

THE

LIT

QUARTERLY

ISSUE 1

GENESES



FEATURING

Isaac Campos

K.M. Diduck

Andrew Furtuna

F. Good

Abbey-Leigh Heilig

Joaquin P.M.

Jay Miller

Weston H.M. Mourão

E.N.

R.S.

Jaw Santorelli

Michael Silverthorne

The Lit Quarterly
Copyright 2019

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced without permission from the author or the publisher, except as permitted by law. For permissions, contact litquarterly@gmail.com.

All works published in The Lit Quarterly were submitted voluntarily.
All authors received payment for their work.

Cover art and design by Adam Whitford.

To submit original works of short fiction, poetry, or non-fiction to future editions of The Lit Quarterly, please contact litquarterly@gmail.com.

The Lit Quarterly

Fall 2019

Poetry

A Song

Woman!

[God does ask to find]

A First Poem

Calm Glass Eyes

Curio

Death before Death

Midsummer Hymn

Losers

Fiction

Charles' Friend

Evocation

Detach from Your Clutter

Playing House

Quiet Moments

(Excerpt from) Life of an Office Worker

Contributors

Abbey-Leigh Heilig

Andrew Furtuna

E.N.

F. Good

Isaac Campos

Jaw Santorelli

Jay Miller

Joaquin P.M.

K.M. Diduck

Michael Silverthorne

R.S.

Weston H.M. Mourão

Editors

K.M. Diduck

Jay Miller

A Song

No gilded sun or faint moon peer
Upon my kingdom deep.
My voice alone, in gentle tone,
Can shine them all to sleep.

Beneath the gentle rolling waves
My sons and daughters lie
In sweet repose eternally
Where not a one can die.

For far above, beyond my reach,
There live in light those folk
Who clamor and recoil under
My rotten brother's yoke.

His people bear the weight of loss,
The prick of hunger's pang,
The arduous, beleaguered beat
Whereon their tired hearts hang.

He tells of intermingling tears,
Times joyous and times grim,
As if the one, the other's sting
Can justify to him.

Down here below, no poor man stirs,
Nor ever runs short breath,
For if he never dares to stride,
He always outruns death.

At first my young ones lived awake
In light, however dim,
But when my firstborn's grave I filled,
My wailing turned to hymn.

My voice caresses every cheek,
Each eye weeps at my song.
I hear no praise, nor need it now
From they, my nestled throng.

-Michael Silverthorne, 22, Atlanta

[God does ask to find]

God does ask to find
in one's own master's peace of mind—
pacem at whole of the Lord's right hand,
lest it is further from what's left
of a trembling, mixed orientation of both.

A drunk document silly, a priesthood of worry,
and no way to escape Germany
(if only by boat) that vanity for
Tristan and a popular myth that bored...

Naval escape being popular among novelists,
and death popular among men with impotence for absolute sure.

For what's trite in a croak if it's not God's smoke.
Wish I could see some like this out at sea
showers cure Nausea, I'm afraid
that there's only rain here to cut and prod.

Off the internal chat in what is my head:
This sea madness has destroyed what is of me!
Was chasing the albatross just an impotent affectation stolen from Baudelaire?
Pearls stay white like the moon shine and I have caught the same Neptunian spell,
this lethe of seasickness has brought me to my end.
I no longer can tell the Albatross's sky
from the water 'round the Mother of Pearl's sea shell.

I vomit overboard as I let go of my daemonic form into the abyss,
unsure of what it's done to make there be sand in front of my eyes, as yellow as piss
I am sure about the fact that whatever I do, I can't tell if it's vomit on a beach or if I've
drowned myself to hell, as far down to the eternal mother of pearl that shines off the moon:

If "Her soul smiles in her eyes and showeth through them
as in clear waters the far whiteness of a star,"
does it really matter to the external
if my rationale has its own end to tell?

I think most people will go so far to defend the right to build themselves their own hell.

-Weston H.M. Mourão, 18, Phoenix

Charles' Friend

My watch vibrated and I slowly rose from my bed. It was 4AM. What was he doing up at this hour? I stumbled over to my home computer console and popped the power switch on. I swear to God, if this is just him watching porn again, I was gonna have a fit. After entering my credentials into the system, I watched the department logo fade away and opened the tracking app on my desktop. From there I could see his desktop and phone screens, any cameras he'd attached, his internet of things data, as well as a log of all his digital actions for the past 24 hours. The camera output showed his dark face with huge bags under his eyes. I glanced at the internet history. Over the past 6 hours, he had done nothing but refresh the advice board of 4chan.

We originally let this kind of website stay up so the population would feel safe in anonymity, but these days we mine it for the data. He had posted only a few times. He kept talking about "feels" and posting pictures of sad cartoon frogs. *Jesus Christ, Charles, get your shit together*. I checked the other cam feeds. I could see his desk from his game console cameras. Tissues and empty coke cans littered the desk. An almost empty bottle of the absolute worst vodka. *Chuck, c'mon man, treat yourself a little*. But then I saw the gun. *Fuck, Chuck*. He touched it and paused for a few seconds and then would go back to hitting refresh. He went into a "feels" thread and posted about how meaningless his life was; how he had wasted every moment of his life playing games that added nothing to his life; how he didn't have a girlfriend, or anyone that truly cared about him or his shitty dead-end job. He said he wanted to end it all.

Now, I don't want to say that Charles was my favorite assignment. Delores was a cam girl and I got paid to pay and watch. She went to fancy dinners too. Sam would write novels and role-played as a vampire. I watched Donna singlehandedly raise twins while working three jobs. But Charles... he just went to work then came home to his computer. He was easy work. I didn't think too much about him, but I didn't really think how much he'd grown on me. It's like that scene in Pulp Fiction. When you can just shut the fuck up for a minute and comfortably share silence, that's when you know you've found somebody really special. Chuck was special to me. I had to do something. I opened the thread he was posting in on my own web browser and posted. I saw him hit refresh and read it.

>tfw ur a g man shill and ur favorite assignment doesn't know u care about him even if all he does is jerk off at his computer all day

-F. Good, 27, Texas

Woman!

Take a look in my cave.
Bent, fetal I am in front of the embers.
Dressed in tatters, eyes alit enough
to behold my love twelve feet from me.
Blessed wind from the east - her hair
like windy burnt and golden banners of
Kingdoms marching. Colors like
late sun lit fields, but
amber waves of grain bow their crowned heads,
shamed.
(the embers rousing now)
My will then dormant moving - her eyes
and lips a searing tandem,
and with mine they are aligned.
O, I'm dreaming now -
Utterances just behind my mouth
when she smiles,
the clouds parting so I
may see the white heat of God -
that beam toward which
I'm inexorably drawn -
I hope I don't misspeak them aloud.

-Jaw Santorelli, 22, Montana

Evocation

I need to take my medication soon. My last dose was a few hours ago. The view from this apartment is pleasant at least, brick buildings all around. Nobody's out but I can see the town's playground from here and a dog barking in the distance.

My apartment is a vile mess, my mother hasn't come and cleaned in a few months. I wonder if she's left for good. She never says much to me when she's here; usually comes uninvited every few weeks and cleans around and keeps this place livable for me without saying a word. I suppose she feels guilty or maybe even liable for how I am now. I've been living off of deliveries from the chink food joint downtown and dollar store chips and noodles. It's been about three months two weeks and two days since anybody's contacted me. I always wanted to be alone but I never imagined it to be like this. It's awfully lonely here.

All things aside, I swore to never message any accomplices, to not cause a burden to anyone, and also, I'm kind of a mess right now.

The lights from the brick building's windows are slowly shutting off as I write this—life passing by for others getting ready for the next day, and me sitting here watching life for what seems like forever, zugzwanged. As my skin turns cold and cold sweat peels down my face and the nostalgia begins to have a negative impact, I know it's time for my sixth dose of the day. A four-mg dose of Alprazolam, a.k.a. Xanax, green in color... two little 'hulks'. My arms and legs both crossed now after craning my head back to swallow both pills dry, anxious.

I've forgotten what to expect, but I always feel like something is coming to me, for me, or for some reason, something is coming. I don't know what but these cracks of anxiety get me compulsively impatient and very agitated. What seemed like a good evening of viewing the desolate playground and wallowing about the empty lot below my window is ruined because of this urge of impatience. Legs crossed far enough to spike pain in my crotch and now I can't help but tap the one foot I can, anxious.

Someone's coming to my door, someone or something is coming to my fucking door at this fucking hour. Soon, I just have to wait. One, two, three, four... One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four... *this fucking asshole is driving me nuts.*

One, two, three, four, one, two... three... four... The windows of the brick buildings outside are pretty much all blacked out now except—one, two, three, four—I can see the outline of a person undressing for bed across the playground, probably a beautiful young person with a nice clean room ready to sleep neatly and with a smile, thinking of breakfast tomorrow, ready for the day tomorrow, ready for the week and months ahead. The dog still barking continues to echo across the lot below, barking in short bursts, very specific bursts—One, two, three, four—They always love playing games with me, they always do these things, these small coincidental things that me, and only me, can catch on to because they're doing it for me, they know me, and for some reason they want me to know, they plan for me to know but what do they want me to know? I mean I'm not even sure if there's anything but me. I mean how could there be? How could there be anyone-but-me? How could I prove this?

It seems the lights are all out for the day, just me now, the only thing burning through the night. My apartment lights shine down on the playground with what seems like the authority of God's will, fluorescent dust and light spades of particles floating through god-sent rays—a message from them, another message from them. Still tapping, still tapping, I think I have to open this door and invite whatever is coming, in. I dash to the door, turn the lock, turn the handle, and plow it with my shoulder to catch anyone there, or any mistake made by them by surprise but, of course, to my luck, they managed to predict that I would predict it, but of course, by having my whole profile and files on lock—all my mannerisms, all habits, all my thoughts—they managed to predict that I would charge the door as a result of predicting that something was coming.

It's getting a bit late again, like it always does. I close off the window, move the kitchen chair back to the small dinner table and head to my room. I decide against turning on the light to navigate my way to my bed; I'd rather not acknowledge the current mess.

I lift the bed sheets over me and snuggle myself in, thinking about absolutely nothing. My crusty, blood-dried pillow that is stained from my constant nosebleeds at night (due to picking my nose), is roughing against my cheek very unhygienically. Deciding to sleep without a pillow tonight, I notice that the mattress sheet has been ripped completely off the corner that I now lay my head on, just like last night. Mama has yet to come and change them.

A First Poem

Every summer feels like a first summer
I know things
but I don't remember them
You're sticking to my sheets
My flesh clings to my bones
heavy, dimpled with sweat
The dip in the bed pools full
of dishwasher, sexlessness, bitten tongues
Blisters, like flus-
you swear you'll never forget how they felt

-Abbey-Leigh Heilig, 25, Montreal

Calm Glass Eyes

The sun goes down, the sky goes up
the streets dry up by beaming skies;
they sweat the skin that covers my veins
the dawn of the papermache sun.

Rosy orange peaks
(as if I ever looked enough to know),
the constant sound of busy streets
The dreaded sound of gridlock traffic
Dusk with the waving orchids
they never seem to move with life;
all dead, far beyond life, lugubrious chills

The asphalt never smells at night, only when it rains.
Wandering with glass eyes till the dusk dries me up
the constant sound of the dreaded life
Never ever ends

-Isaac Campos, 20, Hollywood, FL

Curio

To the sound of a bell, I opened my eyes
Beyond the days of men
And no footfall but mine was heard
In the year of god-knows-when.

A siren call of silence rang
From rotten concrete husks
While ghostly opal smiles glowed
On signage in the dusk.

From subway grates and dark windows watched
Curious camera eyes
And in my face, I never knew
How much they recognized.

In crevices and cracks they stirred,
Emerging from their dens;
My eyes closed, but I knew they'd last
Beyond the days of men.

-Michael Silverthorne, 22, Atlanta

Detach from Your Clutter

"You can give it to someone else's kid or something, don't give it to me," I tried to refuse.

The old man had bought a happy meal for lunch. He told me all about it and he was fiercely excited. Apparently, he had gone to MacDonal'd's and gotten it without thinking. He hadn't known what to order. He had even felt a bit rushed. Now I think, perhaps, the name appealed to him.

He insisted on me keeping the happy meal toy, to have on my desk. I didn't mind because it was a nice toy. It shoots a little disc that spins as it falls and as it spins the colors merge together.

"Did you like your meal?" I wasn't asking maliciously but I could tell that he was uncomfortable thinking about whether or not he had enjoyed the meal, or if he felt fed at all.

"It was really something else! You know, I had never been to a place like that," he said.

"That is crazy, Gus. You've never eaten fast food before today?"

"I suppose I did, now that I think of it." He seemed to have been reminded of something he had forgotten a long time ago. "Back in school, me and two friends, we'd cut class every now and then. Near our school there was a lamb chop sandwich shop, managed by some Arab. We dared each other to eat the sandwiches the first time but they were very good so we kept going."

"What school did you go to? Sounds like you had some good times."

"St. Mary's for boys. We had a great time, me and the rest of them."

"I'd have loved to see the old gang in action. Some good tales, I'm sure."

"Oh, I tell you. If these fists could speak." He waved his fists in the air as if he was going to hit me, but he didn't.

I told him I had to get back to work, which wasn't a lie. I still hadn't entered my sales into the excel spreadsheet, which prevented my commission from being calculated. But mostly I wanted to stop smelling the guy. It was fine for a little while, but then it got to me. I once told Kathy that Gus smelled like raw beef and off-brand air freshener. It was cruel, but she laughed and confirmed my claim, and Gus hadn't heard it anyway.

Sometimes I wonder what they do here. I mean, I know Gus is an accountant and Kathy is management. But eight hours can be long. I find it hard to keep myself even mildly entertained at work. The days I don't talk to either of them, I do really wonder how they are and what they're doing.

I had finally gotten going with my spreadsheet when Kathy walked in with a ten- or twelve-year-old boy. She told me it was her cousin's kid. I thought it would be cool of me to gift him the toy Gus had given me. Sure, I liked the toy, and I had barely gotten to play with it. But I still gave it to him, because he'd appreciate it, I thought.

"You're too old to buy a happy meal," the boy accused, as I offered him the little gizmo out of my desk drawer. He took it, nevertheless, and was happy to play with it outside.

"No, actually—" but the kid was gone. Nevertheless, I couldn't have Kathy thinking I was a retard or anything like that. "Gus bought one," I said to her. "I don't think it made him happy, though." She laughed loudly when I said that. I was starting to resent the fact that it was so easy to make her laugh by making a fool out of a nice old man.

"I want that smelly old bitch dead."

I found that profoundly funny, if very inappropriate. I had never heard her make a joke so dark.

"I'll kill him for you. Leave a suicide note; everyone will buy that."

"Yes. Richard, you get me. You could write 'I'm useless, and I've got no one. I doubt I'll even be able to pull off my own death.' Then shoot him with this gun, and wear these gloves." The gloves were formfitting latex and the revolver was really quite heavy. I looked back up at her.

"I'll pay you half his paychecks for a year." As she said this she didn't look the way she'd looked when making jokes before.

"Why?" I asked her.

"He's slow and unappealing, not really the kind of person I want on my team, or that the higher-ups want representing their brand."

"He's terrible, yes." I felt really bad for Gus and I didn't understand what the higher-ups actually meant by 'brand', but by then, I didn't surmise it to be wise to stick my neck out for him.

"So, I'll tell him I need to have an important meeting with him, a bit after office hours. Maybe I'll make it sexy, just to be safe. Then at five, make sure everyone leaves. Get him sitting at his pathetic desk, and shoot him under the chin. You'll probably need to get close. Thank god you managed to remain friendly with the office idiot. Remember to leave a note. It doesn't have to say what I said." She called the kid by some name a kid would have and gave me a kiss on the cheek before leaving.

Kathy is one of my bosses and she has these very dark eyes too. I can't distinguish her pupils at all. I've tried, every now and then, while she talks to me, to find the edge of her pupil and I can't do it. One time we were smoking outside and she borrowed my lighter and I think I saw her pure black pupil, against the fire's light, amidst a dark sea of green. But most of the time you can't see it and it's very commanding when she stares at you.

I'm a reliable employee to my boss. I wear clean socks, too. Straight out of the dryer, almost every day. But I don't pride myself in it, I really don't. No more than I pride myself in being a reliable employee. It's simply nicer and more elegant than the alternative. Smelly and useless. That doesn't have any business amongst the living.

-Joaquin P.M., 19, Ciudad de Buenos Aires

Playing House

Biggie-C and his ((Ice)) dog, Dr. Funk, were finally on their way. Homework had delayed them. His mother's insistence that homework "be completed the day you get it" would surely result in stubborn procrastination later in his life. But for now they could be on their way, even as the deep purple stain of night had begun to invade the saffron sky. Biggie-C considered the characteristic smell of evening: "Do you think evening has a smell, Dogtor Funk?"

See, Biggie-C was a somewhat strange child. He spoke to his dog and imagined the replies. The dog was a fitting partner: like a saucy servant compelled to silence, he rarely broke his embargo on speech. When he could not resist a retort, it came out as an idiosyncratic bark.

The path to the park was empty because of the time. The older kids had exams and the evening groceries were always collected well before daylight died.

Biggie-C enjoyed the time between leaving home and arriving at the park, for he could amble along slowly, silently. It was the only time he could be alone: as water to ice with the release of pressure, leaving him with a still deep melancholic happiness found at the bottom of a frozen, isolated pool, before it was disturbed by the ever-over boiling effervescence ever present in the company of his friends. He knew his friends at the park only because they played there at the same time every day, like a half-hour tv show in the afternoon.

As he neared the park, he was suddenly met by one of his friends wearing a dolphin-adorned tie, ostensibly contraband, which hung just barely short of dragging on the floor. "Hey Papa Playa," said Biggie.

"Hold it right there!" The boy tugged at the tie nervously. "You'll have to call me Dad or she'll know."

Of course, Biggie-C knew exactly what was going on: she was forcing them to play house again. It was a regular occurrence which, today, he had escaped due to his mother's reminder about doing his homework. He conveniently failed to notice this lest he give his mother credit for saving him from his fate. This time he could play the part of the impassive observer, the old gossipmonger who could see all and thus judge all; one who stood on the other side of the curtain and had a plain view of a household ripping itself apart; who could enjoy clicking his tongue in dismay, and who had the privilege of immediately forgetting the sorry state of affairs without consequence (and the advantage of recalling it painlessly to entertain others). This, however, did not free him from the compulsion to address everyone by their assigned roles because she had the uncanny ability to know exactly when one of them broke character, even if she was not present, especially if it was impossible for Her to know.

Dad was anxious to return to Mistress Moonspice, or Mother, as she insisted they call her during the game, but he was clearly reluctant to return to the game. It was a tragedy of a treasured place invaded by a haunting entity that hung on the ceiling, fully aware of your awareness, awaiting the opportune moment to drop down your shirt like a spider, lizard, or cockroach (Biggie-C had been in some undesirable dwellings in the past).

"Oh, hey Dr. Funk," said Dad as he knelt down to pat Dr. Funk on the head, for he was a good dog. At this, the dog could not help his ecstatic utterance: "Jouissance!" He sputtered as if choking on a pleasure to end all pleasures, as if the highest wave had just crested the greatest cliff and crashed into it, leaving even the centuries-dry rocks wet once more, just as in the youthful days when their edges were first rounded off.

By the time they arrived, the sky was a golden orange bloom in the corner of a dark pond. When Biggie approached, the entire park was empty save for the five children on the sheet spread over the sole grassy patch in the corner of the park, which stood as the confines of Her house. Biggie referred to them by their assigned roles, even in his head, for Her word is law. There was Mother herself, berating a slightly younger boy on his hands and knees, as you do. Another boy, Mr. Flamenco, was a little older than Biggie, and was busy watching something on his phone, most likely the Chelsea-Arsenal game (given that he was wearing his Arsenal jersey today, along with his bright, shiny, eternally-new mercurials that

he wore everywhere). He was absentmindedly petting another boy who was also on his hands and knees, but who had a twig haphazardly sticking out of his pants and looking far more content with his office as a dog.

"Babby!" cried Mother calmly, "You're a naughty Babby!"

"Babby! Babby!" Babby cried in consternation.

"Apologize to your mother right now!"

"Babb—"

"Don't give me backsass! Can't you see how upset Dr. FlamencoInstructor is?" She gestured to the boy who was entranced by his phone screen. She paused for precisely five seconds and looked expectantly at Mr. Flamenco: "..."

Finally, she cried out: "You're supposed to say 'Olé!' with both exclamation marks!" Mother broke character and brandished a crumpled piece of paper to threaten him with.

"Do they even say 'Olé' in falmenco?"

"It's Flamenco. Just say it."

"It?"

"If you're going to be like that, then you can't play with us!" she said in the voice of an apocalypse, but he only turned back to his phone where the Gunners had once again blown their lead and were at a loss yet again.

"I guess I'll get going then."

And as Dr. Funk the ((Ice)) dog looked up at Mistress Moonspice's face in the dramatic monochrome, he was reminded of the words of the Moorish queen:

"Yes, thou shalt know, spite of thy past Distress, and all those ills which thou so long hast mourn'd; Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd, Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd"

"That's not in the script. You don't leave. You're my Flamenco Instructor!" she shouted. He turned around.

"If you want me to stay, then say my name."

"Mr. Flamenco Instructor," sputtered she.

"No."

"That's not in the script."

"I'm going home."

"NO!"

Thus they stared at one another across the park, which was awash with orange light against the dark blue clouds behind. One half of each child's face bright orange, which blent into blueness on the other half, the blue always threatening to invade the orange. In these few moments of halcyon daylight left, it must be decided.

"I'll tell her. I'll tell your mother!" Mother shouted.

At this the Flamenco Instructor stopped dead. He turned around and walked slowly back, the setting sun clearly visible in the corner of his eyes, setting the contours of his unusually light irises ablaze. He stared into Moonspice as if none existed but them. It was the look the boys had only glimpsed in him in the most intense inter-class football games, when he would beat a key player and dribble past him to victory. But Biggie-C had seen it one more time than the others had: in the all-boys play they were forced to be in, when he looked into Biggie-C's eyes and said,

"That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty."

Now Mother took a deep breath and spoke as the Flamenco Instructor took his phone back out:

"Now... can't you see how upset Mr. Flamenco is?"

"Olé! Olé! Olé! Olé!" cried Flamenco with jarring enthusiasm. Biggie-C could not believe his ears until he looked at the phone in his hands. Arsenal had equalized out of nowhere. Mother was scandalized but she could not say a word, for her script was being

followed. Even Dr. Funk was hopping up and down to glance at the screen, which made Biggie-C put his hand on his head, culminating in the dog's cry: "Jouissance!"

Babby and the boy-playing-the-dog-with-a-stick-up-his-pants looked expectantly at Biggie for some exposition. Biggie-C nodded sagely, "Yes, they'd subbed in Walcott in the 64th minute and they just weren't prepared for his pace."

"How did you know?" said Flamenco.

"It's Arsenal."

"Babby?!"

"That doesn't make any sense. Do you even watch football?" translated Flamenco.

"I play FIFA. That makes me an expert," said Biggie-C, to which Flamenco snorted derisively. As Biggie-C and Fulgencio were laughing like boys that age do, Babby was watching Mother's face morph. He simultaneously felt the urge to say something, but also felt a resistance. Mother did not realize it, but she still could not stand her script being appropriated to the Flamenco Instructor's own expression of joy; not to mention the taboo of breaking the script outright. Eventually, Babby felt no choice but to interject for his friend's sake: "Babby!"

"What was that?" Mother shortly cut him down.

"Sorry," Babby replied instinctively.

Mother flinched and said, punctuating every word with a kick: "I told you you can only say 'Babby.'" She took a deep breath. "Like a Pokemon."

Dad saw his precious son in peril and flung himself into the fray in order to keep the play going: "Honey, I'm home!"

"And just where were you all this time? Huh?"

"I was working hard. For you. So you could follow your dream of learning Flamenco."

Mother sniffed suspiciously, as if he was a suitcase at an airport. "Have you been cheating?"

"N-no! Of course not!"

She glanced at Flamenco who immediately stepped in between them and, never once taking his eyes off the match on his phone, said, "Oh, there's no need to quarrel right this instant. I should get going."

"No! Don't go!" she turned to Dad and intoned, "I've something to tell you."

"A-are you leaving me?"

Mother glanced at Flamenco for his cue but Dad stepped in first: "No. You listen to me. I've been alive a bit longer than you, and dead a lot longer than that. I've seen things you couldn't imagine, and done things I preferred you didn't. Don't exactly have a reputation for being a thinker; I follow my blood, which doesn't exactly rush in the direction of my brain. So I make a lot of mistakes. A lot of wrong bloody calls. In nine plus years, there's only one thing I've ever been sure of: you. Hey, look at me. I'm not asking for anything. When I say I love you, it's not because I want you or because I can't have you. It had nothing to do with me. I love what you are. What you do. How you try. I've seen your kindness and your strength—I've seen the best and worst of you, and I understand with perfect clarity what you are. You're a hell of a woman. You're the one, Buffy."

The entire world was silent. The sun had dissolved into a few orange streaks in the sky. The lamps in the park had failed to turn on. Babby could see Mother's anger bubbling up and stared at her intently, for a watched pot never boils. But alas, Mother could not hold her rage and in her rage, she broke her own script to maintain it. She scooped up the ((Ice)) dog Dr. Funk and stuffed him in her shirt where he wriggled around like some Alien abomination. Whereupon she took a wide stance and, hand on her hips, declared: "I'm pregnant!"

Everything was silent again.

"Now," she said with dreadful finality, "did you cheat on me?"

"No. I didn't," whimpered Dad.

"You have witnesses?" The absence of light made her shadowed and imposing.

"Yes, Biggie-C saw me on the way back."

She turned to Biggie-C.

"Relate exactly what happened."

"I saw him while I was walking down here. We said hi and he said he had to hurry back to you. So he pet Dr—"

"AHA!"

"Babby!" cried the scandalized Babby.

"What?" whimpered Dad.

"So, of all people, you cheated on my with a mangy mutt!" Biggie-C wanted to interrupt in defense of his friend, but She could not be stopped. "I knew you'd been cheating. You haven't patted my head in years. How dare you try and set foot in this house again? I'll have you out on the streets and you can be a gigolo for all I care, giving headpats to everybody and anybody for a bowl of slop!"

Faced thus with being turned out of his own house, Dad started to grow a spine, for he had nothing left to lose: "Then how are you pregnant, huh?"

"T-toilet seat..." the maiden blushed. Dr. Funk lost his patience and wriggled out of her shirt, running straight to Flamenco, who could not help but pet him, whereupon the ((Ice)) dog once again cried: "Jouissance!"

"Babby?" cried a confused Babby. He hurt himself in confusion.

"It was him, wasn't it? Flamenco, was it?" said Dad.

"Huh?" said Flamenco, who'd been absorbed in the football match.

"Listen here, fucko."

"Flamenco."

"Whatever. Have you been giving my wife headpats? I bet you've been holding her hand too, you sick fuck."

Flamenco, with Dr. Funk still frolicking at his feet, looked Dad straight in the eye, looked at a nonplussed Mother, then back to the match on his phone. He took a deep breath and said, "Yes. That is my child." He looked away—an action that, along with his memory of Mother's script, reminded all present why he was always the lead in the school play—and said, "I even pinned her down and tucked her into bed after walking her home while gently holding her hand."

This caused Mother to blush greatly and mutter, "Not in front of the children."

At once, all of Dad's false courage collapsed and he fell to his knees: "You headpatslut."

"Get up," cried Mother sharply. Dad submissively complied as Mother continued: "You can sleep with the bitch-dog outside tonight," whereupon she pushed him and he stumbled backwards off the sheet and landed next to the boy-playing-the-dog-with-a-stick-up-his-pants.

Dad stared listlessly up at the starry night sky. There was not a cloud in sight. The limpid stars twinkled down on him and he wondered how far that light had traveled, only for it to be seen by him now, in his moment of most profound sorrow.

The boy-playing-the-bitch-dog felt completely free, unlike the rest of the cast, so he followed the script and cried: "Nyan—"

*

The next day there were only two children in the park: a boy wearing a blue jersey (which functioned as an advertisement for Yokohama Tyres), who was juggling a football, and a girl staring listlessly at the entranceway to the park.

"Why did you come today?" the girl said.

"You were going to tell my mother something, weren't you?"

"I didn't have anything to say," she said, listening to the unchanging rhythm of the ball in reply. "I'm sorry I didn't let you play football the other day."

"That's okay."

And he continued juggling.

-R.S., 21, Los Angeles

Death before Death

A dying youth, having been set upon by bandits
Clutches his midriff with bloodied hands
They've stolen his cross, taken his wits

He lies so until the solar hosts overthrow night's reign
And lo, as though from the morning sun, a figure does approach
Worry not, the man grins, for I am a creature of this domain

He then kneels beside the stricken boy, face wry
My, my! What is this, little one? What has befallen you?
A band of bad men have, and I fear I may die.

To this, the man responds, with mirth heaving
Ah, but do not fear death's coming
You see, it is but life's journey to another vessel
Here, you are wrong - the lad interjects - death is final

Yes, but there is neither wrong nor right, only self-delusion
Everything is a dream and nothing more, the man says with dulcet candor
But dreams are not meant to last, gasps the youth with a convulsion

Then he coughs with blood, whispering in fear - I think my time is near
I have lived as I could, and I trust God will judge me rightly
The man grasps him by the arm, tightly - forget God, he rasps with a sneer

I can make you a god, and you prefer to die a coward?
Renounce your faith in that folly at once, if you wish to walk again!
But it was all for naught - the young man had already expired
Preferring a life eternal to a death as a lord over men

-Andrew Furtuna, 19, Lawrenceville, GA

Midsummer Hymn

Despair, the name we speak
in pride or submission,
wandering amid mirrored oases,
where it rains rain and blood.

No hope, just odium,
death and deathless whispers
in sedimentary colosseums,
where stars shrink when night falls.

Footprints like sundials,
colourful time passes
over straggling pismires and steeds
running free amongst dunes.

Milk-fattened clouds abound
on churning horizons.
Our earthly beacon is silence;
at high sea, lighthouses.

Parades and processions,
cavalcades, caravans,
megaphone cackling, distortion
crack racket, abysses.

Cherry blossom snowblind
vagabonds would rather
the twig of prognostication
to orchids and roses.

Erotic mosaics,
prophetic scrawlings
in tarot card constellations
and tacit axioms.

The oneiric memory,
rotating lens view of the
incubus approaching at night
from windowless mosque rooms.

Pilgrims without a path
seek roadkill and spill urns
filled with the ashes of April
from May unto August.

And the smoke of desire
lingers long after the
end of pages, the enjambment
of Sapphic hookah rings.

Sarcophagus scarabs
greenly translate the plague
under copper-rusting nightclouds,
God's cumulus pupils.

Autumn lullabies lights,
moons wane, skies darken—
the mirage of desperation,
paintings of paradise.

-Jay Miller, 26, Montreal

Quiet Moments

Emily sat alone atop the staircase overlooking the living room. Her arms were folded across her knees. She gazed melancholically across the main floor of the house: the dark dining room table in the corner surrounded by six empty chairs; the front door to the left, through the upper window of which she could see the glowing orange streetlamps on Clareview Road; and in front of her, the dark living room: shadowy and pale with scattered parallelograms of moonlight cast upon the carpet; and the coffee table, end tables, and the bay window seat all overgrown with a field of sympathy cards and flowers sticking out like weeds. These silhouettes of compassion cut sharply against the narrow shafts of light which came in through the window and gave the room a feeling of dark, ugly decay.

The three weeks immediately following her mother's death in late February, there were visits from friends and family every day. Despite finding it draining at the time, she was starting to miss the suffocation of company. The visitors had tapered off through the month of March and on this Saturday night in early April, her father gone to visit his brother, and her brothers out and unaccounted for, Emily was alone. For nearly two hours she had been seated atop the stairs, alternating between long gazes at the cards, flowers, and the darkness of the house, and short bouts of lonely sobbing into the sleeves of her university hoodie. After wiping her face and sniffing once again, she thought her crying was pathetic.

The circumstances of her mother's illness and passing had fractured her studies. The funeral took place the day after two mid-terms, for which she had been granted a deferral. The re-scheduling of the tests got delayed and it was decided by each of her professors that instead of writing the mid-terms near the end of the term, her finals would just be more heavily-weighted. On Monday, she would be writing two exams, each weighted at three-quarters of her final grade. She spent the first part of the evening lying on her bed, staring blankly at her textbooks. At some moment after nightfall, she heard the sound of a door closing down in the basement.

She left her room at the end of the hall and leaned over the banister, gazing down the staircase which led to the basement. "James?" she called, rather faintly. "James?" James's and Alexander's rooms were in the basement, but they were not home. Emily heard no response. A bus roared down Clareview Road. Emily sat back down and rested her head in her hands as she waited for someone to come home.

Some time later, she awoke to the sound of a car door slamming shut in front of the house. Keys jiggled in the doorknob and the front door swung open. Alexander stepped in and brushed his wet shoes against the rug before kicking them off. He looked up at the staircase. "What are you sitting in the dark for?"

"I thought you and James said you were coming home at suppertime."

"I had to work late."

"On a Saturday?"

"... and me and Aaron went for a beer."

"Of course."

"Yeah. What are you sitting alone in the dark for?"

"Is James home?"

"You're asking me?" Alex took off his coat and tossed it on an armchair as he walked across to the dining room. "How should I know?"

"I heard noises downstairs but he didn't answer me."

"Noises..." Alex said this as he squatted down and opened up the liquor cabinet. He eventually pulled out a bottle of whisky and set it on the counter which separated the kitchen from the dining room. "Like the moose picture falling off the wall again?"

"You still don't believe me about that. Well, James was there, too, so whatever. You don't believe anything."

"Sure I do. Want a drink? Looks like there's lots of vodka left over from the wake, if you don't want whisky."

“No.”

“All right.”

At the counter, he poured a half glass of whisky. He grabbed a handful of ice from the freezer and gingerly dropped each cube into the glass, one by one. Then he added a splash of cola, stirred the mixture with his finger, and took a seat at the kitchen table. Upon taking the first sip, he closed his eyes, relaxed, and wrapped the glass with both hands. Then he slowly opened his eyes. “So, what are you sitting in the dark for?” he eventually called across the room. Emily was sitting out of view.

“I can’t study. I read the same page over and over and remember nothing.”

“Have you tried reading out loud?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s obvious you have too much on your mind. You should have a drink and relax.”

“Can you call James?”

“For what?”

“To see if he’s home.”

“Did you not check?”

“No, but I heard his bedroom door close.”

Alex picked up his drink and walked towards the stairs that led to the basement. He shook his head and smiled at Emily. “You know, you shouldn’t feel tormented in your own house.” Emily didn’t reply. Her head was resting between her hands and her eyes were closed. Alex walked downstairs and flicked the light on. He passed through the rec room. There were three guitars, amps, a drum kit, a keyboard, and a microphone. He walked to the end of the hall where his bedroom and James’s stood across from each other. “Hello?” he called out, loud enough so Emily could hear. No one was there. He opened the door to James’s room and found it dark and empty. He took out his cell phone and called his brother. “Hey, where are you? Emily says you were supposed to be home by now. Yeah, I just got home. No, no. Fine. Okay. See you in a bit.” He climbed back up to the main floor. “He and Nathan went to get some band stuff from the mall then they stopped for supper. They’ll be here pretty soon. Gonna have a jam session.”

“Okay, thank-you,” she said without looking up.

“I think you need to relax. Houses make noises. Nothing mysterious or scary about it.” Alex was leaning on the banister sipping his drink. Emily lifted her head and glared at him.

“Can you just stop disclaiming everything?”

“I’m not. Are you telling me a house is supposed to be silent? That there’s no such thing as draughts or creaking hinges? You’re driving yourself crazy dwelling on it. If you hear a noise, just go see what it is. I’m sure you’ll find that it’s nothing.”

“You weren’t here and you didn’t hear it. A door closing is a door closing. You always deny things you don’t know anything about.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“Like what I just *told you*. I heard it. James’s bedroom door slammed shut.”

“So it must be a ghost, I guess.”

“Well, it wasn’t James.”

“So let’s jump right to a ghost. That’s the only other possibility.” Alex was still leaning on the banister drinking. He had a smile on his face, hoping not to increase the intensity of their exchange. But it may have had the opposite effect. Still, he continued: “The only people who see ghosts are people who believe in ghosts. You ever thought that that was odd? That people who don’t believe in ghosts don’t ever claim to have seen one? You’d think that if something exists, everyone would be seeing it in roughly the same amounts.”

“You don’t believe in ghosts. You don’t believe in God. You don’t believe that

anything other than your default beliefs are possible.”

“So now it’s about God?”

“Yeah. It is. You didn’t cross yourself or pray or do anything at church. You just stood there staring into space.”

“Staring into space? Speaking of denying things you don’t know anything about...”

“Oh, so you *did* participate in the mass? You said a prayer? I must’ve missed that part, even though you were standing right beside me.”

“No, but staring into space seems a bit editorial, as if I’m just a daydreaming idiot. And as if my praying—which would have been disingenuous anyway—could change anything about the real world.”

“No, but it would’ve been a bit more respectful to Mom if you would’ve participated in the service.”

“Are you seriously throwing that at me?”

Emily didn’t immediately respond. Alex took a quick sip from his drink then continued: “Mom knew I didn’t believe in God.”

“So what? It’s *her* funeral! You couldn’t say one prayer?”

Alex walked into the living room, set his glass on the coffee table, and took a seat on the sofa along the far wall beneath the picture of the moose. He sat up straight and rested one leg on the opposite knee, feigning propriety.

“All right. Do you wanna talk or do you wanna just yell at me? Because I’d rather a real conversation.”

Emily stood up and walked into the kitchen. As she mixed herself a vodka highball, she spoke under her breath: “Such an asshole. You ever think you could be wrong about something?”

She went into the living room with her drink and sat in an armchair opposite her brother, who began speaking as soon as she took her first sip.

“Okay, so you think I’m a piece of shit for not believing in God.”

“I never said that. I just think you should’ve shown some respect to the church—Mom’s church—at her own funeral.”

“I did.”

“How? By standing there, doing nothing?”

“By going to the mass, standing when Father Daniel said stand, sitting when he said sit, bowing my head when he did the incense thing. I thought I followed along pretty good. Besides, they’re just rituals, Emily. They don’t make anything happen, they just hold the ceremony together. And as for praying, if I don’t believe in prayer, I think it would be pretty rude of me to pretend to pray inside a church, especially in front of people who do believe in prayer, knowing that it’s an empty gesture. If I were a Christian and some atheist entered my church and pretended to pray, it would be really patronizing and disingenuous. I’d probably ask him to leave.”

“So the whole mass is just an empty gesture? Mom’s just dead in the ground?”

“Unfortunately, yeah. That’s why it’s so sad: death really is the end.”

Emily shook her head and went to the kitchen. She dumped her nearly-full drink down the sink, flicked off the light, and went upstairs. “Goodnight. Enjoy your empty fucking world.”

*

Alex finished what was left of his drink quickly then leaned back on the couch, gazing around the living room. The flowers and greeting cards—genuine gestures of sympathy—covered almost every flat surface in the room. He saw them as friendly and supportive things, but ultimately meaningless. As they arrived in the days and weeks after his mother’s death, Alex had read each and every one, many of them multiple times. Most of them included a personal handwritten message of support and grief over and above the generic messages printed by the card manufacturers. Most people had included a brief

description of how they knew his mother, and a fond memory of time spent with her. It was true that he did not know many of her colleagues from work or more than a handful of parishioners at St. James's. The messages, however, stood as proof that the sender knew his mother in a specific way and they wanted him and his father and his siblings to know that Jane had been important to them as well. But none of the messages, heartfelt as they were, brought Alex closer to his mother. They convinced him that he and his family deserved pity. He felt ostracized and that the friends and family were apologizing on behalf of the world for the death of his mother with these perfunctory expressions of sympathy, which told him that the senders acknowledged that his family had been wronged by the actions of the universe.

Worse than that feeling, now, was that the flowers were drying out. He could see in the light that, though they still had colour, the leaves were no longer lush and soft, but pale and stiff, ready to fall. Emily, more likely to be home during the day, had taken to watering the flowers before she left for her midday classes. She must have abandoned the project amidst studying for her finals. He knew that now was not the time to bring it up. He would just water them himself.

Alex was bothered that he couldn't talk to his sister. Since he had stopped hiding his lack of faith a few years earlier, he always felt like he was walking on eggshells around her. He considered her a faithful Christian. She was the only one who still went to church on a regular basis. Alex wasn't angry about God or religion, and didn't fault people for believing (because almost everyone in his life believed in God for positive, harmless, and optimistic reasons, rather than desperate or spiteful ones), so he didn't like to talk about it unless he was asked. But once asked, he found himself incapable of pulling punches, even with his grandparents. Thinking back on it made him wince with embarrassment. He had told his grandmother that prayer didn't work. He had told his father that there is no empirical evidence that an omnipotent god exists. He had told Emily that the rituals don't cause or create anything. And worse than that, he had said that their mother was dead and in the ground forever.

He walked back into the kitchen and poured another half glass of whiskey. He added some ice and didn't bother with cola. When he went back into the living room, realizing he had forgotten to grab a pitcher of water for the flowers, he stood in front of the window seat and looked out at the orange lights glowing above Clareview Road where every few minutes a car or a bus whirred along the slushy street.

*

When Emily had stormed off to her room, she laid on her stomach on the bed and reopened her chemistry textbook and tried, for the fourth time that evening, to read the last two chapters. As she lifted the corner of the second page to turn it over, she realized she had not absorbed a single word and slammed the book shut again, burying her face in the pillows. She was no longer angry at the book or the subject of it. She was angry at Alex. Mom had let him stop going to church, except for Easter and Christmas, when he was about fifteen years old. At the time, Emily didn't like that her mother had allowed this, especially since she and James were still required to go. Emily would've gone anyway, but she thought it was a double-standard. Nevertheless, she never stopped going to church. She had friends at the church and liked the homilies, and she liked volunteering for the coffee hour and some of the social events. The church was a second family in a way. That Alex didn't go there voluntarily had given her the impression that the family would soon fall apart. When her mother was diagnosed six months ago, Emily could not separate that event from the perceived rift in the family. She saw her mother's looming death as yet another column disappearing; the spiritual leader of the family dying.

The noises in the house might have been in her imagination, but she didn't think so. She didn't think that the distinct sound of a door closing could come out of nowhere, or

that the door would close by a random draught in the house. Nor did she think that the Robert Bateman painting of the moose, which had hung in the same place on the wall for as long as she could remember, could suddenly fall off the nail onto the couch and tip forward onto the coffee table. James had been in the kitchen when it happened and Emily had been walking down the stairs. Perhaps in the twenty-odd years it had hung on that wall, the hook had been slowly loosening and slipping out, an undetectable yet steady movement in one direction which happened to come to a fore during a particularly bad week in her and her family's life. Perhaps that is what happened, but she didn't think so. It must've been something. But it wasn't a sign from her mother, that much she knew. It was something else. But she didn't want to tell Alex that. She knew he didn't believe in signs, since he believed in basically nothing, and if she had told him about it, he might've tried to rip apart the sign she *had* gotten from her mother: the feather.

Throughout the five months that her mother had been sick, and the last two weeks when she was confined to the palliative care unit, Emily had visited her every day. She brought her meals and books. She visited her and updated her on things happening at St. James's Parish and at home. They had birthdays at the hospital and abbreviated family dinners. It was during this time that Emily and her parents had grown closer than ever. The three of them spent a lot of time together at the hospital. Emily was asked for input on the goals of care. She cooked for her mother. She prayed with her mother. They read the same books so they could talk about them afterwards. And in those quiet evening hours when her father was gone, Emily and Jane talked to one another as only a mother and daughter can talk: sharing secrets and family stories, stories from school and work, memories of childhood, and the great fears looming on each of their horizons. On one such quiet evening in the hospital room less than a week before she died, Emily's mother had told her, "I don't know what happens, but if there's any way, I will try to send you a sign."

The spare bedroom upstairs next to Emily's had been converted to an office around the new year. Jane was able to work from home for a few months before the cancer diagnosis became terminal and the hospital stays began. When she was eventually confined to bed, and then hospital, her home office was left abandoned but intact. Although it had now been nearly three months since it was used, in the course of her studies, Emily often ventured into the room to find extra pens or pencils, office supplies, and occasionally use the printer. Because she felt uneasy inside the quiet and preserved office, she would be quick about grabbing a pen from the pencil cup or printing what she needed to print, before returning to her bedroom.

Two nights before her confrontation with Alex, feeling disappointed, frustrated, and stressed about her school work, Emily had broken a pencil out of spite and thrown it in the garbage. After a good cry, and eventually calming herself down and resolving to get back to her work, she got up and ventured into her mother's office to find a new pencil. When she approached the desk and reached for the pencil cup, she was startled to find a white feather sticking out amongst the pens and pencils. She had never noticed it before, not during the time that her mom was working from home, nor in the three months since, when she had stopped using the office. The feather had not been there. The feather, as far as she had known, had been thrown out or lost in the move.

The story of the feather:

About five years before her mother died, she brought Emily to a "bring your child to work" day. They woke up early, had breakfast, and rode the subway downtown to the federal building. On the way there, when they had disembarked at the 108th station, Jane had found the white feather laying by itself on the platform. She picked it up curiously. "Isn't that nice?" she had said, showing it to her daughter and twirling it between her fingers with a smile.

"Ew, don't touch that. It's probably covered in diseases," Emily had said.

"It doesn't look like a pigeon feather, does it? I think it's too big. Maybe it's from a bald eagle."

"In the subway? Yeah, right."

"I'm gonna keep it," her mother said, twirling it in Emily's face playfully.

"Fine, just wash your hands." And they laughed and went up to the fifth floor where Jane put the big white feather in her pencil cup.

A couple years later, Jane's three children decided to surprise her and, with the help of one of her colleagues, they snuck into her office and decorated it with streamers and balloons the night before her birthday. While they were doing this, Emily saw that the feather was still in the pencil cup on the desk and burst out laughing. She then told her siblings where it had come from and how weird it was that Mom still had it. After Jane was diagnosed, her office was moved to the house so she could work from home. But the feather had not made it back. It was lost. It was never seen or noticed at the home office. So, months later, when Emily discovered it standing in the pencil cup, just as it had been at the office, she was initially frightened and then extremely happy. It was a sign. It was from her mother. She was not just dead and in the ground. Alex was wrong. Mom was consciously aware somewhere and had sent her a sign.

*

Alex was working on his third whisky. He was sitting back comfortably on the couch, gazing out the front window. He had a relaxed and content expression on his face—a reliable consequence of the whisky—and was thinking back to a conversation with his uncle at the burial in February. After the coffin had been lowered and people began to disperse, his great-uncle Terry had approached him and shook his hand. "Good to see you, kid. Not the best of circumstances for a family get-together, but I'm glad everyone could make it."

"Yeah, I know. Glad you guys could make it."

"It had to be twenty-eight below, too, eh? Keep the family nice and close. If it were warm out, there'd be no reason to stand so close together."

"We're very lucky to have lots of family and support. Thank you."

"Yeah, that's a funeral. Keeping close, staying warm. Comforting each other...that's what funerals are for. But it's only the beginning, you know? When my old man died, I was nine years old, didn't know what was what. Mom did what she could to get things back to normal. We had to work hard every day on the farm, study hard, do all the chores, everything. The distraction of work and responsibilities, even as kids...it worked most of the time. But you still find yourself alone once in a while...those quiet moments...such quiet, quiet moments where you suddenly remember everything. There's no easy fix to that feeling. You just have to deal with it. Getting back to work will be good for the first little while, but then you'll find yourself wondering why things happen the way they do. You'll feel regretful. You'll feel angry. And most of all, you'll feel alone. Not trying to scare you, Alex." He laughed and slapped Alex on the shoulder. "Just don't think that since the funeral's done that you can wrap a bow around everything and move on with your life. When my old man died, that's when I first grew up. Nine years old."

He hadn't fully appreciated his uncle's words at the time. The funeral and the burial, and afterwards when there was still lots of family and friends visiting, and lots of pleasant reminiscing—those days had left Alex feeling very content, as if everything would be fine; as if he had already made peace with the fact of death and the absence of his mother; as if the composed and reassured state of mind that his family and friends had provided would last forever.

But Uncle Terry was correct when he described the quiet moments. They appear out of nowhere, during the small gaps in engagement with work or social responsibilities; when you're sitting passively on the subway; when you're driving in the evening darkness,

passing warm houses with lamps glowing through the windows; when you see parents taking their children to school; when you ease into wakefulness but have not yet got out of bed and the first thought in your mind is Mom. And suddenly you remember. You remember her smile and her demeanour. And most of all, her voice. Alex could still very vividly recall her voice. Mom had only been gone for six weeks, but he still recalled her voice almost every day. Twice he had had dreams in which Jane had spoken to him and they had laughed. And then the laughter was gone and she had warned him about drinking in the inarticulate but still somehow fully-understood language of dreams. In both instances, he had awoken remembering what she had said to him the day before she died, when each of the children had spoken to her in the hospital, one at a time, knowing the end was near. She had said to Alex that she was proud of him but that he must be careful not to get trapped by things that could ruin his ambitions. They both knew they were talking about his alcoholism and the path it was taking him down.

As he sat back on the sofa, he wasn't thinking about the content of her message, just her voice. Her voice, still so fresh and familiar in his mind, comforting and welcoming and positive no matter what words she was saying. And in the dreams she continued to warn him about the world, trying to encourage his good pursuits—his education, his sobriety, his philosophy—all things which had slipped away in the last few months and years and which his mother recognized as having done so. But nonetheless, he heard her voice.

His grandmother had spent a couple days and nights at the house between the death and the funeral. She told him that she remembers so much about her father, who had died over fifty years ago: his mannerisms, his personality, his face. She said these words to comfort him and then, perhaps accidentally, told him that she could not remember his voice; that she could no longer hear his voice in her mind and that that was the only part of him that was gone.

Alex emptied the glass once more and decided to lie down on the sofa. He stared at the horizontal skyline of flowers and sympathy cards rising against the front window in the glow of the streetlights on Clareview Road. At some point, he drifted off to sleep thinking about his mother's voice.

*

The front door swung open and James and their cousin Nathan walked in. "Aloha!" Nathan said, looking around the dark room. Alex stirred on the sofa and sat up.

"Hey, you got all your stuff?"

"Yep. Got new strings for the Gibson. New capo, a bunch of picks. You ready to jam? We need someone on harmonica."

"Nah, not tonight. You guys want anything to drink?"

Nathan had already disappeared into the basement. James took off his coat and shoes while holding the shopping bag. "Hey," he said, quietly.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

"Just tired."

"You want something to drink?" Alex said.

"No, thanks."

Nathan returned from the basement holding one of the guitars. He plopped down in the arm chair, holding the neck of the guitar over his lap.

"James, bring me those strings. Which ones need changing here? Oh, I see. Looks like just two."

He unwrapped the strings that James had brought him and went to work replacing the damaged ones.

"Could you flick on the light, there?"

James turned on the living room light.

"Whoa, lots of flowers," Nathan said before returning to his work on the guitar.

"Yeah, lots of visitors last month," Alex said. He walked into the kitchen and poured a fresh whisky. Emily appeared at the top of the stairs quietly.

"James, could I talk to you for a sec?"

James walked up the stairs and Emily gave him a brief lecture about phoning if he's not going to be home in time. She had begun to take on a motherly role in the house. James apologized and sat down in the living room.

"Hey, Emily, you ready to jam? We need someone on vocals," Nathan called out from the arm chair before Emily got to her bedroom.

"No, sorry. Studying tonight."

"Oh, c'mon, it's Saturday. Your test isn't tomorrow, is it?"

"No, Monday. But it's worth 75%, and there's two of them, so I have to study."

"You know, I recently read that exposure to music actually helps the mind focus and retain information. You should jam with us for a bit and then you'll be able to have a good study session the rest of the night. Trust me."

"I don't know...I have so much to read yet."

"Ah, c'mon, just a couple songs."

"All right, I'll meet you guys down there in a bit."

Alex had returned from the kitchen and placed his drink on the coffee table. Just before he sat down, he paused. "Oh, wait," he said to himself. He shuffled back into the kitchen, filled a pitcher with water, and went back to the living room to water the flowers. Some dried leaves and petals fell off as he watered them, but he scooped up the crispy leaves and crumpled them in his hand. He refilled the pitcher twice more in order to water everything. Eventually, he sat down next to James on the couch and took a sip of his drink.

After a few minutes, Nathan announced that he was finished replacing the strings. "All right, jam time. C'mon Emily, we're all ready!" He and James got up and waited atop the basement stairs for Emily. As she emerged from her room with her hair now in a ponytail, Nathan casually asked her a question.

"Hey, did you tell Alex about the feather you found?"

Emily looked up and her face reddened. She had told everyone about the feather except Alex.

"No, no. He doesn't care about that. It's just a feather, anyway."

"I thought it was pretty cool. I think it's a sign. I'd keep it if I were you," Nathan said.

"I'm just keeping it in the pencil cup," she said quietly as she motioned them towards the stairs. "Let's go play, I don't have that much time." And the three of them went down to the rec room and closed the basement door.

*

Alex sat comfortably on the sofa and drank his whisky. A few minutes after they had left, the muffled sound of drums and guitar wafted up from the basement. He could recognize some of the music and the tunes and could hear Emily singing intermittently. Each time a car or a bus whirred past the front of the house, he turned his head lazily and tried to see the lights pass by in the slushy spring night. Then he would refocus on the music.

When he had emptied his glass, he set it down on the coffee table, stood up, and realized he was drunk. He shuffled towards the kitchen and leaned on the counter. Then the words of Nathan and Emily's conversation began to seep back into his mind and he tried to make sense of them. They were talking about a feather. *Alex doesn't care about the feather.* What feather? It did not make sense to him. He did not remember anything about a feather. He clutched the half-empty whisky bottle sitting on the counter top, tipping it back and forth, examining it drunkenly. Then he put it back in the cabinet. He walked back across the living room and gazed at all the flowers, hoping they would live. He picked up one of the sympathy cards and read it, then set it back down on the end table. He flicked the light off

and went upstairs as the music from the basement stopped.

The curtains were open in his mother's office. The glow of the streetlamps and the moon washed over the bookshelf, the file cabinet, the desk, and the chair. He pulled the chair out from under the large, wooden desk and sat down, his hands clasped on his lap. He gazed around the room sadly, trying to make out the titles of the books and reports that were neatly stacked on the desk and the bookshelf. The computer was shutdown and silent and the screen had a coating of dust on it. To the right of the computer screen was a pencil cup. Inside was the white feather.

Alex took the feather and twirled it between his fingers. The room was silent. He sighed.

For a moment, he forgot about the flowers and the sympathy cards. He forgot about what people had said to comfort him and about what the world had done to his family. He twirled the big white feather and suddenly he remembered. All the words he had withheld from his mother. The meaning he had tried to deprive his sister of. The truth and the dearly-held beliefs that everyone around him kept secret, which he had tried to tear down and dismiss. The careless, unthoughtful words. The lack of compassion. The alcohol. The anger.

The room was still silent. In a single moment, he remembered everything he had been taught, all the things he had forgotten or abandoned, all of the wonderful things—they all flashed through his mind and he slumped in the chair with the unbearable weight of regret and shame.

The next thing he heard was the muffled beat of the drum, the strum of the guitar, and faint vocals emanating up from the basement. He could just recognize the melody and make out the words. Then a bus roared down the road, splashing through the slush. Alex stood up with the feather in his hand, left the room, and let the quiet moment linger.

-K.M. Diduck, 30, Edmonton

Excerpt from *Life of an Office Worker*

1

There is a hidden epidemic spreading across modern offices. Statistically, one to two office workers go mad every day.

Imagine the perception of an office worker as a screen made up of two thin layers of film glued together, where the outer layer represents office reality and the inner layer represents the office worker's mental concept of that reality. At first there is no gap between the two. At the onset of madness, they begin to separate very slowly, maybe just the left corner of the inner film coming undone, curling up, eventually leading to a void between the layers, a void that can disturb the office worker's vision, produce a sense of irreality, a lack of control, a sense that the worker is not a worker but a floating consciousness driven and torn by impulses, cravings, hatreds, desires, and colourful shapes. Especially hatreds and colourful shapes.

The process can take weeks, if not months, but once the seed is sown, there is no way to arrest it. Episodes of madness come and go. I remember on a particularly stressful day in the office I felt something within me snap and a little hollow form inside my gut. The next few hours flew by as if in a dream. I temporarily lost my sense of self and my identity as an office worker, I was reduced to wandering in a landscape I no longer recognised, first around an office, later somewhere in the city centre, besieged by flashing lights, takeaway signs, nightclub queues, drunk teenagers squatting on the curb and making faces at me, man against man, worker against worker, dirty whopper wrappers carried by the wind, leaves and dirt, an email printout that I must have carried from the office still clutched in my hand. I couldn't connect the fucking dots. What the fuck is wrong with me? Can someone tell me what is wrong with me? Dogs barking and seagulls flying in my face. I was referred to a doctor who examined me and said: Maybe you have an anxiety disorder, maybe depression. It goes on and on, only the medication side-effects are stacking up one on top of another.

Office workers go mad every fucking day, even if only temporarily, and no one wants to talk about it. Once it happens to you, it means your two layers of perception have been damaged, therefore it will most likely happen again. Office workers who are mad start avoiding social situations. When they see friends they flinch and move their hands around. For some, other people's features appear distorted. The nose appears where the mouth should be. The ear is missing. A sack of balls hangs from the chin. It's rare but it happens. The office workers whisper and laugh, they retreat into themselves, they become 'anti-social', as the saying goes. They start having ideas, they fantasise about murder. I know I have.

Just the other day, I went to the supermarket and when I was preparing to pay for my groceries the man at the till spread his arms and said: Open the dome! Excuse me? I said. Open the dome! he repeated, with more emphasis this time, and smiled so wide that the corners of his mouth reached his eyes. I should have known I was in the state of madness. Instead, I panicked and shouted, Why are you talking to me like this? What is this smile? Two weeks ago, I'd heard an expression somewhere – force to be reckoned with – and for unknown reasons it really stuck with me. So when the cashier repeated his request – Open the dome! – I shouted, Don't you know I'm a force to be reckoned with? I'm a force to be reckoned with! It was an ugly scene overall and in the end, security had to intervene. I went back to the flat, shaken by the experience, and instantly drank two cans of energy drink that I'd bought in the shop. I was convinced that if I were to sleep I would be surrounded by talking crows and rubber bands tied as suicide nooses. I couldn't let myself relax. The energy drinks gave me heart palpitations and hot flashes. I hauled the full rubbish bags into the hall and dropped them down the flight of stairs from the top floor.

At 8.30 the next morning I had to deliver an important powerpoint presentation in front of 15 people, including 'our most important clients.'

-E.N., 28, Glasgow

Losers

I can't write, I can't drink,
caught up in the melodrama of melancholy.
I get thoughts but can't think,
I have feelings and a dictionary.
I have a feeling my diction carries,
as I put pen to pad, my sad I send,
but my submission gets no publication in the end.
I would go mad if I could,
but madness I heard's no good.
The magazines want sentimental,
the journals want healing,
but life is shit to the point where
even shittiness has become
a piece of glass in the proverbial ceiling.
I'm a mosaic of moods,
rhyming about the orchids in the woods;
never been used or abused, nor
an active citizen in my neighbourhood.
I don't read and don't sing,
but dabble in every other little thing.
I'm not a poet, I know it,
I need a poem like I need a reckoning.
I need poems like I need another thing,
might be a soliloquy, a carrot, or a mothering.
I heave world-weary sighs, gazing out my window
that looks out onto sidewalks and cinderblocks,
and fenced up gardens too well tended to,
so, behind dust motes and morning dew,
I whinge out quiet moans of suffering and pain,
feeling half older than I am, kowtowing
to succotash and curlicued shimmerings
of angst, ennui, pettiness inane,
some ethereal black hole in my heart without name.
Yes, for some strange reason, I've escaped
lengthy hospital ward stays and singing in the rain,
unenlightened and unengaged, I remain
unexamined at every age,
invisible ink diary running out of pages.
Like I said, I'd be enraged if I were any less sage.
My pedantry and pageantry itself looks staged,
I'm afraid I've feigned feigning, taking tea
on the brink of a lake of flames.
We know there's a pill for people like me,
who dream up rowers on the water lilies untamed.
I'm a loser who needs a poem.
This is a poem for those
souls between two nothings
looking to call the void a rose.

-Jay Miller, 26, Montreal

Special thanks to Adam Whitford, Brandon Wynnychuk, and Jay Miller for their help throughout the project. Next edition of *The Lit Quarterly* coming December 2019.

