



LEAVINGS

Literary Magazine



March 2021

Contents

- | | |
|---|---|
| 3 Unpacking My Library Redux: A Foreword
Alexandra Davies | 23 The Year I Got Pregnant with Timmy
Lisa Latouche |
| 5 Strike
William Fargason | 31 Porto-Novo, 1983
Olaitan Humble |
| 6 Orpheus
Anna Newman | 32 Self-Portrait with Black Ice
Caroline Murphy |
| 7 Eggs
Valentina Rosales | 33 Isolated Self
Victoria Helen Loftus |
| 8 The Antichrist.
Valentina Rosales | 35 Eggs II
Valentina Rosales |
| 11 Memory as a Measure for Grief
Sanni Oluwatimileyin | 36 Disperse Me Like I'm Raining or Let Me
Be Celestial
Nicholas Alti |
| 12 Letter to Counselor Hildegard
Paul Brennan | 37 Sublimation
Chelsea Dingman |
| 13 The Tooth
Kate Moritz | 38 Birds
Aylin Sophia |
| 22 Mother Earth
Rocío Iriarte | |

Collective:

Aaron Banks – Editor
Eric Christiansen – Reader
Alexandra Davies – Editor
Derek Ellis – Editor
Nica Giromini – Editor
Danny Landers – Reader

Max Lasky – Editor
Anna Mack – Designer
Joanna Omestad – Editor
Chika Onyenezi – Editor
Züleyha Öztürk – Editor
Nelson Potter – Editor
Rana Yalçın – Magazine Designer

Unpacking My Library Redux: A Foreword

Alexandra Davies

I'm unpacking the contents of this issue, Yes, I am. While I am not Walter Benjamin, I do take pride in mulling over the collection of writers and artists that this magazine publishes. There's something marvelous about taking the time to look over our literary and artistic selections. As a book collector pours over their collection of aged spines of their library, I, too, find gazing over the table of contents a riveting experience. It's a personal pleasure to see the works that we love to read published on our digital pages. I'm sure the writers of this second edition of *Leavings* feel similarly, as achieving a publication is no small task.

I know you're eager to move forward to see what we have in store. It's never easy deciding what will go into each issue. When we begin the process of selection, before each title is argued for and accepted, each submission is reviewed with joy. No poem, short story, or artwork is overlooked or under-analyzed. In fact, I'd say that we at *Leavings* enjoy reading your submissions a little bit too much. We're driven by that old-world desire to collect, to acquire new things, and share them with the world.

Now the selected authors' names are organized on our digital shelves. I'm asking you to join me in the disordered order of our line-up of artists. (Aesthetically utilitarian, if I may say so myself.) We begin and end with Aylin Sophia's two pieces: "Back Garden" and "Birds".

Somewhere between surrealism and sci-fi, Sophia's work is a wave of lush colors and textures that capture the attention of any passing eye. William Fargason's "Strike" urges the reader to keep moving, to persevere despite the pain of the present and past. Fargason's white space is a relentless demand that in our small breaks there is still more to read and accomplish. "Orpheus," by Anna Newman, is a stunning piece of prose poetry. Her embodiment of Orpheus as a metaphor for the desire to leave memory behind is haunting as it is brilliant.

Valentina Rosales' pieces — "Eggs" and "The Antichrist" — blend into each other as works of freezer-burn surrealism. The tired peering eyes of "Eggs" watch over Rosales' short story on intense fascination and God. Sanni Oluwatimileyin follows with "Memory as a Measure for Grief". His work cradles the multigenerational pain of colonialism and racism, harking back to Fargason's poem and the urge to "strike" back. I am stunned by the lines "I mould words into pebbles to hurl at the sky / in hope that heaven hurls back my father / as rain, his scent filling the place of petrichor." Next is Paul Brennan's "Letter to Counselor Hildegard," a near-medieval reimagining of the slow days of summer camp. His lines embody remorse and the desire to return to what once was youth. Summer is long over, but we still have our homegrown herbs.

At the heart of this issue are two short stories we couldn't be happier to publish. The first is "The Tooth" by Katie Moritz. A story marked by a biting irony, it caught the attention of our collective for the way the two characters, Odont and Rosemary, begin seemingly unaware of one another, and yet gravitate toward each other over the course of the fifteen or so pages. The tension building, the twists and turns of every paragraph, will leave the reader undoubtedly surprised again and again. Rocio Iriarte's "Mother Earth" acts as a divide between the two stories. It's a vision of nature that we wish we saw on our hikes. While black and white, it is not hard for the mind to fill in the rich greens and vivid blues that flow off of the page and wash out onto the shore.

Lisa Latouche's "The Year I Got Pregnant with Timmy" lays bare the struggles and psychological weight of motherhood and the passing shadows of love. There is a longing, an unattainable feeling of stable ground. Olai-

tan Humble's "Porto-Novo, 1983" is a poem of love and existence for battlefield lands of West Africa that was once home. Can you return home when home becomes a foreign land? It's a struggle, but a worthy one. Caroline Murphy follows with "Self-Portrait with Black Ice," an elegy that endures the winter and its endless snow. Her fear of loss and an impulse to cling to comfort under ice pierces us like a low windchill. Next is Victoria Helen Loftus' "Isolated Self." Her short work on the anxiety and self-consciousness under covid provides a nearly universal feeling for the suffering souls of those stuck inside.

How many ways can you read "Disperse Me Like I'm Raining or Let Me Be Celestial"? Nicholas Alti's poem embodies the desire for the body to be something more. It strikes back and screams that I am more than the sum of my parts. Finally, we reach Chelsea Dingman's "Sublimation," a distortion of family and faith. Akin to an old fairytale, we are within the pages of a quiet storm that grows cold and foggy.

Now I have emptied the contents of our issue. It's too late to continue talking, possibly past midnight where you are. I should close this foreword here before the dust fully settles. But I'm filled with thoughts of winter dreams, god, war, and passion. I'm drawn to the intimacy of the language and description laid before us. Technicolor dreams and textures swirl behind my eyes. I'm thinking about the past, of lost loves and chest-beating anger. Of isolation and foreign lands. I'm standing in dusty libraries and ancient collections of real book collectors. In the second issue of *Leavings*, the words of these writers come alive before my eyes like phantom limbs. Strike that. It's I who live in the words of others. These words are building stones, a dwelling made of a compulsion to create, and now we must disappear into it, as it is only fitting.

Maybe this is what Walter Benjamin wrote about as he ran his fingertips over the edges of endless books that brought him joy.

Strike*William Fargason*

strike while your fist is still in your pocket strike
while the iron is still an iron strike against
a lover's brick wall each footstep through the forest

reminds you of every road you couldn't be for them
strike while you still remember your neighbor's soybean fields

you got lost in strike that child from your memory
who you once were strike while you still have a home
worth striking against strike that last line strike that whole

last page each syllable a cracked tooth in your smile
strike before the sweat falls before she gets home

before she zips up the suitcase says she's moving back
to Tampa to sort through the years strike that weeks-old
shit from your head and when you strike really put

your head into it strike while you still have a voice box
worth punching for so many years you struck

against your own fists trying to find ways to strike
the heart out each punch into your chest made the sound
of a fist against a baseball mitt strike while you can

still see the exit as if you could get three strikes
and finally quit the years of hating not the body

you were striking against but the self inside the body
strike while there's still a self left to strike against
and when you think you're done strike again

Orpheus

Anna Newman

Toothless, I am left alive and inarticulate, a smiling pit: Hello! Here I am. I would pay what it takes to forget if I knew what was required. Forgive me for memory's triage, for the un-homemaking of myself. Experience forms a crust around reality. In the memory of that night I clap and wait for whatever lurks to clap back, like a movie where something's always on the other end of silence. There was a moment I realized I was trapped. There was a moment where what happened didn't hurt. Outside, the machinery of sunset ground up the day, leaving clouds tidy and contained. When I left myself behind, I did it with surgical precision. Experience enfolds tightly, like a fitted sheet. It does what it takes to keep you from looking back.



The Antichrist.

Valentina Rosales

This world—the one that is filled with metro-stations and worn-out buses; the one in which pink toilette paper is sold in France; the one where Esperanto never thrived as a universal language; the one where the Zodiac killer hasn't yet been caught; the one where Natalie Wood drowned to death; the one where meteors almost always avoid the orbit of the earth—is the world that he inhabits.

The crack is the theater.

The crack oozes streams of lava.

He searched for her in every woman, in every reading of the lines, but she wasn't there. Not yet at least. Sometimes he was one of the actors, sometimes he wrote the plays, sometimes he did both. Now he needed to cast a woman

who could play the role of his mother. He interviewed and auditioned an array of actresses. Say "dear son", say "not so much salt", say "hope to see you this summer", say "you don't call anymore", say "that's why people have a hard time loving yo-gurt". He looked for a tone, a gesture, a movement of the hands. Where were the warm vowels that floated from her mouth to create words, phrases, meanings? He wanted the soft familiar hatred with which she addressed him during breakfast. He sought for tints of sweet resentment, for the cold waves that her hands would spread across his back every time she leaned on his shoulders, for the strawberry breath that spoke to his frightened ear. He also desired her harlequin-esque other. The black-and-white smile, the red lipstick, the pattern of rhomboids that gave depth to her dark and restless eyes. The other. Or the one that appeared while the screen glowed with technicolor images.

A multitude of actresses: or knowing how his mother became three different women.

Alex Storm had this idea about Jesus. He talked about a madman that infused reality with the strings of a perfectly baked mysticism. A mysticism that resembled the coordinates of a blueberry pie that expelled the smell of melted sugar over hot crust, or a batch of warm cookies that cracked in the cold winter air yet remained warm in the center. He was seventeen and already knew that if

you wanted that sweet taste in your mouth, you had to give something up—hand it willingly to the mad chef. Your devotion. Your nightly thoughts. Your silence. So, he never wished for freshly baked pies. He would make them himself, never forgetting to put the right amount of salt into the mix. This is what he told us that day during class. He stood in front of the blackboard looking tall, scrawny, and blue-eyed (like a true Hollywood Jesus) while he shared his opinions about the son of God.

Then Mr. T kicked him out of the classroom.

Dis-res-pect-ful. We were amused. He was proud.

The blue in his eyes covered the room like a big circus tent, and like a magic trick, he turned thirty-three.

33

Clothes, he thought. Was it a form of concealing what lied underneath? Or was it revealing? He was confused. He went to bed early to stop the passionate thrust of useless theory-making. His eyelids felt heavy, as if it were possible for them to crush his two-precious seeing-crystal-balls with their impossible weight. More confusion. His body twitched and he knew he was no longer awake.

A multitude of mothers came running. They were all the same women.

He had interesting clothes, which made him an interesting man (or so he liked to think). He was an actor on the weekends: Costumes/Lines/Gestures/Mnemotechnics. He was c-o-o-l on the weekends. He was also l-o-c-o if you decided to scramble the letters. On weekdays he taught at a university (Kant). And he wore clothes that indicated the presence of a contradiction (that he'd never—ever—done any type of theater). He liked this. It satisfied him immensely. To have a double life that was only double thanks to the garments that were worn opposite the world-canvas.

Night: was he a superficial man? Or was he a deep-deep-deep...

Moon: a shallow soul in the middle of the river.

Sleeper. That's what he would call himself sometimes. Or that's what he told me when we first met. Not a dreamer, but a sleeper.

If it was possible to be the human version of a black hole, that's exactly what he wanted to be. Inside: nothing but anti-matter. The problem was that all the people and objects it/he swallowed never came back to be the same, for they were shattered in pieces that couldn't be collected like elements of a puzzle. Yet it was this that for him stood as the purest and most accurate form of intimacy. Indeed, the epitome of a close encounter had the movement of an imploding star, or the voracity of a naked Saturn. He wished for the darkest of waters to wash over him. After all, what did it mean to be saved? That you owed. Owed the mad chef a batch of fresh human eyes.

He wore a black leather jacket.

Class dismissed.

The black nail-polish opened ten tiny galaxies in the tip of his fingers.

When I was fifteen, my dad gave me a book called Kant: An Introduction. I opened it and started reading. Then I hid it under the bed. It felt like drinking a cold glass of boredom. Boredom is the content; the glass is the container. Boredom takes the shape of the container. There's nothing we can do to change the shape of the container. With a blue pen I drew cat whiskers on Kant's face.

Fascination.

The same day we met, he told me that Kant was not the fella we all thought he was. He liked throwing parties with the right amount of people: not too many, for conversation could suffer the symptoms of superficiality; not too few, for conversation could fall into the deep coils of theory-making. The in-between. The right amount. Balancing acts that only take place in the most expensive type of circuses. Were his eyes blue? I couldn't

tell. I wanted him to teach me something I already knew. His smile drew grooves on his face.

Sometimes, as I walked back home from school, I wished I could buy people's features, people's gestures, people's walks, people's ways of sitting, people's tones of voice, people's mannerisms. Thirty dollars for that human topography. Thirteen for that movement of the hand. Ten for that flicker of the hair. A hundred for those vertical creases that appear on the side of the mouth. I first saw those marks on the face of my dad's cousin. I was ten. I knew they were expensive.

Had the theater the face of a dreamless depth?

The playwright, the actor, the philosophy professor. All garments against the world-canvas, and all clear zones of a dark monad. But then again, we're all dark monads. His mother came running in a dream. She was wearing sport-shoes and red-lipstick. She leaned on his shoulder and whispered in his ear a few cold jokes and some twisted punchlines: icy adjectives, slippery verbs, worm-dirt pronouns, frosted predicates, shivering subjects. Giggling. She couldn't be one. Thus, she became many. A force. A fiction. A lack of explanation. A 0 divided by another 0:

0/0

Kant. What was he going on about?

Gestures: Or the expression with no justification. Eventually it wraps around your life like a cowboy's lazo. It pulls you in like gravity, or like a sphere bending space. Gestures: With a burning cigarette they open holes in the cosmic cloth. One slips through them and becomes a true sleeper, or its synonym: a starving dreamer.

He cannot fix, and so he breaks.

Or that's what he said when he stood in front of the classroom. He was a true loco in a planet that almost always avoids the cruel trajectory of asteroids. Him—with a face that oozes streams of lava, and a pair of eyes that search inwards for a mother that keeps multiplying. Him—the black hole that laughed at Jesus yet became its double. Him—who covered the room like a circus tent

with a blue-movement of the eyes.
Flashback 10.

That day I understood the price of gestures. •

Memory as a Measure for Grief

Sanni Oluwatimileyin

After reading Taofeek Ayeyemi

My grandfather fought in World War II
& buried bits of his soul with every dead
till he became the husk of a hollow soul.

He was harvesting yams that August morning
when British soldiers came & molded his hoe
into a gun. The plantation became a memory.

Home became a battlefield —an opera
hosting an orchestra of gunshots and blasts
as deathly cries filled the air like a melody.

Last night, on the sidewalk, my father
couldn't breathe. A cop knelt to prey on him
for salvation from the sin of his black body.

His name wasn't Floyd. A nation wouldn't burn
to mourn his death. I fold my fist into a stone,
light it up in fire & take the first step into power.

I mould words into pebbles to hurl at the sky
in hope that heaven hurls back my father
as rain, his scent filling the place of petrichor

Letter to Counselor Hildegard*Paul Brennan*

It was supposed be a lap
around the tent for air, but

here, out in the sun ten centuries passed
and we shook them off: your infirmary's

herbs and leeches as treatment
for burns, for skin shed classified

affliction of soul. Remember
the craft table aflame? Our claim

a vision of God was needed
for reference, for painting postcards

you said to mail home.
You stomped that out.

The smoke though, still whiffs
through my car each morning

commuting to work. It's thick,
but flameless as lake reflecting sun

that last day, split by our canoe.
We always thought you knew

we pushed off overfull, let it go
because He had let you go:

tenure scorched by prank after prank.
Believe me:

out of reach of dock
by paddle or limb,

you'd take the chance
to strike a match, bend

a friends face with flame,
peak through creation's haze

and drop it.
Tell Him I'm sorry.

Tell Him we miss you.
That waking sick, we still

walk groggy to the garden,
sniff homegrown thyme, basil

and bloodroot, before
popping aspirin.

The Tooth

Katie Moritz

It was the winter Odont brutally murdered the wasp. The one that flew around in slow motion, sluggish from cold. It kept him company at the paper where he worked as a staff writer and occasionally helped with IT. His office was spartan and drafty and overlooked the railroad tracks that ran along the river. On summer afternoons, he watched the trains haul pieces of granite away, and in winter, he watched the snow settle on the mobile homes that had drifted downstream the year the hurricane hit.

Now that it was dead, curled into a brittle bud on the corner of his desk, he sat and stared at it. The rage he had known moments before edging away, not wanting anything to do with the aftermath. He used the old newspaper that had ended its life to brush the wasp into the wastebasket and wiped the wet spot with a napkin.

The wasp had interrupted his writing and now he struggled to get back to it. He stared at the computer, squinting through his large round glasses. No snow today. At least not yet. Just clouds and a chill. The article he was working on was also going nowhere. But he was on deadline and had to turn something in, or

Barbara, his editor, would have his balls.

It was going to be one of those days. To make it better, he could walk down to the Kwik Mart for a candy bar and a cola. Without even thinking, he began thumbing through Facebook on his phone, pausing only briefly on the girls he had gone to high school with, the ones who were now into “multilevel marketing,” who were athletic trainers and hot moms. If they had any real intellectual ability, they’d have real jobs, he told himself. They’d have real interests and they’d be doing something of value. They’d be contributing to the world instead of posting photos on Facebook and Instagram.

He should stop, he told himself. He needed to finish his article. But he was hungry! If he could dull the pinging in his stomach, it might help his mood. He grabbed the plastic wholesale jug of nuts he had bought from Costco yesterday. He had also bought salmon fillets and bacon (a couple of weeks ago he had overheard one of the salesgirls telling the production manager that her boyfriend, Xander, had started the keto diet and that he was getting, like, so jacked).

He had done some research into this diet and figured he too would give it a go. He wasn’t fat. In fact, he was trim for thirty-six. His few friends, most of them married, a few with kids, had bodies that gave away their age: the gently rounded middle, the body hair that no longer followed the map laid out in puberty, sprouting where it saw fit, atop shoulders, around knee caps, fading out from the belly button. Odont had the same odd hair patterns, but he was relieved that, unlike his college bud, Matt, he had a thick head of hair that always seemed to shimmer thanks to curls as round as quarters.

“You’re gonna be a movie star with that hair,” his grandmother said. Or used to say until he became too old to be a movie star and she died falling down the basement stairs.

So, aside from his hair, and his big round glasses he had a body that did not take up much space. His buddy Matt’s four-year-old called him Uncle Leg. Which is how most women viewed him as well. How depressing.

Odont tossed a handful of nuts into his mouth, his eyes skimming an email he had just received from the governor's office denouncing sexist comments made towards an outspoken member of his staff when he bit down on something hard. The cold pang, sharp, like glass, shot through him, causing a shiver to seize up his jaw.

He reached for the napkin that had come with his morning bagel and remembered he had used it to clean up the wasp. He looked around his office, his mouth frozen, the hard object sitting like a pebble on his tongue. The masticated nuts enclosed it in a mushy pod and pressed up against the sides of his teeth, gritty and warm.

He finally found a tissue. He spit the mess into the palm of his hand and stared: within the rubble of cashews, almonds, and pecans, sat a single tooth.

Odont scowled. He worked his tongue, starting in the back, over the tops of each tooth. He did not feel any pain. When his tongue had finished its rotation without finding any gaps, he started over. The second time proved to be just as fruitless.

He swallowed several times with great difficulty, hoping to rid his mouth of any remaining nut fragments, and then plucked the tooth from the mess and tossed the tissue.

It was 2PM on a Thursday.

As if the tooth were a sign to go easy on his own oral health, Odont decided to make something soft for dinner and cooked a burger on the stovetop. It looked sad on its own, so he fried an egg and put it over the greasy patty. As he sat on the sofa eating, the TV in front of him playing some mindless show, he thought about the tooth. Its metallic ping, the very fact that it was a foreign object, that it had been in his mouth when belonged in someone else's.

Odont had saved the tooth because he planned to write the wholesale distributor in the morning and

would need it as proof. But he also liked the tooth. How it looked, its texture and color. It was a molar for starters, so it was of good size and classic shape. It also wasn't yellowed, nor was it artificially white. Instead it held the color of an old wedding dress with a glossy sheen. A small divot a few shades darker puckered its center like a dimple.

He had placed the tooth in his wallet for safe keeping earlier in the day and there it remained, a tiny bump beneath the leather. He pulled the wallet from his back pocket and held it, rolling his thumb over it mindlessly as he stared at the TV.

As Rosemary waited for her gin martini to arrive, she tipped her head to the side to take a sip of her water and was stunned to find that when she went to bite the straw predictably between her molars, it instead slid straight to the roof of her mouth, causing her to sneeze.

She scrunched her nose and pulled the straw out for immediate interrogation: the smallest spread of pink, the rounded plastic sides, the straw had not been compressed or squeezed in any manner. It had slid just as it had felt, smoothly through. With her brows clenched and her eyes narrowed, she pushed a slender finger into the corner of her mouth and felt with great surprise that her right molar was entirely gone.

How could she have lost her tooth, she asked herself, just as the bartender placed her drink in front of her and bounced off to another patron. She was so good about taking care of her mouth! She brushed at least twice a day – three times on weekends – and she saw her dentist every six months. She had never had a cavity. She owned and used a waterpik.

She still had her finger in her mouth when her friend Jess arrived. Jess herself was in a bit of a fluster as she removed her hat and coat and threw her purse over the pointed shoulder of the high bar chair. Her hair, wild and damp, clung in black curlicues around her ears. Her overly made up eyes were smudged. Rosemary began to hear her friend mid-sentence, as she had started her story before even sitting down. Something

about missing the bus and having to haul seventy-five student papers in a cheap tote bag three miles to make her afternoon appointment.

“ – If I thought the grading was going to kill me, I was wrong. It’ll be the pain in my neck that incapacitates me. I’ll end up in bed and I’ll finally realize, with all the time in the world to write, that I actually can’t write and I’ll kill myself just to prove a point to myself...”

Jess, finally seeing Rosemary with her finger in her mouth blankly staring at her drink, sat, sighed, and cocked her head sideways.

“You okay? Got something stuck in your tooth? A piece of ham?”

“My tooth. It’s missing.”

Jess raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“What do you mean missing?”

Rosemary shook her head and began rummaging through her purse, which was hooked on the bar’s small metal hanger between her knees. She pulled out the garishly jeweled hand mirror her mother had given her as a child and stared at her face.

It was shaped like a leaf with a sharply dipping chin, a pointed nose, and gentian blue eyes rounded and rimmed by thick lashes and an almost organized pattern of freckles. Her hair, which an old boyfriend once called “orpiment orange,” fell in bushy clumps around her pale neck and collar bones.

She bared her teeth in a clownish grin and widened her eyes in horror: like a profound realization, the gap made itself known subtly at first, then blossomed into a full-blown darkness.

“Gone, Jess! Gone! Oh my god.”

She closed the mirror shut and stared at her friend, wide-eyed.

“Girl, it’s not that obvious. Does it hurt? What the fuck

happened?”

“No. No pain. I have no idea. It doesn’t even hurt on the gumline. It’s just so... weird.”

Rosemary finally took a long sip of her martini and as she continued to poke the gap in her mouth, she pondered her situation. She hadn’t been in a fight or done anything particularly athletic. And it must have happened recently, otherwise she would have noticed its absence.

Rosemary was raised in a family of males and meat eaters. She had two bullish brothers, a father built like an orangutan, and a mother who fried slabs of red meat in thick puddles of brown butter. Yet, this was not why she chose to be a vegetarian.

Every day, when Rosemary was seven years old, she would explore the pond in her family’s back field. It was her kingdom, and she saw it her responsibility to care for it, to protect it. And every day when she went to it, her black muck boots chaffing her thin pale legs, her red hair braided to keep the tangles at bay, she surveyed the reeds, the sandy spot on the north end, the clarity of the water. She loved the mud and cattails and the thick organic smell that she could almost taste when the wind slowed down.

One day, Rosemary visited the pond on a warm spring day to find the shallow waters teeming with tadpoles. Released from the stillness of their jellied worlds, they swam with abandonment, their tails squiggling as their round bean-sized bodies, black as pupils, powered ever forward.

Rosemary filled her small red bucket with water and placed it firmly in the sand before she began, with great excitement, to scoop up netfuls of tadpoles and deposit them inside.

When there didn’t seem to be many tadpoles left in the pond, Rosemary looked into her bucket and marveled at how they moved: as if she had created something new.

Then something started to feel wrong. The moving mass was just too much. Too many tadpoles. She awoke from her dream of possession, dragged her bucket over to the pond and quickly poured the tadpoles back. When they hit the water, they became separate again, and each sank, motionless, like small black stones, to the sandy bottom of the pond.

At eleven PM, Odont woke with a start. He was still on the sofa, but the television show had stopped, the screen asked if he wanted to continue watching. The room was dark except for the light he always left on above the stove, which filtered in from the adjacent kitchen. He had been dreaming about something unnerving. He wasn’t sure what. All that remained of the dream was a feeling of losing time and of being reprimanded.

He picked up his phone. When he saw that it was still early, he felt mildly relieved. To calm his heart, which was beating faster than felt comfortable, he turned on some lights, continued streaming, and swiped open the dating app.

Too basic. Too fat. Too artsy. Too high maintenance. Yet, he liked these profiles anyway. Sure, he had great hair, but it wasn’t enough to get a woman to commit. There was something in the way. He wasn’t sure what it was, though. He kept his apartment clean. He made enough money. He went to his friends’ BBQs, and he talked to his mother every Sunday. He considered his biggest flaw to be his inability to stand up for himself. But he thought he hid this pretty well, and he doubted women could sense his insecurity. There had to be something else.

He continued to swipe right a few more times before giving up and heading to bed.

The next morning, as Odont lay in bed, he checked his phone and saw that a woman had not only matched with him, but had written him a message.

“Hey! I noticed in one of your photos that you look exactly like Michael Landon!”

He clicked on her profile. Trim. Red hair. She only had two photos, a closeup of her holding a cat, and a picture of her standing at a lookout on a hiking trail. She didn’t filter her photos, which he liked. It suggested a sense of self-assurance. Her bio said that she liked books, running, painting, cats. She had a small tattoo of an owl on the inside of her wrist.

Odont turned off his phone and climbed from his bed, still tired. He would write her back at the paper. He had to get up. It was going to be a long day, and he had to take care of the tooth.

It wasn’t until Rosemary got to the cafe that she remembered Jess had sent random people messages from her phone the night before. She didn’t really care, it was a dating app. No one took those things seriously anyway. How could you, when half the men sent dick pics as an introduction.

Once she set up her laptop and ordered an Americano, she opened the app and found a handful of messages. It seemed her friend’s sarcastic remarks had not been enough to deter potential soul mates, and the men answered in a variety of ways. Some responded with haha before launching into long winded missives. Others cut to the chase with a hello beautiful, let’s meet up and I’ll blow your mind. Only one had yet to reply.

His username was OJM_MJO2019 and he only had one photo. It looked as if it had been part of a much larger photo, cropped and enlarged so much that it was blurry and pixelated. He had a mop of semi curly hair and a large grin, held firmly closed by thick feminine lips.

Rosemary liked his profile was. It suggested that he might be a real person. She was tired of all the men posing in front of lakes holding fish. She glanced at what her friend had written:

“Hey! I noticed in one of your photos that you look

exactly like Michael Landon!”

Accurate. He did.

She took a sip of her Americano. It was a lovely day outside, and the café was empty. Which was good, she would be able to focus on finishing the kiosk display for the library. She had laid out the pages and formatted how it would look. Now all she had left to do was add text, photos, and figure out a color scheme.

Without much thought, she wrote,

“Sorry, that was my friend. She took my phone. But for the record, you do kinda look like Michael Landon.”

She debated adding a smiley face but chose not to.

When Odont saw the message, he didn’t know how to respond. So, it had originally come from someone else. That made something small inside him deflate. But the true author had come forward, which almost seemed to count more. He chose to hold onto that. It felt right.

His Friday passed quicker than expected, and before he knew it, he was driving home, he realized, he had not called to complain about the tooth. He knew he really should, it was such a weird thing to find in a plastic container of nuts. Could it potentially pose some sort of health hazard? What if there were other teeth, in other containers? What if, broken into tiny pieces, an entire human being was being distributed and consumed by all those unsuspecting people?

Instead, when he got home, he wrote the girl.

“Hey, no worries.”

He paused. What to add? Here was his chance to make a connection.

He deleted it and rewrote:

“Hey, I actually am Michael Landon,” and he clicked SEND.

Odont had two problems that he needed to solve.

First of all, he wanted to find a way to get the girl who said he looked like Michael Landon. But how?

She had written him back several times now, and she was really nice. Normal, even. They had started texting, which made it more legitimate, and she had sent him photos. They weren't of her, but of her life; what she had made herself for dinner one night, the cat sitting in the bathroom sink, a flower she had found on her way to work at the library. What he loved most about these photos was not the focus, but the way she ended up in them accidentally. Her hand in the flower photo, her reflection in the cat one, a lock of hair framing the left side of the picture of her pizza. Plus, they contained pieces of her: her soap, her bare nail flecked with blue paint, the fork that had been in her mouth.

The second problem Odont needed to solve was what to do with the tooth. He had decided against complaining about it. What good would it do? Instead, he continued to carry it around in his wallet where one might place a photo of a child. He sometimes took it out and placed it on the shelf above his computer at work and stared at it when he was bored. Only once someone had interrupted him and he had forgotten it was there until halfway through the conversation. The sales girl glanced at it, then at him, and forced a smile.

"I was babysitting my brother's kid this past weekend," he explained, surprised at his ability to lie so quickly. "And the kid lost a tooth. Got to play tooth fairy. My trophy. Fun times."

The girl had given a forced laugh before leaving. As she left, he reflected on how tight her shirt was, how her breasts burst over her bra beneath the blouse, giving each a sort of muffin top.

He couldn't keep the tooth there anymore. It was weird to display someone else's tooth, no matter how he had obtained it. He could make up all the stories he wanted, but he knew these girls saw through them. He would have to keep it hidden.

Rosemary arrived at the bar first, because she always liked to be early and felt that it gave her an advantage. She could get an idea of the vibe, of the people, or her surroundings. It gave her time to add lipstick or remove it, depending on the place.

She had come straight from work and had to tuck the basket she used to carry her books, lunch, and laptop beneath the stool. The bar was warmer than the library though, and she hung up her cardigan and rolled up her sleeves. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror behind the bar and smiled. The gap as black and round as a tadpole.

She decided to order a drink while she waited. Not because she was anxious, although she was, but because she didn't want him to feel obligated to pay for her. When the martini arrived, she sipped it quickly, enjoying the almost immediate head swirl as she sank out of work-mode.

Earlier that day a patron at the library had been particularly difficult. Plus, she was training several new volunteers. And on top of it all, she had told a new gallery that she would have three paintings ready for installation by the end of the week, which was tomorrow.

She had pulled out her phone and was flipping through her inbox, searching for the exact wording of the gallery's email, when she felt a presence slide onto the stool beside her.

"I'm actually saving that for someone," she started, before realizing the man was in fact, Odont.

"Oh," she managed, as she straightened herself.

"You must be Rosemary."

"I am indeed. You must be,"

She stumbled on his name, unsure how to pronounce it.

"Oh' don't?"

"Odont" He confirmed, pressing the two sounds

together.

"I'm sorry," she fidgeted, pushed her hair behind her ears, and took a sip of her martini.

"No worries," he responded almost curtly.

"So..." She adjusted again, feeling awkward.

"This is a little awkward, isn't it?" He asked. And then smiled, standing again to remove his pea coat.

"So awkward, I forgot to take my coat off."

She smiled and shrugged, feeling the gin and a sudden swerve of excitement.

"Ah, whatever. I've never met anyone off a dating app before. But I say we just go with it."

It had taken some time, but both found a balance. It involved Rosemary playing demur. She turned her statements into questions, and she widened her eyes and nodded in encouragement as Odont told her about his work as a writer and his plan to publish his near-finished novel. It would, he was convinced, bring him great success.

By eleven, the bar had nearly emptied. It was a week-night, and the weather was unusually cold. The two decided to call it, and Odont offered to drive her home so that she wouldn't have to wait for the bus. She hesitated at the offer but then accepted. It was close to zero outside, and the bus took thirty-five minutes to get to her stop.

Once they made it to her apartment, Rosemary unclipped and turned, thanking Odont for the ride and the company. He held eye contact but leaned back in his seat, his hands tight on the wheel. She felt somewhat dejected by this. She grabbed her cardigan, which she had forgotten to put back on before buttoning up her coat, and her purse, and bounced from the car into the night.

Not once did he ask her about her painting, or her

work at the library, or about her interest in books.

"I should have kissed you," he texted her an hour later. Rosemary had made herself a cup of tea and was sitting on the floor of her studio apartment. She leaned against her bed, Colette the cat on her lap, a nature documentary playing on her laptop in front of her.

She didn't know how to respond, but she didn't want him to think she was upset.

Finally, she wrote back, "oh, yeah?"

She hoped that it would come off as flirty, not taunting. She wondered if he had noticed her missing tooth.

A few moments later, he responded.

"Yes. I wanted to kiss you all night."

She felt stupid. Giddy.

Three weeks had passed, and Odont had solved both of his problems. Things were going well with the girl. They hadn't had sex yet, but he knew she wanted him, and that made him feel good. For he saw that she was the kind of girl men wanted. She was smart, and she respected him, his viewpoints, encouraged his ideas. She was extremely interested in his book, and she had something intoxicating about her, although he couldn't quite pin down what it was.

The problem with the tooth had also been addressed. He decided he would keep it. He liked to look at it but knew he couldn't take it out at work. Sometimes at night, when he was home and feeling down, he'd take it out and place it in his own mouth. He'd swirl it around, feeling its smooth sides, thrusting the tip of his tongue into the crevice, or the sharp hallowed bottom, where it was once anchored into gum and bone. But he always returned it to his wallet for safe-keeping.

Things were looking up.

Rosemary and Odont were lying on the floor of her apartment. She had put on some music and it had set a nice mood. She owned only two lamps, and instead had strung white lights around the windows, which probably seemed too youthful, but she also hoped romantic.

She had the day off and had spent it shopping at the farmers market and cleaning her apartment. The smell of homemade pizza filled the small space, and she was relieved that it was time to eat, the red wine they both had been drinking was starting to make her silly. They had already finished a bottle and her cheeks felt hot.

“So, Michael Landon. Have you always had such big hair?”

Odont ran his hand through his tangle of curls and looked toward the ceiling dramatically.

“Why, yes. It’s what made me a movie star.”

Rosemary reached forward, sifting her thin fingers through the bountiful loops. Soft. It smelled salty and bitter.

“I don’t believe you. You know, Tyra Banks once got a modeling gig off her driver’s license? Let’s see your license. That’ll prove just how far those curls will get you.”

Odont rolled his eyes before he pulled out his wallet and tossed it towards her.

“I have to use your bathroom. Here. Enjoy.”

As she grabbed it, she felt a wave of dizziness. Too much wine. She flipped the wallet open. That was then she saw her tooth.

They had only hung out a few times, and it always felt a little awkward in the beginning. Like they were both

trying to figure out how to be genuine without giving too much away. But things for Rosemary were different now. This man had her tooth, and she had no idea how he had gotten it from her mouth.

While she waited for Odont to return from the bathroom, she went to remove the pizza from the oven and set it out to cool. She opened a second bottle of wine. When he finally appeared, she enthusiastically explained that the license was good enough to land him a gig. She avoided his eyes, kept her hands busy with napkins and plates.

“Holy shit, you found it?” Jess leaned in close, squinting at the tooth.

They were sitting on the porch at Jess’ apartment a little after ten o’clock. The night air was cold and calm. The snow in the park across the street actually sparkled under the lights that lined its walkway. Their cigarette smoke drifted away slowly, like steam.

“Yes, it is. And you’ll never believe where.”

She told the story the best she could. About how she had found the tooth in the man’s wallet, how she hadn’t thought, just grabbed it and tucked it under the sofa cushion before he came out of the bathroom. How they ate the pizza and afterwards, she had made up a headache to get him to leave.

When she was done, she shook her head, took a drag. She smoked only occasionally, with Jess, and the cigarette made her feel a little nauseous.

“But, like, are you sure? That it’s your tooth?” Jess pulled her coat up closer towards her face.

“Because that’s just too weird. It’s probably his nephew’s or something. If it were your tooth, would you try to have it put back in? Is that a thing?”

Rosemary shrugged but the movement was lost in the bulk of her parka.

Rosemary never called the dentist.

Instead, she placed the tooth in a small clay saucer she had made in college and kept it in her nightstand. And there it remained until the spring.

Oh to lose something that isn't yours to keep!

It was a Monday and Odont was at work at his desk. He hadn't looked at the tooth since Saturday when he had gone over to Rosemary's for dinner. When he flipped open his wallet, he realized the small familiar bump in the leather was missing. He clawed at the flaps, dug into the folds over and over again. Nothing. How had he not noticed? How had he paid for Sunday's takeout without realizing that it was gone?

He stared at the container of nuts on his shelf and wonder if there were any more teeth inside.

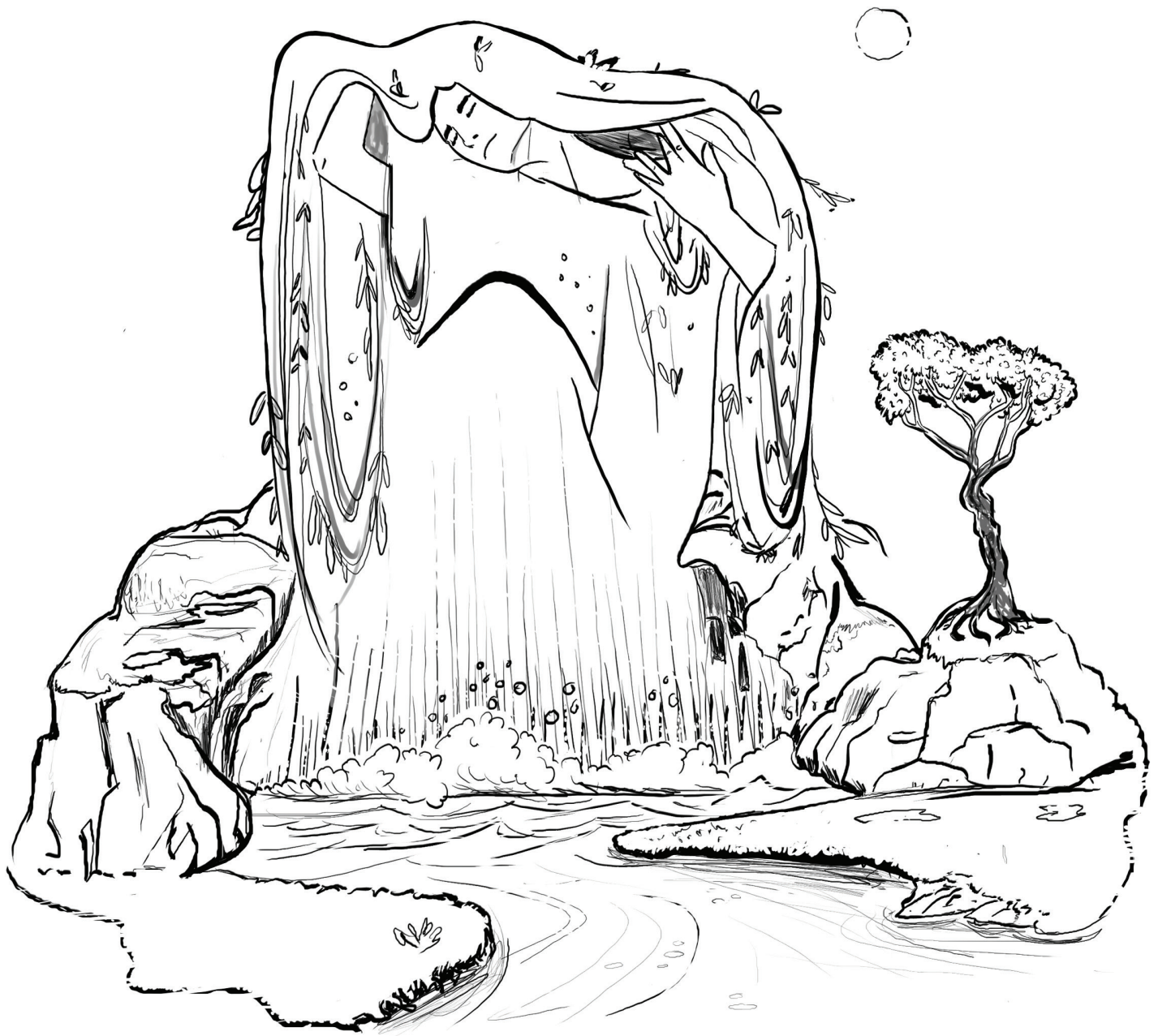
So again, he began to eat.

Rosemary looked at the tooth. Then at the patch of soil. Then back at the tooth.

It was a sunny day in late April. The air outside smelled like dirt and it was warm enough to wear a t-shirt. Rosemary had hiked out to the pond that defined the edges of her parents' property and found that, by the time she reached the marshy shore, her underarms were damp from the exertion.

Wads of tadpoles clumped around reeds and grasses. The pond was beginning to wake.

Rosemary dug into the wet earth with her pocketknife, turning and twisting, loosening. Water seeped in, the smell of plant life. She then pulled the tooth from the back pocket of her jeans, looked at it one last time, and placed it with great care, like a seed, into the earth. •



The Year I Got Pregnant with Timmy

Lisa Latouche

The year I got pregnant with Timmy, my husband, Joe, was having an affair with a woman from the laundromat. Was that same year, I lost my desire to speak. People say I lost my mind too, 'cause of everything that happened. But they dunno nothin. They dunno.

At first, his affair bothered me, the same way it bothered me when he screwed all the other women before. But this time it was different. I was jealous. I was outraged. I wanted what they had. I wanted Joe for myself. And then I didn't want him. A confusion, I know. Maybe it was all those hormones from the pregnancy.

Joe pretended he didn't know I was pregnant. I wasn't no Slim Jim, never was, and my bulge wasn't obvious, but he was living right there in the house with me, and he didn't comment on my retching, he didn't comment on my tiredness, he didn't even comment on my enlarged breasts. I find it hard to believe he didn't notice those things. Maybe he didn't comment 'cause I wasn't giving him no honey; well, just a lil' taste now and then. Was sometime in September, when I was about five months pregnant, he asked me about my weight gain. We were in the kitchen, just after sunset, when the place was still bright so there wasn't no need to switch on the light.

He sat at the table drinking his black coffee and I was prepping for next day's lunch. I bent to take something from the fridge.

"But Sylle, yuh backside gettin' bigger than Farmer Steffy truck!" When I didn't answer he continued. "If I din' know better I would say you ketch!"

"Yes I ketch."

My husband threw back his bald head and laughed. Was a long time I'd heard him laugh like that. He slapped his knees and banged the table, spilling some of the coffee. "I thought you was barren."

I had a mind to slap that damn bald head and make him choke on his coffee. When he saw my wax up face he stopped laughing. He pushed back the wooden chair on the patch-up linoleum floor, making a dragging noise, and stood. A loose piece of carpet shifted under the main carpet and I made up my mind to buy new linoleum for Christmas. Joe came closer to where I was standing, near the sink, two inches taller than me. My husband regarded me, hard, as if it was his first time seeing me. "But Sylle you serious for true? An vyé jou mwen? In my old age you want to make me a father?"

Joe had to think of himself as old. He was forty-eight but looked much older, consuming too much alcohol, tobacco, and pussy. He was a honey color when I'd met him fifteen years before, a handsome man with small dark eyes that squinted when he laughed. I'd just started working at the dentist's office, Joe had just started working for himself in the construction business and I was impressed with him. Now, he was a darker brown, with blotches on his face and skin, like the sun had baked him. The eyes that looked at me were bloodshot and wrinkled at the corners, still handsome if you look at him closely. People used to ask him what he saw in me,

Ma Trubin's daughter – short and fat, and black like the coals we used to sell.

"I thought you'd be glad to finally have a baby," I retorted.

"I happy. I happy," my husband tried to convince me. "You happy?" He watched me again, too close, making me feel naked. And guilty.

"Of course!" I tried to sound excited. After twelve years of marriage, I'd given up hope of getting pregnant, and had thrown all caution out the window. Yet, at forty-four, I was beginning to warm up to the idea of motherhood.

Joe was looking at me with so much intensity I thought he could see right through my soul, right through my lies. I turned my head and continued chopping celery. I watched from the corner of my eye as he walked to the brown painted cupboard where he stored his hard drinks. He pulled out a half bottle of gin and poured some into a glass that was already on the table, most likely dirty from an earlier round. "I'll drink to that!"

I turned to look at him. He held his glass mid-air as if making a toast. Was a slight smile on his lips and I couldn't figure out if he was making fun of me or if he was really happy.

"How much months?" he asked.

"Not sure. Have to go to the doctor." I lied.

He nodded, swallowed the gin in one gulp, then washed it down with the rest of his coffee. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and took his hat from the hook on the wall. "Goin' down de road to check Ronnie."

"Uh huh." I kept my eyes on my business, sprinkling chopped herbs over diced beef. I knew the Ronnie he was going to check had breasts and a vagina. And a slim body. The rumors about his affair had started swirling about long before I was pregnant. Me and my cousin Jean did our investigation and discovered the affair with May. I knew May from little girl days when our mothers used to send us to pick peppers for Farmer Steffy so we could make a lil' money. May used to greet me politely, not overly friendly, but like an acquaintance.

Not anymore.

When Cousin Jean realized I stopped making a fuss over Joe and May she was surprised. I told her I didn't have much to say to Joe 'cause I wanted to be careful with the baby.

The thing I didn't tell Jean is that I didn't think the baby was Joe's.

The first time I cheated on my husband was after our scandalous New Year's Day fight over May. I'd thrown a pot of hot soup at him when he had tried to sneak into the house at six o'clock that morning. After pummeling me, he chased me outside with a machete. Seeing my swollen face, the neighbors called the police and Jean suggested a restraining order. I moved in with Jean for two months. Was during those two months I responded to flirtations that I'd not experienced in years. I didn't intentionally set out to have an affair, but I enjoyed the distraction, and one sweet whisper led to other sweet things. I didn't want Jean to know what was going on and I didn't want Joe to know either. So when he asked for forgiveness I moved back in with him and decided I would stop my affair. He still continued his relationship with May, although he tried to persuade me otherwise. I didn't make a big fuss 'cause I myself couldn't resist my own fun.

When I'd missed two periods, I figured it was the onset of menopause 'cause I'd started experiencing irregular cycles. Was when I missed the third one and the nausea was on full blast that I panicked. I took four pregnancy tests – all positive. I cried then I smiled, feeling frightened and happy at the same time. Frightened of what would happen, what people would say; and happy, to finally be a mother.

That September night, a short while after Joe left to check the 'Ronnie' with the breasts and slim body, I took a shower and sprayed myself with the floral scented perfume Jean had bought me the Christmas before. The night was cool. Was no moon that night, and the sky was starry. Not a cloud. I went to the shop around the corner to buy milk and sugar. The usual group of men was there,

playing domino or observing the game and I spoke with them for a lil' while. When I left, I rushed home and my hands trembled as I placed the items in the cupboard.

I headed out the back door, my heart wild in my chest. My long skirt caressed the tall grass that led from my backyard to the back of the Catholic Church grounds. Soft breeze kissed my cheeks as I walked in the dark, guided by stars and memory. My heart was hustling my brain to breathe as if it was the first time coming here. I reached the church bell and leaned against one of the palm trees lining the perimeter of the property, willing my body to relax. Some teenage boys were talking just beyond the hedges at the front of the church about cars and bikes as if they had money to buy those things. Stars peeked at me through clouds, twinkling among themselves, twinkling about my secret. I was thinking about going back home when I saw a broad figure taking strides towards me. His lips met mine without speaking. His tongue tasted like tobacco and mint.

"I thought you weren't coming to the shop tonight," Boyd whispered in his slight British accent. He kissed my stomach, speaking softly to the miracle inside. I felt my baby flutter, just like the leaves around me. Boyd led me through a grassy path to a dilapidated structure, and we sat on its aged concrete steps, grass sprouting through the cracks. We didn't always come to this location but it was easier and more discreet. Sometimes we would take a drive out of the village. Sometimes we would go to his house but his neighbors were so nosey, I worried they would tell Joe. Boyd was married too, but separated. His wife spent most of her time in England with their adult daughters. People said she was sick, but Boyd hardly discussed her with me.

He took my hand in his. Kissed it. "What did the doctor say?" he asked.

"So far so good. A boy."

He nodded and a smile spread across his face, turning to a grin, then outright laughter. "I don't believe it!"

Smiling, I nodded.

"I've always wanted a boy!" he beamed.

"Me too." I snuggled closer to Boyd and he put his arm around me.

"We can name him Timothy, you know, after my grandfather."

"I'd like that."

That night I walked home with my heart full, wishing I could spend all my days with Boyd. On one hand, I wanted to ask him to move in with him but I was afraid to bring it up 'cause he had not offered and I didn't know if he was ready for that. On the other hand, I didn't want to bring this up with Boyd 'cause there was a small chance that my husband could be the father. Where would I stay if the child wasn't Joe's? Whatever the outcome, I made up my mind to face anything fate dealt me.

As my precious baby grew, my craving for Boyd grew. He was attentive, and wanted me around him every chance I could get away. I still slept with Joe, rarely, so he would not suspect my affair. Besides, he was trying to convince me his relationship with May was over, probably 'cause he felt guilty about the baby.

One beautiful sunny Wednesday, about seven months into my pregnancy, I called in sick, and me and Boyd were enjoying a river bath behind his carpentry workshop. (He did woodwork for a living). Although his workshop was about five minutes walking distance from where I lived, I hardly went there. I didn't want my name in his two workers' mouths. That Wednesday, they had gone out to deliver furniture.

At that time of year, the river was cold, but my body was hot and I needed that relief. Sitting in a shallow pool that Boyd had created using large stones, and shielded by trees and shrubs on both banks of the river, we faced each other as he massaged my swollen feet. The river was clear but our pool looked emerald green 'cause of overhanging branches from the mango trees. My pregnancy was more obvious by that time, causing random people to congratulate me or give me advice. Even my hair

had changed, grown to a length and fullness I'd never experienced. My backside did resemble Farmer Steffy's truck, a part of my body that excited both Boyd and Joe. The baby poked and kicked and we could see the areas where he stretched my skin as he moved.

"Our Timmy is reminding us he is here, you know. Think he has my eyes?" Boyd smiled, a broad smile that went straight to my heart. He was using a river stone to rub the heel of my foot, and paused to rub my stomach.

Boyd's eyes were what I found most attractive on his face; greenish-brown circles that lit up when he smiled. Was a pleasure just to look at him. I'd forgotten how someone could have such an effect on me. "As long as he is healthy," I said.

He resumed rubbing my heel. "So when do you plan on telling Joe?"

I splashed my face with the cool water. Boyd stopped rubbing my heel and let go of my foot. I could feel his eyes on me.

"When you plan on telling your wife?" I countered.

His eyebrows furrowed. "She already knows."

Shocked, I stared at him.

"I was waiting for the baby to come, you know, but someone beat me to it."

"I – I – how come you didn't tell me?"

He shrugged. "We had a fight about it on Sunday. I feel bad she had to hear it elsewhere, you know. Especially in her state, battling cancer. My daughters are not too happy with me either."

I wasn't sure if I should empathize with him or confront him about the fact that he and his wife were supposed to be separated. I sighed, and looked upriver. Boyd held my chin and turned my face towards him.

"When do you plan on telling Joe?" he repeated, his expression intent.

I swallowed and felt my chest rising. "Dunno."

"But you're almost due." He released my chin.

"He dunno."

"Doesn't know you're pregnant? Sylle, everybody can see you're expecting, you know."

"He dunno..dunno the baby's not his."

"What the fuck Sylle? You mean you've been giving Joe my juice?"

I froze.

"Answer me Sylle." I heard his controlled breathing.

"But I – but, but–"

"You mean all that time you fooled me into believing you and Joe living separate lives?" He stood, towering above me, and water droplets transferred from his frame to mine. My body shook like how the land trembled with tremors during volcanic activity.

"Oh fuck!" His voice rose above the river's roar and settled in the pit of my stomach. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see his expression, and when I opened them he was still standing there, fingers tented in front of his face, greenish-brown eyes boring through me, water sliding

down his fair skin. I was afraid he'd ask more questions.

"I won't tolerate lies, Sylle." He gathered his clothes and walked towards his workshop. By the time I dried and dressed, he was gone.

My heart was heavy in the days and weeks that followed. Was more painful 'cause I had to hide my feelings. I was afraid to ask for Boyd too often at the shop. His workshop was open but he was never around when I went. The stars continued to twinkle at me by the church bell. I slowly gravitated back to Joe, although I felt little for him. He was cordial, going about his day the same way, and every day it became more difficult for me to tell him the truth.

Christmas was around the corner and I was due the second week in January. My excitement rose and fell. I was happy I was finally going to be a mother but my heart ached for Boyd. Jean noticed my dejectedness and suggested a potluck for Christmas. I offered to bring beef stew and garden salad. A few days before Christmas Jean picked me up to go to the market to purchase the items for the lunch. By that time I was huge. These days the baby somersaulted and kicked beneath my ribs, causing me discomfort and so much joy.

"You need to tell me what's going on, Sylle," Jean said as she drove. "Been hearing stories."

I leaned against the headrest and sighed. I was going to ask her what stories but decided against it. She must have known all along. "I guess everybody figure me and Joe couldn't conceive so they're speculating."

"No, they're speculating because you been going to the man's house and to other villages thinking people wouldn't know."

I sighed again. "I have to tell Joe."

"Yes you do, but he probably knows."

That thought had occurred to me a few times but hearing it from Jean made me burst into a sweat. How to tell Joe? How to tell Joe?

We drove around looking for parking. The market was a colorful, busy place; large umbrellas splaying over stalls, vendors calling for people to buy their products, women frying chicken, some roasting corn and plantains. When Jean parked, she unbuckled and turned to face me. "Boyd's wife is here. She and one of their daughters. Heard she came to spend her last days with Boyd. Heard she came to divorce him. Stories, stories."

My heart sank to my stomach and a lump formed in my throat. I felt betrayed and confused. Were Boyd and his wife back together? Had they ever separated or did she just live abroad? Was this the real reason why Boyd was avoiding me?

"Let's get those things," I said, and opened the door.

We walked towards the meat section. "All those scents," I moaned, feeling nauseous. Jean led me to her friend's stall.

"I'll buy the beef and meet you back here," she said.

The woman offered me a wooden stool and I watched her negotiate prices with customers. She wore a madras head tie and a white apron with two large pockets where she dropped coins and small notes. Her skin, dark like mine, was shining from perspiration.

Above the hubbub of the market, I heard Joe's laugh. I

stood, and there he was, in all his glory, hand in hand with May, walking in my direction. I didn't know I could be so filled with rage or jealousy. In hindsight, I wasn't sure if I was jealous of May with my husband, or the fact that I didn't have what they had. My skin burned like someone had put a torch to it. I stood with my arms akimbo, my nose flaring as they approached. When Joe saw me he let go of May's hand. I noticed no ring on her finger.

"Is so you finish with that stick, Joe?" My voice rose and quavered unexpectedly.

Joe didn't answer. He took a few steps towards me, slow, as if I was a wild animal. I could feel May's eyes on me, sizing me up. She rushed forward, overtaking Joe. "You wish you was a stick, you cow!" May was just as loud as I was.

Before I could answer, she came closer, her fetid alcohol breath assaulting my senses, causing bile to rise to my throat. "Go and look for your correct child father and stop lying to Joe!"

I lunged at her and clawed her pretty face with my fingernails. I grabbed her ponytail, wanting to root the long black hair from her head. She kicked my legs. I ripped her blouse exposing her small breasts to the onlookers that had gathered.

May pushed me. I staggered backwards and down I went, along with the vendor's items on her stall. Fruits rained on me as I hit the ground. My mind registered Joe pulling May away. I saw his mouth moving but I didn't know what he was saying. Vendors and shoppers were talking at the same time. Pain tore through my body and someone helped me up, asking if they should call the ambulance. I was concerned about the baby, and tears burned my eyes as searing pain twisted my abdomen.

Joe, reeking of alcohol, helped me to sit on the stool, apologizing profusely. He said he was going to look for a ride, and hurried away before I could tell him that Jean was coming. Someone offered me coconut water, but I only spat it out. Soon after, Jean came running and she and the vendor helped me to her car. Was only then I

observed the swelling in my right arm, and the split down the middle of my dress .

By the time we got to the car, warm liquid was running down my thighs and I felt abdominal pain, sharper than any I'd ever felt before. Heart pounding, I groaned and grabbed Jean for support. She hurriedly adjusted the front seat and helped me into the car. I didn't know what hurt most, my back or my abdomen.

"I'm taking you straight to the hospital," she said.

The vehicle squeaked and rattled on the pot holed roads, causing painful stabs in my body.

"We have to make a police report. This woman had no right to attack you."

She went on about it but I could form no words in response. The throbs were excruciating, starting in my midsection then spreading downwards and across my lower body, pulsing, increasing in intensity, tormenting my being. My heart was speeding, my chest heaving, my back exploding. There was agonizing pressure on my groin and I involuntarily opened my legs hoping for some type of relief. It subsided and intensified, subsided and intensified, getting stronger every time. When the pain abated, I tore the split in the dress, right up to my breasts, and freed myself of all constrictions.

I breathed through my mouth, letting out a whistling sound as I exhaled. I wanted to tell Jean I thought the baby was coming but I didn't think babies came so soon. I started panting heavily, grabbing the seat, resisting the urge to push, but Mother Nature was rolling along, forcing my body to behave as she intended. My agony manifested in moans and screeches.

"Almost there Sylle, almost there," Jean kept saying.

My hair was drenched, sweat ran down my face, in between my breasts, and down my body. Jean was urging me to inhale and exhale, and I grit my teeth from the intense contractions. Feeling a compelling urge to push, I bore down hard, gripping the side of the seat, sweat and tears burning my eyes. I pushed again, and again but my son wasn't coming. I screamed Jean's name and

God's name; I swore at Boyd, I swore at Joe. My body felt spent, my legs hurt, and my arms hurt. Jean encouraged me to keep trying, that the baby shouldn't stay too long in passage, but tried as I may he wasn't coming.

After pushing for what seemed like eternity, Jean caught my precious son on a white shopping bag, then placed him on my sweaty laps, a mass of blood and flesh. She ran out to get help. Was only then I noticed we were in the hospital parking lot.

Excited, afraid, and in pain, I held on to my baby boy, as tears rolled down my cheeks. I was already in love with this beautiful human. His eyes were closed and he wasn't making a sound. I didn't know whether I should tap his fair cheeks or hold him upside down.

Someone wheeled us to a room. There, a nurse deftly cut my umbilical cord and placed Baby Timmy on my breasts. Within seconds, she took him away, telling me he needed urgent attention. My heart raced for my baby as I endured the extraction of my placenta, stitching of my torn flesh and a litany of questions about my bruises.

Jean had gone back to my house to get our bags.

I don't remember how much time passed before I saw Baby Timmy again. Maybe two hours, maybe three. I was in and out of sleep. Jean had returned with the clothes and some food. Timmy was wrapped up in a white blanket, his eyes still closed. A nurse handed him to me, shaking her head. "There was placental abruption that disrupted the flow of oxygen to his brain," she said. "I'm so sorry. We tried our best."

I cradled my precious son, so tiny, so still, and held my breath until my heart fell apart and a shrill sound erupted from my soul.

"She killed my baby! That woman killed my baby!" I ripped the drips from my hand, causing the needle to break. In spite of the pain in my arm, in spite of the stitches, I flew up from the bed, making a beeline for the

door. A squad of nurses rushed to my side, and led me back to my bed, saying words I could not understand, as my whole world shattered. Jean was there, smoothing back my hair, her cheeks wet with tears. I hardly felt the injection of morphine.

When Boyd came to see me the next day Baby Timothy had already been taken to the morgue, and I was a temporary patient at the psychiatric unit.

"Jean told me he has green eyes," Boyd said, pursing his lips. I could feel his anguish as he squeezed my hands.

I swallowed, trying not to think about the present tense in which he referred to our son. I focused on the grey painted wall beyond his frame, an empty wall, just like me. I looked for words in the vastness of my mind to form a response, but they whirled around, some stringing awkwardly together, creating fragmented thoughts; some pieced together so sharply they pierced my heart. But no words passed my lips, not even when he tried to talk about our relationship.

Joe showed up two days later, his only visit. I was on my narrow cot, pushing rice around my plate. "You - you ready to tell me de truth?" he slurred in greeting.

I could smell him. I kept my head down, observing a line of ants scuttle across the brown tiles.

"You was tryin' to make me believe is my child."

I wanted to tell Joe to lower his voice, or just leave.

"I know you was pregnant before-before you tell me. I know. An' that night. That night in de kitchen you still didn't say nothing about de father."

I thought I heard his voice quiver but I was afraid to look up. I wanted to tell him he had been cheating for so long, that I was faithful before Boyd. He slapped the plate from my hand, scattering rice and pieces of hard plastic across the floor. I remained silent when two security guards escorted Joe out of the building.

Jean came every day. "Brought your stuff to my house," she said one day.

I stared at the empty wall.

"We're worried about you, Sylle. Need you to talk to me."

I stared at the empty wall when Boyd visited as well, bringing me crossword puzzles I never did, and talking about being hopeful. What did I care about hope? All I felt was sorrow.

I stayed at the psychiatric unit for two months, saying only necessary words like please and thank you. Jean welcomed me into her home, and I never regained no desire to speak. They say I crazy. But they dunno nothin'.

Porto-Novo, 1983*Olaitan Humble*

Should we seek blessings from the mouth
of a cursing mother? We sink our head in
wack sacks; symbols of intolerance.
Stranded as refuge es—bane of our existence.
Every morning here opens with an invasion
of fierce khakied men banging at our door.
We are made to see scenes of sins in their
ugliest figure. Our fathers christened us at their
fathers' funeral then wonder why we turn
into hardheaded lots. So, what if death is a
beautiful thing? We die & go into the ground.
Our remains grow into flowers. It is only
the interval after dying that new things can
sprout. *Four decades:*
in the bustles & hustles of the busy markets
of Benin border & the unfriendly weather in
Togo. *Four decades:*
in the journey through blues & red hues of
big & small sacs with tracks of Biggie Smalls
blasting in the stereo. *Four decades:*
of tribulations. We were not ready to leave
but leaving meant living & the leave left leaps
of lifting to our homeland. Home—still a
battlefield but where we come from & where
we must return—is now a foreign land.

Self-Portrait with Black Ice*Caroline Murphy*

it's January again and I'm still
picking pieces of you out of my hair
like shattered glass after a car crash.

the cold convinces me your voice
won't turn to ice the minute
it hears I'm back in town.

the town I never really left says
I learned how to thaw but not
how to keep from freezing.

the thing about winter is it never
pretends to be warm, by which I mean
the only truly honest place

I've ever known is buried
under twenty inches every year
and refuses to be dug out.

I like to imagine you roaming the streets
naming avenues and boulevards
after your own daydreams

instead of my imagined nightmares.
you're at home here, which is all
I ever really needed. someday

I'll get on a plane, and someday
you won't be there when I arrive.
winter will come each year as promised

and I'll walk the streets alone
having no idea what you call them now.

Isolated Self

Victoria Helen Loftus

Your alarm tinkles to life. Your fingers search for the “stop” button.

You roll out a yoga mat - tie-dyed with mandalas spidered across it - and begin a 10 minute stretch sequence recommended by your therapist. You then take a shower, spending most of the time sitting on the floor, letting the water fall on top of you as you breathe in the steam, letting your sinuses revel in the cleanliness.

Once dry, dressed and moisturised, you trundle down to the kitchen, searching the cupboards for breakfast. You settle on dry granary toast and a questionable avocado. You start your day with good intentions, maybe this will be the day. You brew up your coffee and reach for the milk, as you pour only a tiny droplet escapes the carton, dissipating into the inky black liquid.

You can feel it rising from pit of your stomach to your lungs. It surges through your body, picking up power as it goes. It leaves your knees weak and shaky, you try to hold still, but your arms are shuddering too, soon your whole body is shivering uncontrollably:

You fall to the ground, the mug falling with you.

Your breath heaves. At first you don't notice the blood beginning to show from a cut in your right hand, a tribute to the now-smashed mug. When you do, your breathing gets faster. Your brain begins to vibrate with white noise. You are crying but your eyes are painfully dry, enormous animalistic sobs ricochet around the kitchen cabinets. The sound is separate to you, you don't know where it's coming from, surely it can't be you? You long for something soft, a pillow perhaps, to squeeze and scream into, but all you have is the chipped remains of the mug. Your favourite mug. The one you brought back from New York. Your attention moves back to the blood, now dripping down your arm and onto the white tiled floor, mixing with the brown puddle of coffee.

This snaps you back to reality.

Your breathing slows and returns to normal,. The episode is over, almost as quickly as it started. You reprimand yourself for being so ridiculous and you survey the damage. Idiot, you mutter.

You chuck your soggy breakfast into the bin. What a waste, you can't another delivery until Monday. You're killing the environment throwing that away. Can't eat it now though can you? Bet you would if you could. You fat pig. You feel your breath begin to quicken and cover your ears to block out the overlapping monologue in your head. You grab a glass of water and head upstairs.

You cocoon yourself in your duvet and try to shield your eyes from the sun beams through the closed curtains. You give your head a chance to cease the throbbing you always encounter post-panic attack. It's at this point that your therapist would tell you to use the meditation app, the one you deleted six months ago, around the time you decided to go on a “technology cleanse”. You decide

instead to meditate on the scrabbling of squirrels in the attic. You call them Anne and Frank. Not many people know this of course. Only you, and the RentoKil man, the one with the sweaty face and dirty boots who appears once a month to confirm they have, in fact, not taken the bait, and charges £200 for the privilege.

You shift your eyes from the ceiling to the curtains, all that darkness can't be good for you you can hear your mother saying. You roll off the foot of the bed, towards the window and grab the brittle black fabric. The curtain rings make a rusty clatter that makes you cringe.

The sun is shining, that kind of shining that could disguise a bitterly cold spring day. You grab your phone and open the weather app. Highs of 23 degrees. Interesting.

Children are dotted around the school field that backs onto your garden. A girl with auburn plaits and a blue gingham dress skips using a grubby piece of white rope, whilst her friend, some distance away, puts on a gymnastics show, flipping between handstands and cartwheels, not caring that the boys in the corner are giggling about her pink polka dot knickers.

They don't care do they?

They don't feel the crushing pressure of inevitable doom every time they even think about stepping out of the door.

You remember the mug. The now broken artifact of a time when you were invincible, when you could do anything, when you weren't plagued by- well whatever this is.

Something shifts inside you, like a rusty lock finally slipping into place.

You step out, breathing humid air, your heart is bursting and retreating against your rib cage but you don't mind. You shield your eyes from the sun's rays, but enjoy its warmth upon your skin. You stand a while, with your bare arms out-stretched, you can almost feel the vita-

min D being sucked into your deficient body. You catch yourself, embarrassed by the scene you didn't cause and continue down the road. The nearer you get to the village centre you more you notice the lack of people. The only sign of life is a group of four teenage girls clad in school uniforms with surgical masks covering the bottom halves of their faces. Strange.

You don't really know where you are heading, you just want to see how far you can go.

Gathering your breath you cautiously enter the newsagent's at the far corner of the village. Remembering too late that the door makes an intrusive beep as you enter, startling you, almost throwing you backwards.

"Eh, are you exempt?" The man's voice comes from behind the screened till.

Your head snaps around, you are still recovering from the door.

"Sorry?"

"Do you have a mask exemption card?"

What mask exemption card?

"Pardon?"

"You better head home love, get back inside." •



Eggs II

Valentina Rosales

Sublimation*Chelsea Dingman*

Nothing becomes of ice now, except water
vapor. Children in bright coats play

at the corners of a prayer. The end of faith:
skipping one phase of being to enter

another. Children woven from want.
Becoming snowfields. I rise & walk

out onto the frozen field. Snow
emits a hush as it falls. Then, silence.

The hares, scarce in this cold.
I am trying to find myself inside

my body. Relentless, the hoarfrost.
There was a time when a family

was all I had. But the deer
my father shot down in the woods

wouldn't feed us for a whole winter.
My brother, turning to fog as he failed

to eat. In a cryosphere, specific pressure
systems allow us to cry. For tears

not to freeze before they fall. Last night,
I dreamt our father lived inside

my brother. Secret bloom. The heart
of a phenomena. A deer arrived

as though sensing their hunger. Ice
fields trapped by fog. When I woke,

the fog had become the field. Ice
breaking in the shadow of a deer.



Aylin Sophia is a multi-versed artist with a BFA in illustration who is currently based in Maryland. Her favorite subjects to illustrate are creatures and organic matter, or anything with intricate patternwork. When she is not working or gawking at marine life photography, she's daydreaming about being a little fish.

William Fargason is the author of *Love Song to the Demon-Possessed Pigs of Gadara* (University of Iowa Press, 2020), and the winner of the Iowa Poetry Award. His poetry has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *New England Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Narrative*, and elsewhere. He earned an MFA in poetry from the University of Maryland and a PhD in poetry from Florida State University. He lives with himself in Tallahassee, Florida, where he serves as the poetry editor at *Split Lip Magazine*.

Anna Newman holds an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Maryland. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets*, *Rattle*, *Poetry Northwest*, [PANK], and elsewhere. She lives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Valentina Rosales is a writer and visual artist from Santiago, Chile. Although most of the time she is working on her art-books series *Gruesome Tales from Nature*, she is currently trying to finish her PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Maryland.

Timi Sanni is a Nigerian writer studying Biochemistry at Lagos State University. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Radical Art Review*, *Cypress: A Literary Journal*, *Down River Road Journal*, *The Open Culture Collective*, *Serotonin Magazine*, *Artmosterrific*, *Odd Magazine*, *Macro Magazine*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Journal*, *Drinking Gourd Journal*, *Ice Floe Press* and others. He is the winner of the *SprinNG Poetry Contest 2020* and the *Fitrah Review Short Story Prize 2020*. He is a reader for *Liminal Transit Review* and an editor at *Kalopsia Literary*. Find him on twitter @timisanni

Paul Brennan studied creative writing at Ramapo College of New Jersey and is a librarian. He is also an assistant editor at *Small Orange*.

Katie Moritz lives in Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom, where she works in communications at a not-for-profit critical access hospital. She studied creative writing at Dartmouth College and has published in *Plume*, *Numéro Cinq*, *Clamentis*, and has a poem forthcoming in *Plume Anthology #9*. She writes outside of an academic lens, often taking inspiration from André Breton's belief that "beauty will be CONVULSIVE, or it will not be."

Rocío Iriarte is an illustrator based in Seville, Spain. Although she studied Journalism in 2006 and enjoyed writing stories, she decided to try other forms of expression. Now, her most frequent clients are publishing houses and magazines. In her work, she tries to open a window for feelings and sensations that are often impossible to share in any other way.

You may reach her on Instagram @rocioiriarte_.

Lisa J Latouche is a Caribbean writer. She won the Nature Island Literary Festival Short Story Competition twice. Her stories were shortlisted for the 2020 Elizabeth Nunez BCLF Caribbean-American Writers Prize and the 2016 Small Axe Literary Competition. Publications include *White Wall Review* and a Dominican anthology. She is a graduate of the University of Leicester and a former Writer in Residence at the University of the West Indies St. Augustine in Trinidad. Currently, she is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Maryland and her first novel is close to completion..

Olaitan Humble is an aviphile and pacifist who enjoys reading satire, and collecting quotations and astrophotos. He is a staff reader for *Bandit Fiction*, and poetry editor for *The Lumiere Review*. A Pushcart Prize nominee, his work appears in *CP Quarterly*, *African Writers Review*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, *Rigorous Magazine*, *AGNG*, *NINSHAR Arts*, and *Doubleback Review*, among others. IG/Twitter: @olaitanhumble.

Caroline Murphy graduated from the University of Maine at Farmington in 2015 and spent the last four years teaching English in western Bulgaria. She currently lives and writes in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Victoria Helen Loftus is currently studying an MA in creative writing at Edge Hill University, having graduated the BA in 2017. She likes to keep her writing rooted in real life and gain inspiration from her own experiences and the world around her. She has contributed to her university's student blog from 2016 - 2017 and her work has been published in *The Black Market Re-View* and *Spillwords.com*. She is also a qualified primary school teacher.

Nicholas Alti from rural Michigan, Nicholas is an optimistic depressive with trigeminal neuralgia, no known future career paths, and a modest criminal record. Recent poems live at *Grimoire*, *FRiGG*, *Into the Void*, *DREG-INALD*, and *Always Crashing*. He is an assistant editor with *Black Warrior Review*, an MFA Candidate at UA, and grateful for your reading.

Chelsea Dingman's first book, *Thaw*, was chosen by Allison Joseph to win the National Poetry Series (University of Georgia Press, 2017). Her second poetry collection, *Through a Small Ghost*, won The Georgia Poetry Prize (University of Georgia Press, 2020). She is also the author of the chapbook, *What Bodies Have I Moved* (Madhouse Press, 2018). Visit her website: chelseadingman.com.

