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## Our Death Doula

Dan A. Cardoza

It's late November. The earth is hopelessly frozen, platinum ice-cycle cold. The earth is too fucking stingy for a shovel, or a six foot deep hole from the scoop of a backhoe. Death cares two shits about all this.

We've crossed storms and traveled three hundred miles to get here. Just before midnight we enter a light talc of white spice at the beginning of the cascades, my old home. So tired, we sleep sofas and floors.

I rise early, hot coffee in hand. I place myself right dab in the center of my childhood, in the center of a winter skeletonized orchard. Bone hued hoarfrost coats the reaching Saperstein branches, anorexic metatarsals, splintered radius and ulna. They claw alien into the sky toward hung-over stars.

I think to myself, welcome the fuck home son. It's been like forever.

Morning is breaking her yoke. She knows I'm back in town. She's whores rouge cumuli, brilliant light in the tip-top serrations of Sycamore. The Sycamore line the hash tag tracks like teal candles—burn lit at the tips in the anarchy of autumn. Frozen in time my eyes glass over and water. Not from grief, but paradox. I've never felt so alive.

It's a seasonal cat-walk for the living, trending fashionable grey and black. Bring your undead, its winter time, love.

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Our Death Doula arrives exactly on time, in what we imagined, a charcoal Camry. She's a licensed R.N. As she exits her car, she appears wound up, tightly gauzed with preparatory instructions.

She bounds up the stairs in her black patent shoes in her matching Gucci, clacking like a sandwich bag full of pills.

"Coffee!" demands General Patton in drag.

I say, "It's been waiting, like us." There both cold.

As she grazes my shoulder at the top of the stoop, I swear I can smell the chemical stink of 50's Iodine and Macuracome, shoplifted pharmaceutical trophies from a twentieth-century five-and-dime.

There is no love lost between us.

Inside the kitchen, we circle the farmhouse table like condors, wait for her to land.

When she does, she quickly nods for us to perch. Her eyes seem to oscillate, inspect us for weakness. We introduce ourselves like new recruits.

"Death can be a beautiful thing," she says, paraphrasing a shopworn paperback narrative from her only college Gerontology course. She grips it tight from escaping. I know the read from my own college coursework, *On Death and Dying*, by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

As I recall, my gently used hardbound is packed coffin tight in a box in the attic. An attic is where you store death in your twenties.

"What is so humorous?" she accuses, as she stares at the beginning of a grin. Careless on purpose, I cautiously stretch it into a smile.

There are snakes in the room. I watch as the 'S' in 'humorous' awkwardly glissades through her false teeth, glides through her cracked lips and fades away, hissing as it slithers into the tall weeds of silence.

"Nothing 'ma'am," I lie. "I'm so sorry, I'm tired, I mean no disrespect."

I am a schmoozer, a fixer like her. In her spell, I am back in sixth-grade Algebra, where I levitate an F into a D, in full view of Mr. Fish, my math teacher, who loved being called a genius.

"Thank you she says," I accept your excuse. "Let's rise above this please."

"Your father has this last day, per my computations, we have ample prescriptions. One of the benefits of hospice is that it's never an emergency. No alarm trucks or cops to scream sirens. No crush of strangers in the room unless

you're estranged, and then I only allow one at a time. There will be no clandestine sweeping away of his body, I assure you."

I raise my hand, the Death Doula nods ok.

I say, "Others are coming who want to spend some private time?"

Her response is opaque, "Maybe, to be perfectly clear," she continues, "Things are in motion, timing is everything."

Then I watch as she worries her armies of wrinkles into trenches. I entertain myself, observe, as her body-language rages war with her brambles of thoughts.

"It's okay to cry—or not," she says. Doing simple tasks helps some, others not. That's if you need a distraction. Be gentle in touch, and spirit. Speak softly. It's certainly not the time for thorns, or the bee sting of honesty. Let's give him an unremarkable, compassionate send-off."

My son enters the room and says, "Grandpa refuses to talk. He's staring at the ceiling"

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As we visit the day away, whittle time to the floor, I feel thankful we know what to expect from our assigned Death Doula.

She teaches us to ignore distractions, and that anxiety is overrated. She makes us guffaw at her low brow gallows humor. We learn to acquire a taste for the exotic, to eat death like raw oysters, frog legs and Escargot. Toward the end of the day, she's even got us all believing in clichés, "Death does taste exactly like chicken."

By evening, we grow convinced dad is mumbling up at Elvis. While in heaven, apparently Elvis has learned how to croon from the ceiling. I think it must be one of those over dramatic cape kind of things. Dad's caught a wormhole in his head. He gently sways. I imagine Elvis looping, "a hunk, a hunk of burning love," from somewhere above.

Herr Nurse Doula taps her Apple Watch timer. It's purple, tickles her wrist like a vibrator. She says, "After he's delivered, the funeral director will help you bathe

and groom the nearly deceased," who remains nameless. She then leaves the room, silent and speechless. The time remaining grows death like dandelions.

When his bedroom swells with silence, I close the laced windows. Not because it's so cold and quiet, but rather because fathers melody is gone. His music staff has buckled, collapsed, unable to hold his song.

In a refrain in my head, I can hear Jim Morrison softly sing, 'Wintertime Love,' from his grave in France. Or maybe just outside in the darkness, in the gusts of wind that insist on turning Maple leaves into scraps of crepe paper.

I think, 'shame on the living. Someone light the damn fire. We need a pyre to burn the indifference.'

From now on, I'm going to disguise as tight as a shadow, in a midnight glove, a charade for the guilt of living, command all my tomorrows Mardi Gras, hide behind a Fat Tuesday mask.

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## A Vampire Pays Half

*Camille Davis*

It's not that Jamie was bad at managing his money, it's that he was so bad at it that he had to put out an ad for a roommate when his job paid him enough to comfortably live on his own. His latest issue was getting into the new superhero movies, and before he knew it, he had bought special edition versions of all the movies, several licensed action figures, and gone to a convention, picking up bits and pieces that he thought were cute. His savings was pretty well shot to nothing. He was fine for this month, but the next one he wasn't so sure about. So he put out an ad for a roommate, and he said yes to the first person that inquired. Jamie had (some) standards, but the first person to call him looked promising, so why would he say no? Weird to be sure, but promising. "I have something of an... unusual appetite," the man had said over the phone, and Jamie told him that was fine. BDSM wasn't for everyone-- least of all himself-- but he wished they wouldn't be so damn dramatic all the time. The guy had a stable job, and unlike Jamie, a good understanding of his own finances and how to manage them. His personal life was going to be just that: personal. They set up a time and date for him to move in, and that was that.

A knock came on the door, and Jamie got his first look at Luke. He was wearing full length pants and long sleeves, sunglasses firmly on his face, and a big floppy hat casting a shadow over the rest of the skin on his face.

"Are you sensitive to light or just hungover?"

"A bit sensitive," he said mildly, stepping through the doorway when Jamie waved him in. Once in the apartment, he took off the hat and sunglasses, revealing a pale face and long dark hair that had been tied back so it was out of his way.

'A bit sensitive' was an understatement. If it weren't for the clarity in his eyes, Jamie would have thought he was sick. As it was, he only blinked. "Alright. Well this is it," he said, motioning at the apartment. "Down on the left is your room. Do you want help with your boxes?"

"That would be nice, thank you." He brought the backpack he'd carried to his room and set it just inside the doorway, then put the hat and sunglasses back on as he walked out with Jamie following him.

Luke didn't have all that much, so it was a short move. In that time, Jamie learned that Luke was a gym rat. Some of the boxes he carried were heavy as hell, yet Luke wasn't even breaking a sweat. By god, if Jamie didn't *have* to do this, he wouldn't be. People who worked out that much were stupid insufferable to live with.

A couple weeks later, a coffin was delivered, and Jamie really didn't want to know. He signed for it, heaved it inch by inch into Luke's room, and left it there. Halfway through dragging it down the hallway, he thought about giving up and leaving it there for Luke to deal with. It was his stupid coffin-- made of *real* wood, and real wood was heavy-- and he hadn't even warned Jamie about its arrival. The only reason he didn't abandon his mission of getting it into Luke's room was because it was a challenge now. He didn't want to cart this dumbass thing from one end of the apartment to the other, but he needed to prove that he was capable of it.

When Luke got home and saw the coffin in his room, he seemed surprised. "It... doesn't bother you," he said cautiously, inquiring.

"What you get up to in your own time is none of my business," Jamie said, not looking up from his computer screen where he was scrolling through a store's catalogue.

"Most people would be curious."

Jamie shrugged, not wanting to hear the particulars of his freaky lifestyle. Who cared if he slept in a coffin? He paid his half of the bills, and that's all Jamie cared about. A couple days after that, he saw Luke drinking a dark red liquid from a wine glass. "Do you mind if I have a glass of that wine? I've had a hell of a day."

"It's not wine, it's blood."

Jamie huffed and rolled his eyes. "A simple 'no' would have sufficed," he muttered, walking away. Honestly, the things he put up with in a roommate to make rent: hardcore BDSM, sleeping in a coffin, and pretending that he was drinking blood. Absolutely ridiculous.



## Screaming into Bowls

Cecilia Kennedy

Just beyond the alabaster walls of the central gallery of the second floor of the art museum, I hear screaming. I'm supposed to be viewing an exhibit on cabins, but the screams are far more interesting. I turn the corner and find another exhibit called *Screaming into Bowls*. Based on the scant information on the gallery walls, I discover that an artist has decided to scream into various bowls and record the results, which run in a loop. The screams are not entirely terrifying, like those of a haunted house. They're more soul-wrenching and passionate. There's a lot of angst there—and frustration. Several bowls are on display as well, and I like them because they flow like water and spill into various glassy shapes. However, there's no indication that the artist made these bowls. The artist may have screamed into them, but it would have been really cool if he had also made the bowls too.

Still, when I get home, it's not the cabins or the bowls I remember from the museum, but rather the screams. I imagine the thrill of just picking up a bowl and yelling into it. Who would have ever thought of that, but an artist? And now, I'm tempted. I really want to see what it's like to just scream into a bowl, so I open the kitchen cabinets and select a white porcelain bowl from the shelf. Then, I stare at it because it frightens me. It takes a lot of nerve to just scream into a bowl, knowing that the walls of my house are thin, and that the neighbors' yards and windows are so close. If I scream into a bowl, over and over again, someone might call the police. And then what? I guess I'd just explain that I'm fine. I'm just screaming into bowls. A shiver of excitement runs down my spine as I put the bowl close to my face. It feels like I'm about to do something bad—something for which a bowl is not intended. The very thought makes me lose my nerve, again and again, and dissolve into laughter, because it's also ridiculous to just scream into a bowl. After several false starts, I finally muster the courage to just scream.

A rush of sound pours over the sides of the bowl—throwing the scream directly into my ears. The echo bounces off the walls behind me. The bowl sends my voice right into my face and beyond. The room reverberates with the sound, but in just a slightly higher pitch. I try different registers of screams: high and low. I try short, staccato screams, as well as long, deep bellows—and I'm hooked. Absolutely hooked. I must capture the sound now, so I record the screams. But recording is not enough. It's not enough for me to just hear the sounds. If a person screams into a bowl, does anyone hear? No. Not until it's recorded and shared on the Internet. Before I know it, I've made over 500

recordings, which I post to social media sites. To my surprise, I get several hits and comments.

“Super cool and spooky,” says BrendaMaui92.

“Keep it up,” mikewaves001 tells me.

“You should sell these—don’t give it away for free,” tikitundra4000 posts. And when I look at my watch, I realize I’ve missed more than a week of work, which I didn’t like anyway. I really hated that place. I called in sick to visit the museum and then I guess I just forgot to show up again. I’d better find something to do with these recordings, to stay afloat for a while.

I find one of those crafts websites where people sell their homemade soaps, candles, jewelry, and artwork. Here, I post my various recordings and sell them for a dollar each. By midnight, I’ve made over \$500 and the orders keep coming in. Eventually, I’m up all night and all day, screaming into bowls, recording the files, and uploading them to the crafts site. However, the noise really does carry into the streets where the children play. Once, a neighbor summoned all of the strength she had to knock on my door. The rapping on the wooden surface made a sound, but it was timid. When I opened the door, my neighbor was trembling—working hard to overcome her fear in order to find out what was going on.

“I’m so sorry to come over here unannounced,” she said.

“No problem. What’s going on?”

“I . . . just . . . I heard the screaming . . . it sounds so awful. . . are you okay? Sometimes I’ve nearly called the police, but I thought I’d just come over and see for myself.”

She thrusts a hand into my face, and I take it. The palm is sweaty. She was probably expecting to find blood and bruises. Out of a sense of duty, she came, but without a plan—except to maybe bolt and run if she really did find blood and bruises.

“Ah, yes. It’s part of my work. I’m a bowl screamer,” I tell her. “I scream into bowls. For a living. People pay me for the recordings I make.”

She nods her head and stares at me before turning on her heels and walking away.

#

I’m a bowl screamer. I can’t tell people what I really do for a living. The bowl screaming is just a cover. The emails and phone calls came in shortly after I made my first \$500. There were complaints. Many customers—customers who felt unsettled and afraid in their own homes—blamed the product I was selling. Karenbubble559 wrote this review: “Well, the audio file was just as advertised. I had settled in for the night, hoping to savor these delicious screams, which I did

for a while, but then . . . I was just expecting screams . . . not actual words. There were words! The screams became words and they haunted me—and I can't get rid of them. Stay away from this product!" Warrenpots852 wrote, "I'm not sure I want to be left alone in my room at night with these screams. I. Cannot. Deal."

So, I started to look into these complaints by calling people. How were the screams turning into words?

"I can't explain it," one customer named Shannon said. "You'll just have to come see for yourself. The screams become actual words."

#

Two-lane roads wind around the edges of wilderness studded with tall pines on the way to Shannon's cabin, which is at the foot of a state park. Moss grows on parts of the roof and even the outside walls show evidence of water damage and dampness. The path to the front door is littered with tree branches and stones. Large patches of mud make me second-guess every step.

When I get to the front door, I can hear the mad barking of a large dog. Then, I hear Shannon's voice from behind the door. It says, "just hush now! Now!" I wonder if that works on large dogs. I get my answer soon. This dog's incessant barking, followed by a heart-stopping guttural growl, tells me otherwise. I don't even have to ring the bell, since the dog has already announced my presence. When the door opens, Shannon is struggling with a Scottish Deerhound that looks like a wild wolf. It's chomping at the bit to get at me and tear me to shreds.

"So sorry. Hold on while I lock him in his room upstairs."

Shannon shuts the door and I wait outside. Already, I can smell the mold and dampness indoors. I'm hoping not to stay long.

In a few minutes, Shannon opens the door again and lets me in. The floor and ceiling are made of wooden boards that are dark. There's a plaid sofa in the living room and the window behind the sofa looks directly out into the woods, thick with ferns and mossy trees.

"Thanks so much for coming over—can I get you anything?"

The last thing I want is to eat or drink anything in a moldy house. I decline.

"So, yeah. . . umm. . . It seems that my recordings—the screams—are doing something weird?"

I know that I could just refund her money, especially if she's not happy with the product, but I must get to the bottom of this. I can't refund everyone's money. I'm a bowl screamer now. I've committed and there's no turning back. Shannon reaches for her laptop, which is sitting on the coffee table in front of the plaid couch. She clicks on a sound file I sent to her and the recording begins. I remember this one. I used a large, shallow blue bowl. The screams that rolled

off the rim nearly matched the shape of the bowl. The shrieks were smooth, but high in pitch, bending and curving up and over—echoing and ringing in the air, except this time, I hear something new. Shannon sees my eyes grow wide. She leans forward.

“You hear it?”

“I think I do. Play it again.”

Shannon starts the recording over from the beginning, and at nearly the end of the first scream, I hear the sound move from a long, thin noise to something more significant, in the shape of words: “I’m here,” they seem to say. But the scream carries on over the words, as if the words were placed over the scream separately.

“You heard it, right? You heard it. You heard it say, ‘I’m here?’” Shannon asks.

“I heard it plain as day, but I can assure you that was never a part of the original recording.”

“But there’s more,” she says. “It only says, ‘I’m here’ on the first two plays. There are more messages. Listen.”

When Shannon plays the recording again, the voice that floats above the end of the scream says, “Under the floor. Look under the floor.”

When the voice stops, Shannon pauses the recording. Her face is pale and she’s searching my eyes to find out what I know—to find out what this thing is, but I think we both know what this means.

“Have you looked under the floor?” I ask. “Have you pulled up the wooden boards of the floor to take a look?”

“Why on earth would I do that?” Shannon asks.

“I think you can take these things literally. I think you should look under the floor boards to find out what’s saying, ‘I’m here.’”

“Maybe you should look under your own floor boards. You made this recording in your own house, right?”

I don’t even want to think about that. I just scream and record at the same time now. I can’t even think about what’s in my own house.

“Never mind my house,” I say. “What if this voice is meant for you and only you? There’s only one way to find out. I’ll bet if we look under the floor boards, the voice will stop, and you’ll be left with just the screams you purchased. Nothing else.”

Shannon nods her head, which I take as a sign to start pulling up the floor boards. It’s a lot of work, but we pass the time talking about how big and scary Shannon’s dog looks. She says that in reality, her dog is a “sweetheart”—a

sweetheart that likes to jump all over people and eat the neighbors' free-range chickens.

I'm expecting to find concrete under the floor boards, so I'm surprised to just find regular dirt.

"Well, no wonder it's so drafty and damp in here, especially in the winter," Shannon says. "Whoever built this cabin just stood the whole thing over dirt. I'm surprised the house doesn't shift and move as I walk across the floor."

"I guess we can start digging now. Not sure where, but I think we can start in the middle."

"The middle's just as good a spot as any," Shannon says.

The dirt beneath the house is incredibly soft. We both know that we're looking for a dead body, but neither one of us has the nerve to say it out loud. Earthworms till the soil; they're thick and fat with blood, shiny with secretions. We dig deeper to get to the drier pieces of soil beneath, thick with rocks and pebbles. As I push the top of the shovel down further into the soil, my arm is jammed back into my shoulder. A tiny "pinging" noise tells me I've hit something hard. Carefully, I bend down to brush some of the dirt away and I realize there are several long, flat stones, edged into the ground to form a kind of box. Whatever we're looking for must be in the middle of that stone box, so I dig gently with my fingers and feel around for hard objects. My fingers curl around a long, flat object that seems solid, but fragile. When I pull it up from the dirt, I recognize it as a bone-shaped thing. It's definitely not a rib, but I know what bones, stripped of flesh look like—and this is a bone—and not an animal one like what our dog used to bury in the backyard after we'd toss him a rib from the barbecue. This looks distinctly different. Soon, Shannon is on her hands and knees, digging with her fingers and she pulls up a small, round, yellowed shape, with spaces for eyes and a nose. The upper jaw still has all the teeth intact.

Silently, we gather the bones and try to give them a respectful burial on Shannon's property. Then, we put the floor boards back. It takes all night, but when we play the recording again, the voice is gone. Only the screams remain and now I know that I'm more than a bowl screamer—and I can't tell anyone. Bowl screaming is an interesting line of work. Digging up dead bodies—well—that's the fastest way to make a less than favorable impression.

#

The orders still come in and I'm still screaming like crazy, but I'm also making house calls to fix the audio tracks that get messed up by other voices. In "thunderjohn50's" house, the screams end in a pair of voices that say, "the

bodies are in the wall.” So, in John’s house, in the suburbs of Seattle, I remove bricks from the fireplace in order to excavate the bodies of two people, walled up together. It seems that there are lots of houses with secrets. Lots of houses that change hands, but the original owners can’t leave. So, I scream into bowls and help set them free, I guess. The pay is pretty good, for screaming and digging, but I don’t advertise the digging. While I’m at John’s house then, he asks me if I ever investigate my own house. Everyone I help asks. I don’t know if there are other voices and I don’t want to know. The echoes carry on long enough for me to make a recording; I never play it back. Screaming into bowls—in long, thin waves—soundproofs the house, so only my voice lives.

*Cecilia Kennedy earned a doctorate in Spanish and taught 20 years in Ohio before moving to Washington state. Fourteen of her short stories have appeared in nine different literary magazines since 2017. Her blog, “Fixin’ Leaks and Leeks” (<https://fixinleaksnleeksdiy.blog/>), describes her humorous attempts at cooking and home repair.*

Brain Crack  
*Ana Vidosavljevic*

I

The street was my home. I spent half of my life on the street. And I had no other home for a long time.

There must have been better and more comfortable ones, but that one was mine. Therefore, it was good enough. I didn't know for better.

I was only thirteen when I started roaming the streets and rummaging for food. I had never met my parents. They told me I had never had ones. But there must have been a man and a woman who had made me. What had happened to them I didn't know and I didn't think I would even find out.

I spent thirteen years in an orphanage, that filthy hole. The orphanage employees were not kind and friendly, and led by their example, the orphans were also cruel, rude, moody and gruesome. The orphanage employees were not very creative with naming the orphans. They gave me the name John.

What a boring name! Or who knew, maybe someone else named me.

I hated that place. And finally, when I was thirteen, I ran away. I didn't think anyone there missed me.

And they obviously didn't put much effort to catch me and bring me back. First, I starved for days. I didn't know where to look for food, how to steal and what to do. My inexperience cost me an empty stomach. No one would give a job to a 13-year-old orphan either. And there was not much I could do. But then, I met an old man, Vilo. He was also roaming the streets. But he did that voluntarily. When his wife died, he left his house with only his clothes on, and never went back. He told me he had wanted to die at the beginning. But the power of will to live won. He felt hungry and he searched for food. In the garbage bins, restaurants garbage containers, wherever he thought he could find some scraps and leftovers. It was not the life he had to live. He had a good pension and a nice house. But he chose the street life. I had always thought that something must have cracked in his head. And that crack, that hole, the cavity which was empty and void needed to be filled.

Otherwise, his brain couldn't function normally. The death of his wife made that hole, and his old life couldn't fill it. Therefore, he opted for the street life. I had never lost anything that I had had in that time, because I had never had anything. And I believed that instead of a brain, my skull was filled with the void.

That nothingness couldn't be easily filled since it preserved empty for so long. And I didn't know what could be a good filler, until I met Vilo.

When Vilo was in a good mood, which means his crack was calm, and it didn't happen often, he told me about his wife and children. He had two sons who were married and had their own families. All of them were trying hard to bring Vilo to his senses. They often came to the area where Vilo slept and hung out, brought him food and clothes and tried to talk to him. Sometimes, he accepted the food, clothes and kind words and he listened to his sons and grandchildren, but often, he refused everything they offered him and ran away.

I looked at those clean, good-looking and pleasant people and thought how happy I would be to have my own family. That would be my brain filler. I wished not only to have the house but home, household, people that would fill those empty rooms and bring liveliness to otherwise just a building. But how to make this dream come true?

One day, the older Vilo's son, Joyce, came to see his father. Vilo and I were sitting on the cardboard sheets in front of an abandoned building. When Vilo saw his son, he picked up his scraps and ran away. I remained to at least try to comfort Joyce, since he seemed sad and disappointed that his own father didn't want to see him. Even though he must have already got used to Vilo's strange behavior, Joyce always seemed broken-hearted when Vilo refused his gifts and company. I felt sorry for Joyce.

Joyce sat down on one of the cardboard sheets and started telling me how he had had a hard day at work and that he had hoped his father would at least be in a good mood and make him feel better. Being a carpenter was a nice thing and he loved his job except when your bosses got nasty and started complaining about everything you did. I wondered what the carpenter's day looked like. Seeing my curiosity, Joyce face lightened. He looked in my eyes and told me that if I really wanted to see how the carpenter spent his working day, I could join him the next day at work and watch him working.



I was pretty excited about Joyce's offer. But I looked at my ragged clothes that were also very dirty and got ashamed. Joyce understood my hesitation to accept his offer and he told me he would give me some clothes and that I could even take shower in the shower room of his company. I smiled and looked forward to the next day.

Becoming a carpenter was not easy. But at the same time, it was not that difficult either. And I wanted to learn carpentry skill. Joyce was happy. He promised to teach me and train me. In exchange, I would help him out when necessary, when he alone was not able to finish a job on the scheduled time. Of course, I would get paid for it.

The excitement of learning made me a great student. My curiosity and motivation impressed Joyce. And he was a patient teacher. No reprimands came from him. He always made sure to explain me, with a caring voice, what I did wrong. In a month, I was able to do some tasks he gave me alone. In the meantime, Vilo continued his roaming the streets aimlessly and carelessly.

Once I felt the comfort of working and earning money, I started struggling to understand why this old man had abandoned all the benefits of the normal life. I knew that the hole in his brain was different than mine, but I didn't know how to persuade him to come back to his old life. He just didn't want the old life. He wanted something new, different from the painful memory. Well, I wanted the same: something new but better.

After few months of working as the carpenter with Joyce, I earned enough money to rent a small room and buy some clothes. Joyce was, however, very generous and he gave me a lot of his clothing pieces that he hadn't worn anymore. I was eternally grateful for everything he had done for me.

Months went by and I was doing fine working and living the life I loved. It seemed to me that I had been just born and that I was just getting to know the beauty of living. Then, I met Maria, a girl who worked as a cashier in the local store and we started dating. Maria was a short, almond-eyed brunette whose smile bought me the first time I saw her. For the first time in my life, I felt truly loved and wanted. I realized that there was no bigger award in life than to share

happiness with the people you loved. And I was awarded: I was happy, loved and I loved someone deeply and honestly.

Maria and I got married after six months of dating. We managed to buy a small apartment on the outskirts of the town. Those were the best days of my life. When Maria stayed pregnant, my happiness was lifted to exhilaration. I was so excited that I would become a father and that there would be another small human being on this planet thanks to Maria and me that I told everyone the news: friends, Joyce, acquaintances, passersby. They all seemed happy for me even those who saw me for the first time.

During the eighth month of pregnancy, as her belly was growing, her anxiety and some strange pain in the abdomen grew as well. She started feeling unwell very often. Dizziness, weakness, pain, migraines tortured her and she was hospitalized. My blood ran cold those days. I feared the worst. And unfortunately, the worst thing one could imagine happened to me. I lost Maria and our baby. The miscarriage ended up with Maria's death as well. And her death opened another huge hole not only in my brain but in my heart also.

The pain I felt was unbearable. And those holes inflicted agony I didn't know how to fight against. And I didn't fight. I just let it be.

The next few weeks, I was a dead man walking. Actually, I didn't even walk, I didn't go outside. I stayed inside the dark apartment with the curtains pulled down day and night. The stale air was suffocating but I didn't care. I couldn't eat, I couldn't move, I couldn't think or work. It seemed as if my whole world had fallen apart. And I wondered what I was doing alive here anyway. Joyce kept calling me and stopping by my place and he tried to help but I didn't want any help.

Then, one day, not sure if it was morning, afternoon or evening, someone knocked on my door. I knew it was not Joyce, because he would enter my apartment without my response to his knocking or ringing the bell. He would bring me the food, try to make some order in my small and messy room and then leave. But this knocking was different and persistent. It lasted almost fifteen minutes. And it had intention to bring me up from my bed and make me move. It succeeded. I reluctantly stood up and dragged myself to the door.

When I opened the door, and unexpected surprise greeted me. Vilo was standing there in his rags. Strong but familiar odor was spreading around him. That odor reminded me of the years spent on the street. And I didn't miss it. But now, after being left alone, emotionally smashed and dispirited, I started thinking about the street life.

Vilo looked at me with his big blue watery eyes and said he was sorry for my loss. He seemed in a good mood. I gestured him to come in. He unwillingly obeyed but refused to sit on the sofa or in a chair since he didn't want to make them dirty. Instead, he just spread some old newspaper sheets on the floor and sat there. I felt embarrassed. I was so ashamed that he had done this for me and

I felt so uncomfortable that I sat with him on the floor.

After a couple of minutes of complete silence, he asked me what I intended to do. I looked at him surprised by the question and asked: "To do with what?" "To do with your life, son." He said calmly.

That was not the question I expected from him. He caught me completely off guard. I didn't know what to answer. And I remained silent.

Then he said:

"I know you are thinking of leaving all of this: everything that you have achieved and made, everything that you have dreamed of. I know that you just want all that to go to hell and you don't want to know about it anymore. That life brings the memory of those who were gone. And that wound is so fresh that it seems impossible to heal. I know that you just want to get drunk, wasted, high. You just want to forget, actually, not to think about it. I know that. You want to run away from what hurts you. And that pain seems unbearable. I know that because I've been there.

And you even think about going back to the street, about joining me in this endless drifting and roaming life. I can feel it. I can read your thoughts. Well, I don't blame you for your thoughts. I understand them, but I don't support them. Listen to me, young man. You probably now look at me and think: what is this old fool saying?! Is he mad?!

Yes, I am. And that is the reason why I chose this kind of life. You know me well, and you know that I have that crack in my head. And when that crack gets nervous, I change completely. Some kind of strange madness possesses me. I cannot control what I am doing and I don't recognize people, places

and I don't know what I am capable of making. Maybe I can hurt someone, kill someone, make some irreparable damage. I don't know, because in those situations, I don't have control over my actions. That is the reason why I left my house, my children and grandchildren. I don't want to hurt them in those kind of spaced-out moments. I don't want to harm them. I would never forgive myself. However, I don't want to be locked in some asylum, prison or some other spooky institution either, where they would drug me and keep me locked and shackled. I prefer this kind of freedom than that kind of prison.

But you are different. Yes, you have some crack in your brain as well, but that crack, that hole is not like mine. You are young, strong and you can control your emotions. You can and you should rise above the misery and pain you have involuntarily embraced. You can pick up strength and continue doing what you love. There is the whole world out there you need to discover. It is waiting for you. You can't go back to something you ran away from."

Then, he stopped talking. I saw that his eyes became different, not focused and a bit blurred. He started fidgeting and he became restless. He wanted to do something but he didn't know what. The crack in his brain took over control. Unexpectedly and all of a sudden.

At once, he just stood up and left.

I remained sitting on the floor for a long time. I was baffled. This Vilo was a man that I had just met. The old Vilo and I never talked about this kind of matters. The old Vilo was a senile man who didn't talk much. But he was good company. The new Vilo left me speechless. But he did provoke some emotions in me. For the first time, I felt that I had talked to someone who had authority to influence my feelings, to someone who was the father figure and had that strange power to make me do what he had asked me to. I was a child again.

When finally, I woke up from this bewilderment, from a trance that caused my cracked brain work again, I stood up, looked around the room and realized how messy and dirty it was. I opened the windows, let the air and sunlight in and started cleaning my home.

*Ana Vidosavljevic from Serbia currently living in Indonesia. She is a teacher, international relations specialist, writer, translator, interpreter, journalist, surfer and mom-to-be. Her collection of short stories Mermaids will be published by Adelaide Books in September 2019, and a memoir Flower Thieves will be published by the same publishing house in April 2020.*

## MY LONG WALKTHROUGH HOME WITH GERTRUDE THE PORN DIRECTOR

*A.M. Pfeffer*

It was the kind of hot reserved for scenes of chain gangs in vintage prison movies. Sweltering, middle of the day, and I was sporting a penal jumpsuit of my own—a threadbare Men’s Warehouse contraption of maximum uncomfortableness—miles away from my usual Hollywood locale. As its name suggests, Sunland is a basin of blistering temperatures located at the foot of Angeles National Forest. And if the traffic is reasonable, about a forty-five-minute drive north of downtown Los Angeles. Winters there can be bad enough, but the summer heat is nothing short of disrespectful. This particular day was beyond cruel, and the unforgiving sun had permeated every shoddy fiber of that cheap suit, pelting my aching body as I dug a fresh grave for the dog of an aged-out porn star. Hmm, perhaps you’d like me to back up a bit?

I never wanted to be a realtor. In fact, all I ever wanted to be was a successful real estate investor, so procuring a license in said field seemed like an appropriate place to start. That’s exactly what I did. But before all that subsequent investing could take place, skills would need to be honed, which meant first sharpening my craft as a real estate agent. A few potential buyers here, a few crappy listings there, and suddenly I’m in the thick of a burgeoning career as a Keller Williams professional, vacuuming up all forms of RE knowledge. Throw in some fiendish levels of networking, and it wasn’t long before a truly juicy referral came my way. And though this potential client lived nowhere near my desired realty radius, the potential commission check would find me happily adding extra miles to my Honda’s odometer again and again if need be.

Her story was fascinating, really. Most notably that she had been an actress in adult themed films when VHS was still a thing. Petite, blonde, alluring, and clearly a big fan of silicone, an advanced age now found her behind a camera rather than in front of one. Success as a director and producer of pornography had afforded Gertrude (not her real name) and her husband an opportunity to move away from the hectic city and into a beautiful community specific to equestrian life. As in, the gated development boasted about fifty luxurious homes, and all of them surrounded by miles of horse trails perfect for riding. Unfortunately, this blissful life was to be short lived, as her husband contracted

cancer and passed away soon after. Her goal now was to sell the house and move back to the faster paced parts of Los Angeles immediately.

The property itself was both charming and spasmodically eclectic all at once. At least, that was my first impression upon pulling into the compound. The rustic edge to the place had you thinking cowboy boots and a southern drawl, but the outside color schemes conveyed more of a preschool vibe than that of a grandiose Wyoming ranch. Strange to the nth I tell you. Still, I could quickly see that a three thousand square foot house in the distance had incredible mountainous views, and that the entire lot sat on nearly two acres of land. Promising. Also, much of that acreage employed stables, barns, a hot walker, extra storage units, and a few guest houses we'll be discussing in a moment. The saltwater swimming pool smack in the middle of the front yard was luxurious, but any real semblance of landscaping around the rest of the lot was nonexistent. Downright chewed up is a better description of all that wasted land. There were also dozens of animals. Horses, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, and dogs. A solid pack of ten dogs. That's who first greeted me shortly after I turned off my ignition. They surrounded my car in formation, barking and yipping like mad, wanting to know who the intruder surveying their abode from his muffler-impaired '98 Honda Civic was. Big ones, little ones, fierce ones, cute ones, but all working together, like any protective family should. Gertrude called her pups off, enthusiastically shook my hand, and led me inside where the air conditioning had thankfully already been cranking hours before my arrival.

I'm just going to say it; the guts of the main house were disappointingly horrid. Sure, boxes had been checked by a developer at one time—kitchen, bedrooms, bathrooms—enough windows to exploit the view, but the Midcentury look she had chosen was underwhelming in the worst possible ways. Think gruesomely cheap "Brady Bunch" way more than ornate "Dynasty." Plus, most of the appliances, paneling, and hideous crown moldings would find themselves in a landfill somewhere soon enough. The work that needed to be done was well beyond a little paint and carpeting, and my ideal listing price for the joint was going down by the minute. Then she walked me into one of the back bedrooms. I had never seen so much pornography adorned in such a small space, and I lived in a fraternity house for three years. Every inch of every wall was plastered with nudity. And not just any random nudity mind you, most of the erotic pictures were of my affable hostess from her time as an actress. These pictures were further accompanied by a bevy of other pictures, posters, and graphic artwork from all sides of the porno industry. No one would ever accuse me of being prude, but yeah, the orgiastic paraphernalia was a tad much. Even for me.

Realtors often advise their clients to closet personal photos so as not to cloud a buyer's judgment, but this? How do you even begin to suggest hiding pics like these? At least it was cloaking that repellent paneling. Besides, the bedroom was obviously being used as Gertrude's office, and her business was, well, her business. I acted like this was all normal and gave nothing away in my expression. She seemed pleased with that. Appreciative almost. We pressed on. Next stop were the ramshackle guest units off to the side of the house. The main house may have needed a facelift, but whatever the hell these casitas were would have been torn down before someone contracted a life-threatening disease. Especially since it became abundantly clear this is where a few, if not all ten dogs liked to spend their time defecating. Ah, yes, the dogs. It was right around this point I thought we'd be wrapping up our tour, pour a couple of iced teas on the back patio, discuss my employ, and ultimately get down to numbers regarding price. Alas, no, instead she invited me to take the pups for a walk. All ten. Off leash.

It had to have been ten degrees hotter now than when I had first shown up, and it was astoundingly hot then. Pervasively hot. Too hot to be walking ten dogs ten yards in the suit I was wearing, let alone a solid mile hike around the entire development. Did I also mention I was sporting wing tips? Because I was. So, either my affable hostess was now testing me to see how much abuse I'd take to be her listing agent of choice, was completely oblivious to anyone but those excitable dogs, or a solid hybrid of the two. Also, most of our journey so far had been downhill, which meant the inevitable walk back was going to be a billion times as daunting. Sure, our conversation we were having about the community was pleasant enough, but I was more than eager to see this expedition end. No such luck. The footslog home would have to wait. The scream Gertrude let out is what sticks with me the most. A piercing wail like any other I've ever heard before or since. Combine the caterwauls from every Hitchcock movie with Yoko Ono's performance art and whatever scream you are envisioning still wouldn't come close. No, a howl like that must come from a fresh event of pain, and shock, and horror. As we passed a particularly baroque property on our tour of the neighborhood, one of the dogs, her favorite dog, was unable to avoid the oversized tires of a workman's cargo van as he backed out of the driveway. He was ill prepared to evade ten off leash dogs, just as we were all ill prepared for the aftermath of the accident. The poor little pup never had a chance.



For a good half hour my potential client cradled her beloved, inconsolable, and really, it was neither my place nor the worker's place to even attempt to console her. So, we sat with her at a distance, giving her space to grieve. No one else was around. Not the homeowner where the incident occurred, nor any neighbors, nor had even another car passed by during that time. That's how remote a community we were in. Inevitably, the sobbing lightened to a whimper, and she called someone. We went back to waiting, she went back to mourning, and the remaining nine dogs went back to running circles around their fallen comrade.

A hulking figure appeared in the distance. A towering man with bulging biceps and a height well over six feet. I had not seen such a person back at the compound, but apparently this young man lived in one of the dilapidated guest units where the dogs did their business. I did not fully understand the relationship between him and my hostess, and I did not ask, but I was damn glad to he had arrived, nonetheless. Except, upon seeing the deceased dog and pain upon his landlord's face, this heroic figure himself quickly turned to mush. Los Angeles may be known for its inauthentic drama, but this was no show they were putting on. Both Hulk and Gertrude sat crying together, holding the dog and moaning in unison. This went on another half hour or so. The worker had mumbled his apologies and left by then, but where was I to go? There was no way I would have made it back to the compound without their guidance, as we had twisted a confusing path on our earlier walk to the very spot where the unfortunate mishap occurred. Mercifully, they pulled themselves together, he scooped the dog into his arms, and the three of us trekked back towards the compound with the remaining dogs in tow. The heat was suffocating by now, none of us had taken a drink of water in hours, and the rubber of my wing tips were essentially sticking to the pavement with each grueling step uphill.

Expecting to offer my sincerest condolences and leave them to their lamentation, I hovered near my Japanese chariot, prepared to abscond after we said our goodbyes. This is not what happened. What happened was that without a word, Gertrude opened a shed near one of the barns and procured both a pickaxe and a shovel. She then made her way to a very particular spot on the land and began pathetically poking at the earth with the pickaxe. And did the brawny figure who could have been cast as a boxer in any number of films make a move to help her? He did not. He simply sat down and watched her, dog in hand and tears streaked across his cheeks.

Having seen enough, I relieved her of her duties and took over the workload, ushering her to sit with Hulk and the dog. The earth here wasn't the most pliable, and I'd be remiss to leave out how many other animal bones kept popping up as I dug deeper. Too many to count, really. But I just kept on digging. I dug until that hole was enough for burial and every ounce of sweat in me was good and depleted. The wheels of that truck had their say, the heat had its say, the day definitely had its say, and now it was time for Hulk and Gertrude to have their say.

I'd like to tell you that I remembered the eulogy. Or at least some incredibly inspiring portion of it, but I don't. I just remember that it was short and sweet, and filled with a torrent of woe. However, the bright shiny cross Gertrude planted on top of the grave site when I was finished refilling all the dirt? That I remember. I also remember thinking how well a burial site in the front yard was going to look on the MLS listing pictures. Probably about as well as all that pornography adorning the walls of a certain guest bedroom. Sure, think me unfeeling if you will, but yes, I was absolutely expecting to be rewarded with a listing contract after all of this.

She thanked me. Curtly. Even after what I had been through with them. Although, it quickly became clear that she blamed me for what had happened. After all, a walk with her potential agent is what had triggered the accident, and I am not devoid of empathy. I understood. If she needed an object of derision to deflect the pain she was feeling, I was the most likely target. I took the fall. We said our goodbyes and I kissed that juicy commission check sayonara. She called me. Maybe a week later. Her tone was much different than last we spoke. Cheerier. Appreciative. Some might even call it bright. She invited me back up to her compound, suggesting I bring a listing agreement with me. Surprised and excited, I obliged. I dressed much more casually this time, and we toasted our newly formed contract with some of that sought after iced tea out on the back porch, overlooking the expansive view on another sweltering day.

I listed the house in summer of 2011, complete with tasteful professional pictures. Okay, so we shot around the dilapidated guest units, erotica-addled walls, and animal graveyard, but they remained on display in person for any buyer to see had I gotten at least one bite. I didn't. And though I pleaded with Gertrude to lower the price to drive some foot traffic, she resisted, and our agreement ran its course. She remained there and waited out the market another four years before another, luckier agent sold it for just about the same

price I had listed it for. I often wonder how many other of Gertrude's animals said realtor had to bury in 108-degree heat to win that contract. I'm going with none. Then I find myself wondering what did they do with all that commission from the sale? I like to imagine they blew it on a roundtrip cruise. To Antarctica.

*A.M. Pfeffer has been featured by Ariel Chart, The Good Men Project, and his memoir OF, BY, AND FOR THE HANGED MAN was published in January 2019. He is at once a devoted husband, father, and ruthless recreational tennis player residing in Los Angeles, California.*

They Call Us Resources Now  
*Steve Denehan*

I stare at a screen  
the cursor blinks  
I blink  
at green letters on a black background  
if I squint it looks like the Northern Lights  
a little

I feel the air contract, become thinner  
I yearn to take big gulps of it  
I do not

all around me people type  
their brows pursed  
their fingers sure  
I feel my ribcage tighten

I look out of the window onto Nassau Street  
a pigeon lands on a wire  
beyond it there is another office  
filled with the soft light of monitors  
and people, resources  
one of them is also looking at the pigeon  
we catch eyes, he shakes his head, ruefully

I peel my back from the wall and get back to it

Casual Fridays  
*Steve Denehan*

I worked for an insurance company  
where we worked to convince the vulnerable  
to bet against themselves

behind the scenes morale was wilting  
smiles were pained and strained  
souls and hearts were stained

the bigwigs met  
talked about how to raise morale  
a happy worker is a good worker  
we were summoned and they announced  
Casual Fridays

I sat at my desk one Friday afternoon  
looked around the office  
at everyone dressed in their casual clothes  
even the bigwigs  
rendering them more human  
supposedly, and yet  
I hated them  
and myself  
just the same

months passed and we were summoned again  
there were to be no more Casual Fridays  
somehow, they had decided  
morale was now too high

I cleared my throat to speak  
then thought the better of it

*Steve Denehan lives in Kildare, Ireland with his wife Eimear and daughter Robin. Publication credits include The Irish Times, Poetry Ireland Review, The Phoenix, Into the Void, The Opiate, The Hungry Chimera, Ink in Thirds, Crack The Spine and The Cape Rock. He has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize and Best New Poet and his chapbook, "Of Thunder, Pearls and Birdsong" is available from Fowlpox Press.*

## To Sleep Is To Dream

*Mary Spofford French*

Almost as soon as we turn off the lights at each side of our bed , Jack has parked the big green cattle truck next to the barn, and he and a farmer have started walking up the hillside pasture in Campton again. The Holstein are not far off. They gather at the edge of a stand of trees. Watching. Now the border collie has decided. Jack does not belong. She crowds him and nips at his legs. Jack kicks back and lands a sharp thump on my shin.

Or ...

Maybe he has just dickered for the shoats in the board pen out back and under a different barn. The angry sow roars as he grabs the first squealing young pig by the leg to lift it up and over the top board and the wire. Outraged, her jaws wide and foaming, she charges.

Or ..

He is facing the bull again.  
The one that got loose and cornered him.

I nudge him awake.

*Mary Spofford French was born Thanksgiving Day 1932, married to Jack 67 years, lots of children and their childrens' children. Member of the yogurt poets aka yo po of Concord, New Hampshire some 30 years. Published-in some NH journals & included in " Anthology of NH Poets". She likes the narrative manner that poetry allows us, to convey small things that are often over looked.*

## BEHIND THE SCENE

*Scarlet Clinton*

"Goodnight mom", "tkkk" and lights off,  
Those were the good old days biddings at early evenings,  
Life was a roller coaster and all my needs were one request away closer,  
If that was literally the only light to keep on, it wouldn't have been good old days.

Now the lights on, are the bills payment,  
We fight against sleep, cause it is not on the job menu,  
Any arm not around the clock of the menu,  
Is nothing money profitting.

Around the means to my end is dexterity,  
Always on the pen and papers,  
Such beauty to be a writer,  
And a beautiful catastrophe to be a poet.

The voices are much in my head, thoughts of a population wavers through my sight each and everyday,

Oh!, can i forget the abstract bodies and matters left ignored,  
My duty is to light up their beauties unseen,  
Words are my tools, technicians of abstractism.

Headache is a core member of keeping it on,  
The lights from gadgets at late night taste sour to the eyes,



Late nights-as early as three o'clock AM is the sleep hour and six o'clock AM is the wake time,

Late to sleep, early to rise, cheers to that,

Consistency is a choker and reminder,

Its saying is " if you let me go, you let you go".

Three square balanced meals is for kids,

Soda and waffles can still serve after breakfast,

This is a curse that comes with age,

I must do this, in as much as i hope this content clears my next bill.

*Scarlet Clinton is an African based writer (hailing from Nigeria), his genres includes poetry (fiction and non-fiction), ekphrasis, songwriting and video-text presentations. He discovered his literary talent four years ago (2015) precisely, roughly and gradually followed it up the following two years due to low self-esteem, national background and poor appreciation. At the third year 2017/2018, he officially opened a social media for my works, joined a non-profit writing organization by name free world writing ,this caused a positive upstart in his writing career. Presently(2019),joined an email writing platform which indeed has been blooming to him. BEHIND THE SCENE is his first published poetry, apart from that, he is a member of Poets in Nigeria, also written for well respected and recognized organizations and magazine platforms in Nigeria and abroad such as Military Pension Board (Abuja, Nigeria) , Nigeria Economic Summit Group (Nigeria), Chicken soup for the soul (USA), Horror Writers Association(New york) and many more.*

## The Smartphone

ChangmingYuan

At daybreak, my wife unplugs it from the charger  
Puts it into her transparent bag & goes to work at YVR  
In a hurry, playing with it whenever she can, the gadget  
Of post modernity. Occasionally, back at home, I look at it  
Feel tempted to unlock it & take a quick peep to see  
How much more of a husband it is than me. She had wanted  
Her own phone & was delighted when I gave her last year. &  
Since we've been married over thirty years, it seemed  
Like the right time for the gift of a smartphone. A compromise  
With the helpless inertia and intricate boredom of marriage

But today I thought of my brother's wife divorcing him  
For failure to strike rich or climb up high. Not smart  
Enough to function in her daily life, and much less useful  
Than a preprogramed device. How powerful the way a phone  
Stays more intimate with a human soul.

My son is a senior  
Engineer at the Apple, where he spends every minute  
In front of a computer, trying to perfect a circuit for another  
iPhone to replace more husbandom (or wifedom)

But I just  
Cannot unlock it. Everything she wishes from me has now been  
Digitalized into this e.machine. With just a soft touch, she obtains  
All she needs from a partner that, though non-breathing, proves  
Far more attractive than any living soul beyond the virtual reality

*Yuan Changming published monographs on translation before leaving China. Currently, Yuan edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include ten Pushcart nominations, Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17) and BestNewPoemsOnline, among others.*

Weapons of Mass Production  
*Casey Aimer*

Waking at three a.m. for work I do so into silence.  
The highway drags are not ready to relinquish  
their nightdreams of apocalypse and the etiquettes  
of existence merely suggestions rising between sleeps.

Once arrived to sell my sinew for salary, I unload  
trucks of crafting supplies despite rigid timekeepers  
existing both as my foreman and competitor.

Stacking boxes with my miniature frame  
three stories high I climb them, unafraid  
or simply dreaming of plotted insurrection  
utilizing weapons of mass production.

At six a.m. the store games begin,  
a mixture of baseball and curling, an  
orchestra of breakable commodities  
turned into balls and frisbees.  
And if they broke who would know?  
Surely us damned ghosts wouldn't tell.

Us walking machines responsible for  
old ladies' yarn appearing on shelves  
night in, day out, the products only there  
because we willed it, deciding bread for our  
families more important than revolution ideals.

We watch the company's fake security doors deter  
community communion for those without credit,  
step into work each day more communist than the last.

But specters paid eight an hour do not mind much if  
someone seizes and relocates inside the craft store  
their own means of creation.

*Casey Aimer holds a bachelor's in creative writing from Texas A&M and is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Texas State University. He advocates for radical thoughts and honest questions expressed in unconventional styles.*

## A Bargain with God

Cymelle Edwards

I want to rediscover my favorite meal and lap the forty-something woman in a multicolored windbreaker at the track; I want to re-rescue my pet, this time with less tears; I want to mitigate the earth's core before it shatters and thanks me for a wild ride; I want to hide in the cupboard instead of the basement; I want him to find me waiting instead of kneeling; I want to be forgiven for sins before I commit them, like a comic strip reveals its ending and expects your eyes not to wander; I want to obliterate borders and build mossy hedges in their place; I want to keep gaze with my mother until we placate and reconcile over something else from my childhood; I want to see snowflakes as delicate shapes of ice and not atomic torpedoes blitzing to ravage the kinks in my hair; I could do without the joblessness; without the spitting image of my father reflecting in the piece of plastic I use as a mirror; without desert shrapnel making its way into my door-less apartment; without the methed'up homeless men fondling my breasts while I try to sleep; I want what you promised back when the ocean dried and you said that'd be the last bad thing; I want to forget how to pray so that words seem less like blowing into fire and more like dancing; and, I could use less poetry to temper the unexpected.

*Cymelle Leah Edwards is an African-American emerging poet in Phoenix, Arizona. She was recently accepted to pursue her MFA in Creative Writing at Northern Arizona University. Her work has also appeared in Elm Leaves Journal, The Ceruroveand Gaillardia, with work forthcoming in Nightingale and Sparrow.*

"Experiment in the Science Class, or Why I Go to Work"

*John Dorroh*

1.

Black-outs can last a lifetime.

Children suffer because no one cares  
about them, their pitiful lives,  
and where they might end up.

Fruitless garden, dead soil.

"Make a difference," the hollow mantra  
of the gatekeeper, the superintendent,  
Big Man with administrator's pay;  
gold falls from his mouth every day  
as he sits in his comfy leather seat.

The Great Oz.

2.

"Class, I am going to let you choose  
how you want to demonstrate  
mastery of subject matter. Details  
are in the pudding. I hope you like it."

("This dude is crazy, you know. Like  
off into space. Who cares how we get  
to tell our stories? We're the gum  
stuck under the seats since those  
damned 60s. Fuck that shit!")

Enter the seven muses: the Writing  
Cluster. (Cluster fuck more like it.)

And Art. (Art who? I though he got  
shot last year in front of Arby's.)

Lab work. (Working in a lab...hell,  
I ought to blow up this damned lab.

Yeah...) Expressive Mode notebooks.

(What the hell is that? I ain't in some

damned English class!) Oral Reports.  
(Oral? Like a blow job? Now he's  
got my attention.) Small Group Work.  
(I got a group from him. A group of  
fuckin' birds to peck his eyes out.)  
And Written Tests. (Oh, shit...I hate  
those damned things. Teachers trying  
to fuck you up, left and right.)

3.

Protocol and guidelines posted  
on the wall, in the students handbooks;  
copies sent home to whoever's there.  
Choices and responsibility. (Like,  
what if I make the wrong choices?  
He says to choose at least three. I ain't  
doing more than that. What's the trick?  
What's he up to? I ain't ever had no  
teacher telling me to make choices. It's  
a trap, some sort of trick. He's a teacher,  
and they're always up to no good.)

4.

Dead flowers with petals scattered;  
need a drink of water, some nutrients  
in the soil. That's all. Some sunshine.  
a little TLC. Some direction. A bit  
of guidance.

5.

I measure the height and fullness  
of new flowers; count fruit; sort the  
seeds and save for the new garden.  
Enjoy the fruits of labor. Kiss the  
data. Share with the garden keeper,  
the Great Oz; see if he appreciates  
the difference. Maybe, just maybe  
he will. And if he doesn't, I do.

*John Dorroh helps students and teachers understand science principles and concepts by using writing and reading strategies and insisting that they assume ownership of their work. His poetry has appeared in Dime Show Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Red Fez, Tuck, Piker Press, Suisun Valley Review, Selcouth Station, and several others. He also writes short fiction and the occasional rant.*



Tiller of the Ground  
*Jose Luis Oseguera*

My brother didn't ask for my mother's womb  
To open its mouth to receive her husband's seed.  
He didn't ask to be part of a family sapling  
Too diseased to be called a marriage.

He didn't ask to live in an apartment building  
Where the property manager's kids acted  
As their mother's henchmen—  
Garnering fear from the kids

Who slept cramped  
On hand-me-down mattresses  
As she garnished their parents' Welfare checks—  
Because she was jealous

Of how torrid and impetuous and dashing  
Her "assistant" manager husband  
Wore his grin whenever Mom needed something fixed—  
Then 26 and mostly single.

He wasn't at fault  
For his mother's beauty and selfishness—  
An abandoned, immigrant woman starved  
For the kindness and warmth and lies

Of any man stupid enough  
To harvest the fruit of his vigor  
For her pale, brunette, wild honey— tender as lush as foreplay—  
Miraging as clear as forbidden sex.

He didn't ask to be born two years after  
My empty trunk, shaking as it petrified,  
When my hands twinged as twigs— my shoes as roots—  
Because they were filled with rage as a tree with sap.

He didn't ask to read the letters Dad  
Sent from prison, written in false promises  
On paper made of the pulped bark,  
Inner flesh of stumps pruned dead.

He didn't ask to be too young  
To understand rejection and disappointment  
From someone who had become so good  
At hiding them in her impatience and chagrin—

Our comfort, craving for the heat of her violence;  
A woman whom I questioned in silence,  
While she distracted herself with absence,  
Whether she was really a mother

Or someone pretending to be one  
Because she was stuck in a prison  
Which bound her to us in a way  
That correctional bars set him free.

He didn't ask for his wailing kindergarten body—  
Still soft and fuzzy of baby hair—  
To be tilled soil for their whaling fists,  
Stripping from my sinews

The spirit that wasn't fully formed—  
The layers between skin and muscle,  
Bone and soul, blood and breath—  
Crying to me from their laughter.

He didn't ask for his eyes  
To be so large that he couldn't hide anything,  
Melting as the older of the two Cains  
Held his arms back, sternum up—

A loser before I had the courage to face his sacrifice—  
While the smaller kid punched my boy, my son by omission:  
It was a matter of honor,  
Something you defended when all else was lost.

The leaves on the trees—  
Falling before it was their turn—  
Paved our way back home  
In summer's heat, when the days were longer

And the dad's came home  
Tired, dirty, hungry, empty-handed  
Without a dad to give us,  
As if they'd lost him somewhere along the way.

*Jose Oseguera is an LA-based writer of poetry, short fiction and literary nonfiction. Having grown up in a primarily immigrant, urban environment, Jose has always been interested in the people and places around him, and the stories that each of these has to share. He seeks to write about the accounts in marginalized people's lives that often go untold and the beauty in the urban landscapes that goes overseen. His writing has been featured in Meat for Tea, Sky Island Journal, The Esthetic Apostle, The McNeese Review, and The Main Street Rag. His work has also been nominated for the "Best of the Net" award and the "Pushcart Prize.*