made her way to the curio cabinet across the room. Its shelves were lined with teas from all gestation periods. Loose-leaf tea ingredients, tea that had been bagged, and tea that had been brewed. She grabbed a jar of the last variety and turned back toward her company. "Drop your pants because I'm about to drown your Semon Demon in this Dick Tea!"

Shirtless launched to his full height and reached for his belt buckle.

Anita gasped for breath. She fumbled for her purse, and headed toward the front door to get some air.

Serenity met her halfway and placed the jar of tea in her hands. "Wait. What's your wildest sexual fantasy?"

She had already felt weak. With the added weight, Anita nearly crumbled. "I..." She snuck a glance toward Shirtless, who had his jeans around his ankles and his thumbs hooked around the top of his boxer-briefs. Her cheeks warmed from the temperature of boiling water to that of molten lava. "...Sometimes I imagine what it would be like to be a flower and have a bee pollinate my vagina."

Bangles flew in every direction as Serenity ripped her shirt open the rest of the way. She addressed Shirtless (now Pantless) again. "And after your swim, you're going to buzz your bumble-ass over here and plow my secret garden into the next solstice!"

A strange noise escaped out of Anita's lips. She scurried over to the curio cabinet, flung her entire wallet onto the counter, and scooped up every iteration of the Dick Tea that she could carry before bolting out of the house.

"Pleasure doing business with you!" Serenity called out after her. "And you," she added to Shirtless.

The man's pants were back on. He sauntered over to the counter and took the majority of the cash out of Anita's wallet.

Serenity joined him by the cabinet. "Wow! Greedy much?"

"I licked that chick's toe," the man reminded her. "You're lucky you're getting anything."

Serenity shrugged, and took a sip of tea.

## Contributor Biographies



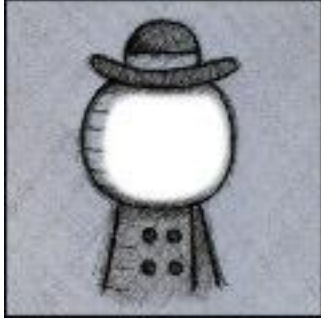
**Maxwell Shepherd** is a writer of horror and comedy fiction living in California.



**Linda Lowe's** stories and poems have appeared online in *Six Sentences*, *Misfit Magazine*, *Tiny Molecules*, *Microfiction Monday Magazine*, and others.



**Cori Steinberg** is a lawyer now living in Colorado after having spent most of her life in Southern California. She enjoys writing poetry (often rhyming and humorous) in her free time, in between studying Spanish on Duolingo and listening to true crime podcasts. She is still new to being published—other than *Defenestration*, she has recently had two poems published in *The Chained Muse* online poetry journal.



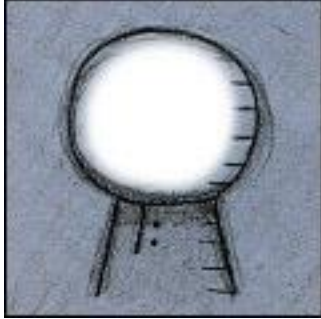
**Alex Dermody** was born and raised in Florida, currently lives in New York, and is 5'7 (even though he tells everyone he's 5'8). Alex's fiction has been most recently published in *The Seattle Star* and *Corvus Review*. He can be reached at [alexdermody15@gmail.com](mailto:alexdermody15@gmail.com).



**Adrianna McCollum** is a writer of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. She won First Place in Nonfiction in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Annual Jade Ring Writing Contest and has had poetry published in *A Year in Ink: Volume 15* and *Creative Wisconsin Magazine*. She is working on final revisions of a middle-grade portal fantasy novel called *Peregrine from the Stories*. She was inspired to write in the fantasy genre after stepping through a portal to another world while she was living in Oxford as a graduate student. That actually happened. On a rainy day on Queen Street.



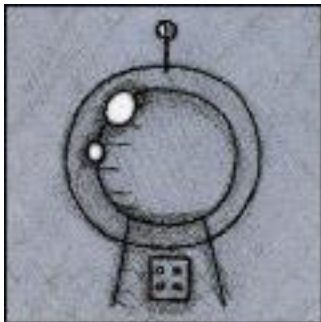
**PS Zhang** was born and raised in the American South. Her work can be read in *Southern Humanities Review* and *Zone 3*, where she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Further work is forthcoming in *New South*, where she placed second in their 2021 Prose Contest, *[PANK]*, *Washington Square Review*, and *Pleiades*. She is an alumnus of the Iowa Writers' Workshop Summer Program and a finalist in One Story's Adina Talve-Goodman Fellowship.



**Corey Bryan** is a student at Georgia State University. He lives with his clowder of cats (the best to ever do it) and girlfriend in Atlanta, Georgia. He is currently writing daily poetry prompts with a friend of his at [poetryispretentious.com](http://poetryispretentious.com). He is published at the *Empyrean Lit Magazine* and Papers Publishing and has six poems forthcoming at *A Door is a Jar*, *Deep South Mag*, and the *Seventh Quarry Press*.



**Austin Wilson** writes stories and interviews writers on his podcast *Ledger*. He loves Nora Ephron and James L. Brooks. After years of therapy and medication he has managed his doubt to bring you this bio. Find his work at [www.austinrwilson.com](http://www.austinrwilson.com).



A poet who also had to get a paying job, **J.M. McBirnie** has tricked such publications as *Whistling Shade* and *Dappled Things* to accept their work, and their self-published (gasp!) poetry collections include *The Dead of April* and *Let Us Go*.



**Trevor Conway** had it all. Life in sunny California was fully of dizzying highs, depraved lows and creamy middles. After he met a rather buxom lady, ruin followed. Realising all his money had been drained from his account, he took to poetry. For the money. His poems have been read on Austrian hills and in Mexican bathrooms. *Evidence of Freewheeling*, his first collection of poems, was published by Salmon Poetry in 2015. Website: [trevorconway.weebly.com](http://trevorconway.weebly.com)



**Emma McNamara** is a 21-year-old national award-winning writer from Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in publications worldwide such as *Wild Roof Journal*, *Ember—A Journal of Luminous Things*, *Beyond Words*, *Eunoia Review*, *Scholastic Art and Writing*, and *Defenestration*. Emma's passions include mental health awareness, disability advocacy, and LGBTQ+ issues. She has been an editorial board member at *Beyond Queer Words* since March 2021. Follow her on Instagram @author\_emma.



After a soul-destroying career in advertising, **Gail Mackenzie-Smith** got her MFA in screenwriting where she continues to torture herself with near misses and empty promises. In the quest for a more varied rejection collection, she started writing essays and flash fiction and has actually managed to get published although her submission to publication ratio is probably 1,000 to 1. She's written for *Purple Clover*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Manifest-Station*, and a few others. Ever the masochist, she is now thinking about writing a novel and looks forward to even bigger and better rejections



**Ariel Castagna** is a technical writer from Southern California. She makes a living by drafting operating guides for heavy machinery, and moonlighting as a professor of essay writing. Her creative work (which has been previously published in *The Aerie* and *California's Emerging Writers*) is always looking for its chance to shine.