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Euphony is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations.

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POEMS

Poetry Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this issue of Euphony. It is an act of trust, when more poetry than you could ever hope to read is available at your fingertips, to give your time and attention to a collection put together by a motley crew of undergraduates, armed only with half-completed liberal arts degrees and a love of literature. Thank you for trusting us.

It was an act of even greater trust and temerity for each author—those included in this issue, those published online, and all of those whose submissions were not chosen for publication—to send us their work for consideration, to trust us with something they love and believe in. It is not easy to create a beautiful thing and send it out into the world. I am honored to have been trusted with so many beautiful things. In combing the Euphony inbox, I have gotten a privileged look into dozens of poets' lives—their memories and dreams, anxieties and obsessions, tiny joys and vast griefs.

We have selected just a few of these for you, dear reader. The first three poems in this issue have a somewhat dark bent: “Madness” finds a strange, mysterious beauty in language and image; “At the graveyard dwell the dead people and” offers an unconventional meditation on mortality; and “A Wake of Ghosts” paints a chilling picture of a haunted house. “A Summer Afternoon” is haunted in a different sense, connecting poets across the centuries with its interwoven lyrics of a medieval round. Taking a far lighter turn, “walk in the rain” gives us a glimpse at a happy moment between parent and child. The next two poems ask us to imagine alien worlds: “As If” travels across the galaxy while “an intimate invite” recounts the coming of the “portobello spaceships.” The last four tend towards the bittersweet: “Raccoon Hands” creates a concise but powerful image of a relationship; “Man, Nature, God” tells the comical tale of a duck’s demise; “Crater Lake” reflects on loss and the color blue; “Back in Town” closes the poetry section of the issue with a long-awaited return.

You never know where you will find a good poem. There are poems I have read scribbled on flyleaves or posted on obscure web pages that have stuck with me even as the literary masterworks of renowned authors slip from my mind. Maybe you will find a poem you love in here. Maybe you won't. But I invite you to read with trust, kindness, and curiosity, and perhaps you will find joy in the searching.

With love,
Sammy Aiko

Madness

Leila Farjami

The moon ring stands still—
a wreath of silver magnolias.
It encircles the charcoal cosmic sea.

Madness
seeps through pine roots
shivering in September gale.

The end is not beyond your reach
or my anchored body.

The world is hollowing itself
from its long-dead twins:
I and I.

The moon ring stands still.

The jasmine vine writhes and twirls
toward it,
insatiable
as her white mouth
opens in ferocious lust,
licks the merciless air.

At the graveyard dwell the dead people and

Gale Acuff

I'm supposed to say *cemetery* in
-stead, not *graveyard* and certainly not *bone*
-yard and when I'm playing there behind our
church I'm not supposed to disturb the plots,
Father taught me that—he's going to die
one day and sooner than I will so I
guess he should know and when I visit him
or at least his dead body I'll be sure
not to tromp on him though when I was young
and I'm ten years old now I used to drive
my toy cars across his body, up his
arms and over his chest and when he woke
the Earth was opening and the devils
escaping and the word for that's *earthquake*.

A Wake of Ghosts

Kevin Brown

Back through whispering
willows scabbed
with buck rub,
where bullfrogs bank
in midnight burn,
the dead house bogs
near creek marsh
choked with no rain.
There's pain
squared
by pane-less windows,
two sweat slicked
bodies on a gutted
mattress striped
in backwoods candle-flicker.
This is not what she imagined.
This is not what she imagined.

These walls are scarred
with ghost marks,
invisible frames
cocked crooked in sheetrock.
Her black and white grandparents
unwrinkled in the yard.
Her mom and dad smiling,
her mom alone, not,
two Christmas Eves apart.
A younger her with missing
tooth and dirty nails,
another in braces
and manicured cuticles.
Her specter dresses
Rainbow Brite on the steps,
her grandma in her rocker,
porch moaning underfoot.

Now in the witching hour

the ceiling bellies
where daubers hum
and deer mice ream
the stained insulation.

Summer Afternoon

Robert McCarthy

Sumer is icumen in;
singeth loud the cuckoo.

Summer thunder, rattling its f/x tin-sheet,—tin almost the sky's color now, or is pewter maybe; puddled metal in the swimming heat. And that tune in your head looping round and round: "All I've got's this sunny afternoon." Or not even that maybe; as, extravagantly, a bruised horizon descends: mauve, chartreuse, clouds black as hell's roof, with seams of silver ore, frets of forge sparks.

Summer thunder again, a chair dragged across Thor's floor, dragged again. Chainsaws of vertical lightning. Sumer is icumen in; but she's jejune, an unsophisticated country-wife dragging a chair across the floor of an enormous room. Your windows are city-smudged; sky might be blue clouds or smeary something else: or smoke from a bellows? or a small child mud-larking in puddles? Summer's music all tantaras and smashed cymbals. (A chair dragged repeatedly across a floor.)

And all the birds in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire sing tit-willow, tit-willow, and the hayricks and the haycocks are on fire there. Sumer is icumen in. Summer thunder. (Did your girlfriend drive off in your car? Not that you had either.) Summer thunder. Someone dragging

a chair across the sky's floor.
(The unhappiness of Thor.)
Singeth loud the cuckoo. The sky
is a sunny black mistake. Tit-willow,
tit-willow. The sugar-addicted
mynah birds chase the breakfast
packets of Dominos. Singeth loud
the cuckoo. The air so thick
(with moisture) it must be swum through.
Heat lightning crackles; thunder dins
from rooves. And sumer is icumen
in. The rain it raineth every day,
tit-willow. And your heart still as empty
as your head. Sing willow, willow, will-o.

walk in the rain

S.M. Foran

we walked in the rain
 this afternoon,
 father and son,
you with the determined
 focus of a child, eyes on the side-
 walk
 beneath
 your feet,
waiting for puddles to appear

 magically

 in the narrowed line of your vision and
taking delight in the thin slap

of your shoes parting the water,

then laughing as I matched
your flat-
 foot shuf-
 fle,
the two of us
just a couple
of vaudevillians

 hamming for applause.

As If

Robert McCarthy

As if I'd caught, by happenstance
or luck, a light-rail interstellar.
Starlight-Express on a puckish
timetable, an Acela to Vega
on a no-stops schedule, then straight-
on to the Horse-Head Nebula,
where all must be just as it seems,
fast-tracked dreams sung to slow-time
acapella. Nothing much more
than will ever occur, but there's
doo-wop sounding round the corner.
Only when you get there there's
just empty ledges and the smoldered
air of abandoned cigarettes.

Morpheus entangled in his ruck
of sheets, his burst bag of stardust
a-leak, and memory, slip-shod,
blurs and evades like a dream you
can't quite get awake from, too easy,
like travel through the roomy straits,
a-glide through unlatched logic-gates
to the gardens of Adonis
each wall a bright circuit of gold.
Here is all that worlds desire,
there is no alternation dire,
but flesh and flower each attired
anew. Death, his teeth and talons
blunted, watches, frustrated,
Spring change to Summer, then Summer
change back. Our world-lines slow, stopping
to stroll, to window-shop, and, like a wheel
continuous run, each thing old
becomes ingenious, and grows
as first it ever grew, when it was young.

an intimate invite

Abbie Doll

we all remember when
the portobello spaceships first flew
into view, fluttering like jellyfish
propelled by a welcoming wind
their wobbly ribbons—single strand thin—
dangling, as they
tickled my electric fingers

they brought their dissected world
comprised of spidery lines
a network of diagram drawings
with overlapping complexities
and aged pencil sketches
buried by our river's gushing paint

they wandered in, fueled by
their consumption of our colors
all our stolen hues
we mourned
the loss of vibrancy
abducted by these plump
m&m's sliced in two

we sent our chosen ambassador
a formal deer, our dress-up paper doll (formally, *my dear*)
with heart-like antlers branching out
a weaponized peace offering—they rejected—
making this stationary cutout
a muted mammal lost to their four-dimensional world

they left us
this warm grey sky, our chariots on tortoise clouds
contained in our curtains of currency
freshly printed
above our bleached coral seawater stars
bits of debris floating at our feet
the water's trash may just be our treasure

my thick-as-fabric eyelashes
drape over this boundless stage
of perception and ancient architecture
blinking a series of mathematical halos
around our discarded toenail clipping
sliver of a moon
the imagination blooms
watch as it spreads
its contortionist legs
eclipsing itself, as its
sprawling satellite blossoms
welcome you into its fantastical folds

Raccoon Hands

Marisa Campbell

I won't always have these raccoon hands.

I won't always comb
the sunken, reedy parts of you
to find what's good.

Man, Nature, God

(For *the* Ross Taylor)

Paul Brucker

Miss Priscilla took her Sunday morning stroll
while I prayed at the church of my choice.

Upon return, I noticed her bob and weave
on the back porch. I detected the signs.

She had swallowed fermented yeast
from the pan I had left there.

I thought, let her have her fun. It's her prerogative, her reward
for earning the red ribbon at the county fair.

When I bent down to give her a kiss,
she quacked

Then exploded with loud report
into hundreds of pieces.

I ran into the kitchen, covering my one good eye
with both hands.

The district surgeon was summoned. His diagnosis:
Penetration of eye by flaying fragment of duck.

He offered no hope for return of my optics,
but, as consolation, provided his discounted rate.

Beloved Miss Priscilla is in a better place. I'm practically blind
but my faith remains unbroken.

I invite you to share the wonder of it all with us, Sundays, 10 a.m.,
at The Fresh Life Church, corner of Busse and Albert.

Crater Lake

C. J. Trotter

*Turquoise water, brilliant,
color of father's eyes,
newly deceased.*

We are staring at the lake,
an opulent vat of blue.
Can anything ever be as blue,
so beautifully blue, my husband says.
Is that turquoise or cobalt?
Or maybe cerulean?

I think he just likes sounding out
the words, as if the lake can hear,
as if it demands the most expensive
word you can afford, a word beyond
imagining. Or maybe he wants me
to make an offering. I am after all
the word-person in this pair. I am
the one who earlier claimed the sky
was a sapphire plate—See how
the occasional cloud skims the surface
in soft white relief?—or maybe
he just wants to see if I'm okay.

It's a function of depth, he says,
the depth creates the color,
that stunning blue, and the clarity,
damn, it's 2,000 feet deep!

His eyes widen—bluish green
like my father's. Color and clarity.

Three mallards fly overhead, then dip
and skim the lake's surface, a swath
of purplish-blue on their wings.

What's to keep the sky and lake

from swapping places, from
joining forces and squeezing the life
right out of the slab of hard earth
we're standing on, crush it to pulp,
we with it, no warning? Destruction,
I think—it all comes down
to blast, to eruption.

The air's buzzing like crazy crickets,
the drone of all that's unspoken.

My husband takes my hand
in his, squeezing tight.

Back in Town

John Grey

He that we knew long ago
is back in town.
but not in the past
where he was a good-looking man.

Yes it's me, he says,
me, Peter Donovan,
come gather around,
see that I'm alive.

Lose no sleep
over how I look,
this once green lawn
is now overgrown weeds,

but think of my wife,
Missy Donovan,
don't you remember?
she is with us and yet not,

the reward for our devotion,
is a poor thing
washed and fed by nurses,
in a place far from here,

where I once went to grieve,
but now never go near,
come here instead,
where the struggle to remember me

at least has a happy ending,
so, even if you're lying,
and you don't know me at all,
just say you do –

say, we missed you,
Peter Donovan.

PROSE

Prose Editors' Letter

Dear Reader,

As our staff took time over the past few months to curate a selection of stories for this issue, we wanted to make sure we had a diversity of storytelling to share with you. These three stories are each unique in their style, subject material, and tone. Our selections are reflections of some of the darker parts of life, as well as some of the more humorous. Some are heavily grounded while others seem more fantastical. Our hope is that you will feel a wide range of emotions, see the world through unique perspectives, and most of all, enjoy reading all three of these pieces.

The first piece you will encounter is “An Inspection,” a story about surveillance that made many of us curious about the narrator’s odd strategy for overcoming writer’s block.

In our second piece, “Sipper’s Sweet Satisfaction,” prepare to be transported to a zany galaxy of mad soda science—and the consequences of corporate experimentation.

Finally, we have “Mercy Garden,” a darker tale of two brothers caught in a cycle of violence and complicated loyalty.

We hope you enjoy reading this season’s selections, and we hope to see you again in the spring!

Laura Ribeiro and Christopher J. Lee
Prose Editors

An Inspection

Ben Roth

It's late morning on a Tuesday when the doorbell rings. I ignore it. I'm sitting on the couch in my pajamas watching highlights from yesterday's games on my laptop. Surely just a delivery guy: they buzz everybody in the building, hoping someone is home and will sign for a package.

The doorbell rings again. Usually, at this point, I'll hear somebody running down the steps. Even during the day, someone else happens to be home most of the time—the mom in apartment one with the two kids, or, if not her, their nanny, or the guy upstairs who's always leaving his workout clothes in the communal dryer. I'm not expecting anything, and I haven't showered yet, and I hate talking to anyone this early.

It rings again. Now he's knocking loudly as well. I live in the basement, or the “garden level” in realtor-speak, though I've never even seen the garden. The family upstairs has the back half of the basement as well, and the garden is theirs. But it's not too bad: full-size, south-facing windows look out on a light well in the front yard. I can even see the sky if I raise the blinds all the way.

The doorbell again, and I can hear whoever's up there shuffling around now. As he takes a step back from the door to look at the front of the house, his shadow falls across the windows. I freeze, and quickly mute my computer. It would be especially awkward to answer now that I've ignored the bell a couple of times. I usually don't raise the blinds all the way, even if it means not seeing the sky, since then anybody in the front yard can see right down into the apartment. I haven't raised them all the way today, and I can't see him, but maybe he can see my legs, or feet anyway—I'm not sure about the angle. I stay still, and quiet, hoping he'll go away.

No luck—he rings again. Now I'm acutely embarrassed that I've just been sitting here the whole time. He's knocking again, too.

I give in, set my computer aside, and go over to the intercom: “Hello?”

“...”

“Hello, can I help you?”

“...”

Must not be working again. I sigh, put on a robe, haul myself upstairs, and yank open the door.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

He doesn’t look like a delivery man at all. Middle-aged, maybe fifty or so, he’s wearing a plain gray suit, blue tie, and, oddly, a bowler, which he raises slightly as he nods in greeting, before handing me what seems to be a business card: thick stock, embossed.

Department of Personal Inspections, it reads.

I stare at it, then at him. He blinks, and perhaps nods ever so slightly again.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Are you the TV license guy? Because we don’t have a TV.”

He simply points to the card.

“Right, you’re here for an inspection, but of what?”

He blinks, then slides past me and into the house. He does it so confidently and, I mean, he’s wearing a bowler hat, so I let him.

I’m sitting on the couch again, staring at the wall now instead of my computer, unable to make sense of what has happened, when my wife comes home.

“Why are you sitting in the dark?” she asks, flipping on the lights. She stops and looks at me, and I see what must be my own bewildered expression reflected in hers. “Are you okay?”

“I’m...I’m not sure. I mean, I’m fine, just a strange day. How about you? How did that thing at work end up going?”

“It was kind of a disaster, actually...”

He finally left just a few minutes before. Because his shift was over? He must have gone out the front gate and disappeared around the corner only moments before she came into sight. Was that a coincidence, or did he know somehow? Who was I dealing with? *What* was I dealing with?

“Hello? Are you even listening?”

“I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“What’s going on with you? I come home, you’re sitting in the dark, and weren’t you going to start dinner? What have you been doing all day?”

“I...” As I open my mouth, I realize that I’m not going to tell her. Am I ashamed? Of what? Worried she won’t believe me? Nothing remarkable ever happens to me. I saw a minor celebrity in

the park one day, and it was my go-to anecdote for months afterward. I spend most of my days alone, reading and going for long, aimless walks, so never really have anything to contribute when she gets home. “Nothing, I mean, just the usual: read, went to the park, stopped by the farmer’s market.”

“Weren’t you supposed to,” she stops herself and her tone softens, “I mean, didn’t you say you were going to start writing soon?” She knows that I already feel bad enough about this. I know that she wants to motivate me without doing anything that seems like nagging. But neither of us knows how she might actually do that.

“Yeah, today just didn’t seem like the right day, though. I kind of ended up busy with some other stuff.” For once, this is true. She nods, and her face betrays nothing, but I know what she’s thinking. We cook dinner, then watch a TV episode on the computer before bed, like we always do.

The inspector, as I quickly came to think of him, had followed me downstairs. Opening the door, it occurred to me what a mess things were.

“Actually, could you give me a minute?” Leaving him in the hall, I quickly made the bed and put my breakfast dishes in the sink. “Right, sorry about that. Please come in.”

He stood in the middle of the room, looking around. I hadn’t noticed the clipboard before.

“Do you need to see the gas meter? I think it’s above the stove there. The electric one is in the back of the closet and, as I said, we don’t have a TV.”

He remained unmoving. I could see my reflection in his well-shined brogues.

“Do you need to see my papers or something? I’m sure everything is in order.”

Still nothing, but then I noticed that he was looking at the card, which I only then realized I was still holding. I looked at it, uncomprehending, then back at him. He merely blinked, but I realized I was supposed to turn it over. It read (in very small type):

The Department of Personal Inspections is charged with the remit of examining the lives of persons within His Majesty’s territories. You have been chosen for inspection, and judgment will be rendered. Please carry on with your day-to-day activities per usual.

“Judgment will be rendered”? What is this? I think I need to see some identification.”

Not at all resentfully, nor ironically, he pulled a small leather wallet from the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket, opened it, and proffered it to me. The picture looked like it had been taken that morning, though the patina of the wallet suggested greater age. “Department of Personal Inspections, His Majesty’s Government, Inspector #64578.” Tilting it in the light, I saw there was a hologram as well. I handed it back, and he slid it into his pocket while repositioning himself in the corner, still standing, as if assuming a post.

After quite a bit of searching, I turn up a webpage titled “The Department of Personal Inspections: Frequently Asked Questions.”

What is the Department of Personal Inspections? The Department of Personal Inspections inspects the lives of citizens of, foreign workers residing in, and visitors to His Majesty’s territories.

On what authority are inspections carried out? A 1915 vote in Parliament (1087A.2) reaffirmed and standardized a longstanding Royal Proclamation from the year 1649.

How will my inspection work? Your inspector will observe your daily behaviors and habits.

Isn’t this a violation of my privacy? The Department’s proceedings remain completely confidential. Inspectees, while free to discuss their inspections, rarely choose to do so. No doubt that is why you were heretofore unfamiliar with the department and are now reading this F.A.Q.

Why have I been chosen? Section 16B of Act 1087A.2 clearly delineates that the Department of Inspections is not required to explain its selection procedures.

What should I do? Please carry on normally. Simply act like your inspector is not there.

How long will my inspection take? Inspections usually take a few days, a week or two at most. The longest inspection on record lasted 27 months. No inferences should be drawn from an inspection’s length.

What if I have complaints? Though we of course endeavor to avoid such a contingency, complaints may be made in person at your local Post Office. Please make note of your inspector’s number. We might mention that most inspectees come to very much

enjoy their inspections.

When will judgment be rendered? Judgment will be rendered at the completion of your inspection.

That night, I'm locked in the bathroom for the second time in twelve hours. It seems to have quickly become the only place where I'm free from observation. I can't sleep and, since it's a studio apartment, I can't read anywhere else late at night without keeping my wife awake. But I can't read any more than I can sleep tonight. I sit on the edge of the tub and stare into the mirror across from it. Over the last year, my hair has quickly started to gray, even though I'm barely over thirty. My father's hair, now so silvered it almost looks yellow under certain light, had changed completely by the time he was forty. It's not that I see him when I look in the mirror, but I don't see myself anymore either. My self-conception has not decayed as fast as reality.

Earlier, I had retreated to the bathroom just to get away from his constant gaze.

"I'm going to use the bathroom. You just stay here, okay?"

He merely blinked.

I turned the tap on, filling the room with the sound of running water as I tried to process what was happening. Seeing my reflection in the mirror, I draped a towel over it, hiding my own eyes.

Right. Pretend there's not a bowler-hatted man with a clipboard in the corner, judging me. "Well," I announce, "I guess I would usually read for a while now." He blinks. I guess I would not normally announce what I am going to do. Normally I would watch some more highlights. Instead, I settle in on the couch with my book. I start to read, but every few seconds my eyes slip, uncontrollably, away from the page and back to the inspector. I read a sentence, then see him move, making a note on his clipboard, and look up. I try to find my place, reread the sentence, but then look up again, wondering why he's stopped taking notes. I shift posture, leaning back and holding the book up in front of me, so it blocks him from my line of sight. This works for a few minutes, but then I catch myself listening for the sound of his pen. I cross my legs, listening if doing so merits a note. No. I scratch the bottom of my foot. Yes. I wonder if I could work out a baroque code of gestures that would allow me to convey

a message to whoever it is who reads these notes he's taking.

"Do you mind if I put on some music?" I ask him. He blinks. Right, I'm not supposed to tell, much less ask him.

Turned sideways now, music on, I can't see or hear him. I finally make it through a few pages. But I feel his presence behind me, and worry he could be creeping across the room. A quick glance: still there in the corner. I read another page, now trying to hear, over the music, if he's moving. He could be in the closet, going through my stuff. Or, looking up, I could find him gone. Was he ever really here? Maybe I hallucinated the whole thing. Or maybe I'm still asleep and dreaming. I quickly peek again, but he hasn't moved.

I give up on the book and open my computer. He makes a note, no doubt judging my atrophied attention span. I check my email: nothing new. Continuing fallout from the bombing, protests in the south, famine: no new news. I look up at the inspector, and he looks back at me. I click over to my email again: still nothing. On my second pass through my bookmarks, I'm clicking on articles I have no real interest in. By the third pass, I'm just cycling, waiting for anything new. He stirs from the corner now, and comes around beside the sofa, looking over my shoulder. I take the computer off the coffee table, resting it on my lap. He cranes his neck to see. I lean back, turning slightly away from him. He quickly climbs, with surprising dexterity, onto the back of the sofa, perching just over my shoulder, as I hover over the tab that would bring up my email yet again.

"Right," I say, slamming the computer shut. "Nothing new. Maybe I'll go for a run now?" I run three times a week. In theory. If it's raining, or too cold, or I just don't feel good when I wake up, forget it. So more like once or twice a week, and that's when things are going well.

I'm curious to see if he'll jog after me, despite the suit, tie, and hat. Given the finesse he demonstrated in hopping up onto the back of the sofa, it wouldn't surprise me if he could keep up without breaking a sweat, continuing to make notes on his clipboard all the while. Instead, he strides a tight circuit in the middle of the park, keeping me just in sight as I run along the outer boundary. There he is going up the hill as I dart down the path and along the row of trees that line the field where school groups play. And there he is coming down the other side as I emerge from the trees back onto the paved path. As I trace the bottom of the park, past the playground and restrooms, he casually blazes a trail through

the uncut grass. I usually have to stop and walk one stretch of my route, but today I make it the whole way, even if I'm puffing up the final hill. As a kid, I would get a horrible stich in my side if I ran too much. It's not that I'm in better shape now; rather, I never exert myself to the point of pain anymore, because nothing could be as enjoyable as playing tag was then, capable of distracting me long enough for that to happen.

On weekends, and evenings when the weather is good, the park draws a crowd of picnickers who sit on the hill overlooking the city's skyline. Once last summer, returning from a nearby restaurant, we came upon a crowd here, even though it was after dark. A storm had opened up over the city, but not here, just a couple miles to the north. The crowd oohed and awed at each bolt of lightning and rumble of thunder like they were part of a fireworks display. I was more fascinated by the fact of the crowd itself, and by watching them watching, than I was by the storm. And I was too worried about getting caught in the rain to enjoy that.

Even on weekdays, the park has its regulars. Amidst the dogwalkers, and retirees passing their days on benches, there are always a few exercisers with personal trainers. They run between trees, do calisthenics while the trainer keeps count, toss medicine balls, and whip enormous, nautical-looking ropes, one side tied to the fence, up and down. The trainers alternate stretches of feigned enthusiasm and deep boredom. I notice they often position themselves behind their clients, so that they can text inconspicuously through a set. "Great job!" they call out, not looking up from their phones.

Were any of these regulars watching, they might think that the inspector and I formed such a pair, except I look like I should be at work at this hour, and he looks like he should be auditing someone's tax return. I sometimes wonder when I sit in the apartment, midday approaching, still in my bathrobe and unable to motivate myself to do much of anything, what would happen if I put on a suit and tie. Would I find myself closing deals, merging and acquiring, robber baronning, building a monopolistic empire? Or at least writing a few pages? I have not, as of yet, tried.

Wheezing for breath, I stumble up to the inspector at the entrance of the park, just as he too arrives there, as if he knew exactly what pace I would keep. "Did you get my time?" I ask. I never time myself, so it's not as if I would have any point of comparison, but it seems like the thing to say. He merely blinks.

“Excellent choices, sir.” He weighs the greens, peppers, cucumber, and a rubber-banded bunch of asparagus and loads them into my bag on top of the eggs, loaf of spelt sourdough, and organic tomatoes bought earlier at other stalls. This vegetable guy always seems eager to talk, to tell me about today’s basil, or the first sorrel of the season. If he successfully struck up a fake farmer’s market friendship with me, would I find myself buying more? If I struck one up with him, would he slyly tell me to skip the lettuce, that it was sub-par this week? I just smile and give him my money. At least my choices as a consumer are validated. But of course he would never criticize, so long as I pay.

“You know what, free-range, hand-made sausage guy? My cholesterol hasn’t been high enough recently. I’ll take everything on the table.”

“You mean one of each type, sir?”

“No, I mean everything.”

He would do no more than quietly celebrate being able to go home early: “Excellent, sir.” Actually, he’d probably think I was going to set up a rival stall somewhere, reselling his goods.

No sausages, even these fancy ones, for me, though. I make eye contact with the inspector, his pen hovering over his clipboard, ready to note my choice, and back away from the table.

I wonder what the people here, buyers and sellers, make of him. A business man, with somewhat quaint taste, taking a late lunch? Hotel porter on break? Or does he just blend into the crowd, despite not buying anything? With his clipboard, does he look like he’s planning his own market? Or like some kind of...inspector? No one seems to notice him. He keeps some distance from me as I move from stall to stall, but I feel his gaze on me as I make my selections. Should I feel good about all this healthy food I’m buying? Ridiculous? Happy to make my wife happy, since she can’t get away from work for a midday, midweek market? Responsible because I’m supporting small, local producers? Why does that matter again? Their stuff tastes better anyway, fresher, right? The eggs are definitely better, their yolks visibly brighter. Normal eggs taste muted in comparison. But if someone rubbed dirt on grocery-store vegetables, then sold them here, would I know the difference? Am I paying more for dirty vegetables? At least it’s organic dirt, right? Is there such a thing as inorganic dirt? I mean, not organic dirt? Or is this actually cheaper than the grocery store, without the middle-

man?

Before walking home, I stop at a bench a little away from the market to repack my bag, to make sure the berries and tomatoes don't end up smashed. My goods form a bright spread of colors: red tomatoes, bright green basil, deeper green peppers, purple blackberries. One day in the dining hall in college, a friend looked at my tray full of processed yellow foods: "You're going to die of cancer," he said. My bagful from the market: it *looks* lovely, but I have no idea what I should, or even do, think about it all anymore. I don't even bother to check that he's following as I start for home.

A few evenings later, we're lingering in bed, having had sex for the first time in weeks. I almost feel like I shouldn't be allowed to enjoy myself at the end of a day, which there had been so many of before, filled with nothing but procrastination, but my writing is actually going well now. I notice that we had forgotten to lower the blinds before, and get up to do so. I swear I see him standing in the window well looking in, but it's only my reflection in the glass.

I'm walking down the High Street, surrounded by a bustle of tourists and workers on their lunch breaks. The inspector follows at a slight distance, a few people back behind my right shoulder. I briefly wonder if I could lose him in the crowd, but what would be the point? He knows where I live. I had decided to try to stick to my normal routine, which, when the weather was clear like it was today, calls for a long walk in the afternoon. I pass the grocery and off license, the dry cleaners and a charity shop. I stop to look at the bookstore's display and, reflected in the window, see him still behind me. He makes the occasional note, but leaves a little more distance between us, so as to not stand out as a conspicuous stalker, I guess.

Just then I see the reflection of another bowler floating through the crowd. I turn and follow. He's about thirty yards farther down the street now, but the hat stands out clearly. I liven my step, slipping past shopping bags, around a couple holding hands, gradually closing on him. How many people wear bowler hats anymore? It can't be a coincidence, can it? I glance back and see my inspector still trailing as usual. Has he seen yet who I'm following?

I've nearly caught up with the other bowler-hatted man now. From behind, I can see that he is wearing a dark suit. Giving

him some space, I try to get a little ahead to see and—indeed, he’s carrying a clipboard, nothing else. My own inspector must surely have seen what’s going on, but he’s far enough behind now that I can’t make out his expression, though I can see that he is trying, without letting his casual demeanor slip, to catch up. Will he intervene? Am I breaking protocol?

I fall back now, trailing this new inspector from a position a few people back, just off his right shoulder. As we continue down the street, I see, just as far ahead of him as he is of me, the person who must be his inspectee: an elderly man, probably in his seventies, wearing trousers and a collared shirt, a cardigan over it. He makes his way down the sidewalk without hurry or apparent purpose.

The old man stops now, looking at the display in a shop window. His inspector stops too, leaving some distance. I stop, yet farther back. Glancing behind me, I see that my inspector has caught us, but he stops now as well. We stand arranged down the street as the old man watches a toy train go around in a circle in the window. What, I wonder, would it be like to go through this process at his age, rather than mine? Our lives seem not wholly dissimilar: here we both are, on a weekday afternoon, strolling through the city without any particular goal, while everyone around us has their sights set clearly on lunch or shopping. The presence, and gaze, of my inspector has made me self-conscious of my choices, or my inability to make them, as I try to make a life for myself. Does the old man instead look back on the choices he has already made? What does his inspector see? Can you see someone evaluating his past the way you can see him determining his future? Looking back over a life of regrets and disappointments, possibilities once imagined with hope, not turned into actualities, but simply gone? I watch the inspector watching him watch the train, my inspector watching me.

I’m in and out of sleep as my wife is eating breakfast and getting ready for work. She moves so confidently, so un-self-consciously, from task to task: I admire it, but it also exhausts me. It used to be that, hearing the door close behind her, I would roll over, prepared to sleep for another two or three hours, but today I’m up and, a few minutes later, right on cue, the bell rings. I quickly let him in and drop into my new routine as he assumes his position in the corner. A light breakfast and coffee, then I begin to write immediately, be-

fore too many stray thoughts can form, before the censor that lives in a corner of my head awakens. No internet—email, news—until I have at least three new pages. Only then a break.

“The satisfaction of making eggs in a brand-new no-stick skillet is not unlike that of discovering that there’s been a film of plastic protecting your watch all these months and that it, not the glass itself, has progressively scratched and fogged—then peeling it off.” I have carefully constructed this aphorism in the time it takes me to cook my eggs. He seems unimpressed, and makes no note of it on his clipboard. I hope my pages, piling up quickly now, are better. Certainly I feel better, happier, more purposeful. At the end of the day, I feel lighter, justified in thinking about other things, in laughing and smiling instead of brooding over another lost day. I can tell that my wife has noticed, and also that, though happy, she doesn’t say anything in fear of jinxing the new order.

As he does at some indeterminate time each evening, he quietly steps from his place in the corner, touches the brim of his hat, nods, and blinks, as if to say (though of course he doesn’t), “Another good day’s work,” or “Same time tomorrow, then.” Actually, the time isn’t so indeterminate, just not tied to the clock. Whether she’s getting back at 5:45, straight from work, or later after a Pilates class, he always leaves five minutes before my wife comes home. I have no idea how he knows. Is he in communication with a team of spotters? Are we being digitally surveilled? It’s hard to know just how paranoid I should be. Lately, I have taken his leaving as a convenient cue to make the bed, do any dishes left in the sink, and start dinner. Today, though, I just nod back to him and remain lounging on the couch with my book.

He slips out of the apartment, up the stairs, and, moments after I hear the front door shut—long enough that I’m not worried he might still be lurking in the front yard—I’m off. I throw on my shoes and a jacket and rush out of the house, though being careful not to let the front door slam behind me, lest it echo down the street. I peek out from between the hedges to check which way he’s gone, and see him to the right, about halfway down the block. Good: my wife comes home from the other direction. No doubt she’ll be coming around the corner any minute now, but I should have just enough time to slip out of sight first. I follow him, hanging about fifty yards back, ready to duck between parked cars should he look over his shoulder. Characteristically purposeful in

his movements, he turns left at the corner, and by the time I catch sight of him again, he's going right around the next one. I quicken my pace just to be sure, but he's probably headed for the subway, taking this route. A few turns later and we're on a major road, crowded enough that I can draw closer to his bowler hat, bobbing above the after-work crowd, without drawing attention. As expected, he enters the subway, and I pass through the gates and get on the escalator a few dozen people behind him.

I see him go onto the southbound platform, but I get caught up in the sudden rush of people exiting a train on the other side. By the time I stumble onto the platform, I've lost him. He doesn't seem to be among the few passengers to the left, waiting on the shorter side of the platform, so I work my way in the other direction, but still don't see him. Hearing the train approaching, I'm now frantic, trying to quickly but inconspicuously scan the rest of the passengers. Just as the train rumbles into the station, I almost run into him.

He's taken his hat off—that's what happened. Luckily, he's intent on the train and doesn't even look up as I brush past him. I make sure to get on the next car forward from his. The doors chime and close and I stand looking back through the windows. At this crowded time of day, he too is left standing, and I see now just why I lost sight of him. It's not only the lack of bowler. Rather, his whole posture has changed. Normally, he stands precisely straight and looks slightly down his nose due to the tilt of his head. Now, however, his shoulders and spine are rounded in resignation, and his chin droops tiredly to his chest. The power of the job, dissipated? Of the hat? Now he is but one more exhausted commuter amongst a train full of them.

I shadow him as he switches trains and then finally returns aboveground, far into the suburbs. He makes his way into a non-descript residential area. Ten minutes and half as many turns later, he fishes his keys out of his pocket and approaches a narrow, well-weathered terrace house, the kind worth nothing or several million, depending on the location—I know nothing about this neighborhood, wouldn't have any idea how to get home if I hadn't taken the subway here. I loiter at the corner until he's gone in, then skulk down the block. From behind the overgrown but spotty hedge, I look into the front room. The walls are lined with stacks and stacks of notebooks and papers. Not just the walls: there are smaller piles in the middle of the floor as well, only narrow paths left between them. I step around the hedge and into the front yard

to get a closer look through the window. There must be thousands of notebooks in there, pages upon pages. Just then, the light flicks on and a boy, maybe seven years old, comes into the room. Locking eyes, we both freeze. He tilts his head inquisitively, and then his jaw hinges open—but his lips don't move further, and no sound emerges from this black maw. He just looks at me, mouth hanging open. As the seconds grow, my puzzlement gives way to fear, but I remain rooted in place. Just as I am trying to will myself into fleeing, the man appears, positively looms up behind the boy, and places a protective hand on his shoulder. He stares me down and then, without a word, lowers the shades.

And suddenly, just like that, he's gone. I had woken, eaten my usual bowl of yogurt and muesli, and put the coffee on. He normally rang the bell right about then, just before I settled in front of my computer to write. But that morning, twelve days into my inspection—nothing. By the time I had poured my coffee, I was wondering where he was. I tried to reread the pages I'd written yesterday, but couldn't concentrate. Thinking maybe the doorbell had stopped working, I went up and checked if he might be waiting out front. I went back downstairs, and, finishing my coffee, cycled through my email and other bookmarks.

Since then, I haven't written a word. It sits there on my computer, half finished. Most days, I can't even muster the will to open it. Is it because I followed him? I try hanging a picture of my favorite writer over my desk, hoping his gaze will compel me to end my procrastination. I even try hanging a generic picture of a man wearing a bowler, but nothing works.

I awaited my judgment, now that my inspection appeared to have ended. My days were organized around checking my mailboxes, real and virtual. I kept my phone on hand as well. How would they contact me? After three increasingly desperate weeks, I go to the post office, but the clerk acts like she has no idea what I'm talking about.

"I'm here for my judgment!" I repeat.

Looking concerned now, she gestures to the security guard, who, over my protests and attempts to explain, drags me out of the building. Much the same happens at various government offices downtown.

Finally, I remember the F.A.Q. page, and pull it up on my computer again. It looks rather dated, like a webpage built in the early days of the internet and not since updated, something I hadn't noticed before. I also only now notice that one can scroll down to more questions, including:

How do I receive my judgment? Judgments are not shared with inspectees, but rather made for the sole use of His Majesty's government.

Despondent and self-loathing, I've again started taking long, aimless walks across the city. If I maintain a steady pace, the sights and sounds change just fast enough to hold my attention. The walking lulls me into an unthinking, peaceful state, broken only by thirst and hunger. I avoid my wife as much as possible, too ashamed to face her, waiting until she's asleep to slink in and go to bed. But one night, I sit in the front yard until the light goes out, then carefully climb down into the window well. In the green glow of the alarm clock's numbers, I see my wife arrange the blankets over herself and stare at the ceiling. After a few minutes of stillness, I turn to climb back up, when suddenly the lights flick on.

"Is that you?"

I freeze, hoping that I'm camouflaged by the light reflecting off the inside of the window.

"What on earth are you doing? Where have you been? Please come talk to me."

I slink into the house. Without taking off my coat or shoes, I sit on the couch.

"What is going on?" She presses her hands, fingers splayed, against the sides of her head. "I never see you anymore. You sneak in after I'm asleep, and never get up before I leave for work."

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come.

"Explain yourself!" she shouts, anger overcoming worry now.

I can't sustain eye contact with her, so turn to the window, where I see my own reflection. As she fires question after question at me, I can't—or at least don't—so much as open my mouth. I cannot explain myself even to myself.

"What are you doing all day? Why am I working all the time if you're not writing at all?" She pauses, holds her arms out before her, palms up. "Don't you have anything to say?"

Her questions, her worry, her anger—all are reasonable, and I look back at her with sympathy. But as her words build and bounce around our tiny basement apartment, I am pulled more and more into myself and my silence. Looking back at the window, I see that an unfamiliar smile has crept into the corner of my mouth. She sees it too and screams in exasperation before climbing back into bed and pulling the covers over her head. After a while, I get up to turn off the lights, but then simply return to the couch, sitting alone in the dark.

Yet again, I'm out trying to walk myself into thoughtlessness. As I proceed down each street, I look at the countless houses, and the countless bricks that make up each one. How does anyone muster the will to make anything? Put one thing on top of another and give it form? I plod through the park without stopping, its benches appealing only to those on whom idleness doesn't weigh. Even looking at the trees, and their countless leaves, exhausts me.

"Hey, mate!" One of the trainers is shouting to me from the distance. "Do you have the time? Phone's dead," he says, holding up the guilty device.

I stop and turn toward him, but all I can do is blink.

He tries again. "I said, do you know what time it is?"

Again I just blink.

He shakes his head and turns away, cursing me under his breath, whether as an idiot or an asshole, I don't know. I resume my walk.

Coming up on the farmer's market, the vegetable guy tries to catch my eye in a lull between customers. I studiously ignore him. But then something catches my own eye, a small advertisement stuck to a lamp pole: *The unexamined life is not worth living, it reads. Join the examiners. Applicants of discerning judgment and absolute discretion required.* It gives the unfamiliar address of an office, which I make note of, enlivened. *Please bring your measurements, including hat size.*

Sipper's Sweet Satisfaction

Ronan O'Callaghan

It is a misnomer to say that Sipper was born. As a matter of fact, his giant stick-bug body had been cloned onboard Cosmic-Cola's Spacelab Gamma after being transmitted by a distant scouting party. Analysis of his genes concluded that Sipper's purpose in life was to suck cellular blobs of sugar growing on the flora of LPP-Dondras-23.

The fine folks at Cosmic-Cola had another purpose in mind, however. Utilizing their advanced Create-a-Cola device researchers would combine different variations of their products. Sometimes they would splice Blue Neptune and Solar Blast to maximize flavor contrast. Other times they'd combine Isotope Bonanza, Black Hole Wirl, and Dranken's Drink to concentrate refined sugar coating. But most of the time they improvised, sloshing together countless variations as inspiration struck. The purpose of these tests was simple: as a result of only consuming sugar, Sipper's species had developed the most sensitive sugar taste buds in the universe. So the researchers tracked his reaction to see if they had created the best soda possible.

The test quickly went off the rails. Sipper drank seven sodas then promptly died of a heart attack. More importantly to the scientists, however, was that the introduction of soda distorted Sipper's pleasure sensors, meaning all the data the researchers collected was inadequate. Undeterred, the researchers found an adequate solution. Once Sipper gave them the data they needed, they would release a quick zap and mercifully kill the creature before sugar irreversibly clogged his arteries. Then they would create a new Sipper and repeat the process.

A couple hundred Sippers down the line, the crew had improvised a concoction containing Martian Brew, Zeta Juice, and Green Vonkin. Sipper took one sip and every neuron in his body exploded in pleasure. The next moment his heart exploded from arterial pressure. The drink would go on to be a hit across the galaxy, and was named Sipper's Sweet Satisfaction in memory of their faithful test subject.

Although no one instantly perished after drinking SSS, increasing health complaints made Cosmic-Cola's executives fear a lawsuit, for a lawsuit could reveal that the adorable mascot of

their most popular drink had been subjected to years of murderous experimentation. All files regarding Spacelab Gamma were subsequently destroyed except the data collected from experimentation on Sipper.

These files went unseen for hundreds of years until they were released to the public during the Ythasian Revolution. The revelation that Sipper wasn't fictional inspired shock and bemusement across the galaxy. People began asking if the various universities, nations, and planets named after the beverage should be renamed. Others insisted that the names should stay, as they honored the poor abused creature. At the controversy's height, it was discovered that the planet now known as New Sipper had once been LPP-Dondras-23. Pioneers had hunted Sipper's race to extinction before the beverage had reached that remote part of the galaxy.

It is unknown who gave Sipper his name. Was it the corporate mercenaries who first laid eyes on him, the scientists who spent their days probing him, or a marketing executive with a penchant for alliteration? It cannot be doubted that Sipper is one of the most influential creatures to ever exist. Due to the destruction of his genetic information, he will never know.

Mercy Garden

Lyss Welding

Joshua said he didn't know when his rage issues started, but I do. It happened sometime that summer when he was eight, and I was seven, and we'd just moved from mom's Saginaw apartment to Gram and Grandpa's farm in Millington. We spent all summer outdoors, killing all the animals we could touch.

First came the field mouse. It had fallen into a window well. When we picked it out, it was panting, dehydrated, and starved mostly to death. See, it was supposed to be a mercy. Joshua carried it by its tail out to the pond where we found a rock the size of my head. Josh stood over the mouse, cupping the rock above it. The furrow lines in his brow looked like grandpa's as he said, *it would be cruel not to*.

He dropped the rock. We waited a few seconds, then tilted it up to see if it had done the job. The mouse was two-dimensional. Like Wile E. Coyote after the anvil. I'd never seen a being that flat before.

I don't know what made me lie for him when Gram asked what we were doing. *Josh was showing me how to skip rocks.*

The next day, I tried telling him how the thought of that mouse and its paper-thin ghost kept me awake all night.

What are you talking about? he scoffed. *We were just skipping rocks.*

When I came to, I panicked at the feeling of loose teeth filling my cheeks. Thank god it was just gravel. Joshua was staggering over the man in the Cargill cap. Last thing I remember, Cargill had bought us beers and tried to sell us on some new-fangled seed and crop protectant. Now he was splayed out on his side in the dirt patch between the bar's dumpster and the forest.

Joshua started pacing. Mumbling, "I told him we don't farm any more. Told him he'd better shut up. I warned him."

Under the light of the crescent moon, Cargill's body looked gray and glistening wet. Joshua lurched toward the dumpsters and set off a light's sensors. Colors returned to the scene. Josh's stretched, torn orange tee. Green shattered glass, fool's emeralds, in the rocks. Wine-red Rorschach blotches making mud. Syrupy crimson beads

dripping from the blade in Joshua's hand and pooling under the man in the Cargill cap.

"I'm telling you, I warned him. Dipshit didn't listen."

"Shh!"

There'd be no use hearing Joshua's rationale. He simply got a taste for a fight and chased it.

"Was he here with anybody?" I asked.

Joshua shook his head.

I approached Cargill.

"Is he out-out?"

"I think, yeah."

I tried to shake him awake.

"He'll be fine," Joshua said. "Let's just get out of here. He'll be fine. And if he's not, he got what he deserved."

"He's breathing."

"Let's just get out of here."

I looked closer. It was hard to see with all the blood, but it looked like Josh had gotten his armpit and abdomen. A thick wind of iron and sweat filled my mouth. I gagged.

"You can't leave him like this," I said. "I've got tarp in the truck. We'll take him back to the barn, then figure out what to do."

Grandpa never did hunt. But he let Joshua and me wander out around the property with our pellet guns. He told us to shoot the squirrels, but Joshua preferred the frogs. Watching them as they burst open, their bodies erupting like volcanoes with legs. The fat ones were slow. If one was slow enough, he'd catch it instead. He'd make me hold the legs while he pulled on its arms. First, its legs would dislocate. Then it'd stretch forever til the skin around its joints tore. Fatty yellow globules would bubble out of its body and over Joshua's hands.

As Joshua dragged Cargill by the wrists toward my truck. I thought he might dislocate the guy's arms. I almost expected the same fat pockets to pop out.

We drove home. Twenty miles on country roads without passing another car. The only lights were the moon, the stars, and the lit, open garages that punctuated the flat black earth every few acres.

We didn't talk. Not til Joshua said, "Maybe we leave 'em with Milner. Like we did Jasper."

“Like a horse? No, we’re not bringing Milner into this.”

“What’s your fuckin’ bright idea then?”

“I’ve got a deep freeze.”

“Oh, Christ.”

Joshua kept bitchin’, and I just drove. I already had it all thought out. Sure, we’d have to move the quarter cow I just bought from Milner. But in my head, I was planning all the meals we’d make. Steaks. Chili. Roast. Bolognese.

We didn’t even unwrap the tarp from Cargill’s body. We just folded his knees into his chest then tucked in the edges like a burrito so he’d fit in the chest freezer. A mound of shrink-wrapped beef sat condensating on the garage floor.

“Phew,” Joshua sighed and even smiled at me, which I hardly ever saw him do. He couldn’t have been relieved as I was that we didn’t have to finish the guy off, or hack up the body or anything. We’d just let him... sleep.

My stomach didn’t churn til I finally turned the padlock. Then I hurled. It splattered up on my jeans, and Joshua’s too.

“Nasty, man! You got it on my face!”

He wiped his cheek, but missed a flemmy chunk that dangled from his chin. It reminded me again of that summer. And all those critters we massacred twenty-five years ago.

Right after the hottest part of the year is when the grasshoppers get real bad. Those locusts, man. It’s literally biblical. We spent all afternoon catching them. Joshua said that Grandpa said he needed bait for fishing. But I don’t think that was true. Cause when we offered up our milk gallon full of the things, Grandpa turned us away. *What the hell my gonna do with those?*

Seventy-two grasshoppers. We counted. Big ones, too. The size of my index finger today. It made them seem like real animals, you know, when I could feel the weight of their bodies, the push of their muscles against my palms when I caught one. But Joshua said we couldn’t let them go. *You got ‘em all jacked up in that milk jug. Prolly half-dead already.*

Joshua took me to the air conditioning unit behind the house. Grandpa had just installed it that spring.

Open the jug, he commanded.

I did. He tilted it down into the air conditioner fan. The grasshoppers started jumping out. Slowly at first. They were bottlenecked. Then Joshua flashed a pocketknife I didn’t know he had

and slit the neck of the jug. The bugs came flooding, careening into the fan's blades. Joshua grinned, watching. Rust-colored bug guts and spit shot out, freckling his face and bare chest. Eventually, the last grasshopper was gone. That killing ended like they all did, with Joshua totally losing it, rolling on the ground, writhing with laughter, howling like a wolf.

I don't know for sure why he laughed. I don't think it was a joke to him. Maybe he laughed at how ludicrous it was that he should get away with such things. Or he laughed from surprise, of how cruel he could be. Sometimes I think he laughed because he couldn't possibly do anything else. Like cry, or reflect, or feel. Because those things would be worse than death.

Cargill hadn't been in my freezer for three whole days when Joshua ran into the house, sweating and cussing. He was at Milner's. They said someone was looking for him.

"They said plain clothes, but must have been cops. Detectives or something. I don't know. Maybe they said... I don't remember."

"They say why they're looking for you?"

"What do you *think*? They know. They know what we did. You gotta move the... You gotta move it."

"Oh, *I* gotta move it?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah? Why me?"

"Because you're the one who put him there, dipshit. I said leave him, remember? You're really the one who killed him, when you think about it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

There was a knock on the door.

I stood and met my brother's gaze, hoping I could find something in his eyes that was sorry for what he'd done. That was sorry for what he'd done to me. That might beg for my help.

Instead, he furrowed his brow and scolded, "You'd better clean it up before they catch you, shithead."

Today, I miss my brother. I do. I don't ever talk about him, but I think about him all the time. I remember his laugh. The way he'd spit when he'd call me a shithead or a dipshit. I remember the stupe-

fied look on his face when those officers opened my deep freeze to find nothing but a white, empty basin and a pool of water.

Pardon the mess, sirs, I just defrosted it. Actually tryna sell it, if you know anyone.

I wonder if my brother felt his heart flatten when he died. If he felt it crush at the impact of the water when he jumped off that bridge. Or if he gasped for air just to feel the burning rush of silt and algae flushing through his sinuses. Like all those rodents he waterboarded. When they pulled him out, catfish had bitten off his fingers. I swear I saw zebra mussels behind his ears.

I never thought he had it in him. Shame, that is. Regret. But I can say it here, in the solace of my garden, where we don't forget our dead. We memorialize them. Grill a steak in their honor. We feel them among the birds, and the toads, and the garter snakes, and the mice that come to gather, that make this place their haven. While underneath, old life gives life to new.

CONTRIBUTORS

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