

# CHEAT RIVER REVIEW

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Cover photo by Aaron Lelito

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**Aaron Lelito** is a visual artist from Buffalo, NY. In his photographic work, he is primarily drawn to the patterns and imagery of nature. His images have been published as cover art in Red Rock Review, Peatsmoke Journal, and The Scriblerus. His work has also appeared in LandLocked Magazine, EcoTheo Review, About Place Journal, and Alluvian. He is editor in chief of the art & literature website Wild Roof Journal. See more of his work on Instagram @runic\_ruminations..

Cliff Face is What You Pull Right Before You Die Ashley Danielle Ryle

---

[thy rod and thy staff]

I stepped to the brief precipice  
 and sought out the small brown bats [they comfort].  
 They come for the wet limestone, the larvae  
 who root in [me] the yellow clay. I wonder  
 if it's true what they [thy rod and thy staff] taught us  
 of the buffalo waller and the friendly Natives

[they comfort me]

or was there something particularly  
 [thy rod and] racist [thy staff] in that history class *yella*.  
 My friend [they] from high school who found  
 [comfort]  
 a stack of blank KKK membership cards in his granddaddy's attic  
 and passed them around for us [me]. The bats: [thy  
 rod and thy] they should be here thicker, louder. [staff they]

*Should come a time* is a statement of disbelief  
 [comfort me]. The brown bats:  
 their white nose disease, their persistent fertile radar.  
 [Amen.]

Varmint Poetics

---

You must understand how much I love my husband, how beautiful  
he is naked in the kitchen in midnight thirst: his two beards,  
his crooked left ear, how even after everything we go at it

like two beagles through a fence. My husband is a kind man,  
and I am the lawnmower you know you'll fix someday,  
the stack of tomato cages from your daddy's shed rusted into one

artsy clump. My husband is the mimosas springing  
into pink blossom by the train track spiraling *a million miles*  
to St. Louis, to Detroit, when neither of us dreamed of stealing

away from here. You see, the ground sags down as suddenly  
as a body; or a body as the ground: how limestone has a lie in it.  
Imagine him lying down, and all the fine hairs turn to bluish

grass, and I am an overpopulated deer, and I eat him all up.  
How much can I need before I scream at you like a possum in the trash.  
See this beautiful man take me into his arms, say *alright now, alright*.

## Flirtation Might Require a Biological Component

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Redbird doesn't know he's slang for menstruation when he skips to the beech top  
and sings about sunshine and women.

*If I made a pretty little basket, would you come  
a-Maying? If I split the millet and safflower, would you come a-laying?*

His is the first bright body I have seen this season; goldfinches still tarnished and androgynous,  
*wurblurs* a Southern mouthful.

He flits his blush from cheek to cheek of the small forest;  
his stiff tail bobs with each singing gutful like the modest hand of a mending women,  
*darn, darn, darn.*

He is the life of the party, what you wear at the collar for an assignation.

*Color* is blood rushing to the face while he imagines it elsewhere.  
To color, you have to get the joke but be embarrassed you get the joke.

*If I bent the thistle and the berry bush, would you be a-staying? If I lined this bole  
with fragrant moss, would you still think I'm a-playing?*

I still love redbird.

I don't care how he harasses his golden girl.  
I don't care this is what certain men mean by *natural*.

---

**Ashley Danielle Ryle's** work has most recently appeared in Zone3, Cordella, and Raleigh Review. Her chapbook *Fetching My Sister* is with Dancing Girl Press, and she was a recipient of a brief residency through the Kentucky Foundation for Women in 2014. She earned her MFA in 2011 from West Virginia University. She currently resides with her husband in central Pennsylvania while pursuing a PhD in materiality and grammars of sixteenth and seventeenth century women's life-writing.

EMILY AS IT'S NOT SO DIFFICULT TO WRITE AN EROTIC POEM ABOUT THE  
MOTHER OF YOUR CHILDREN *Darren C. Demaree*

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There is thirst. There is rain  
& dew. There is always coffee leftover from the morning.  
I open my mouth. We meet somewhere near there.

EMILY AS A NATION OF PLANTS

---

Nobody is near me  
right now. I'm alone on the lawn  
& yet, this light touch of grass is her.



## EMILY AS WE PLAN THE FURROW

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Let us both be enthusiastic  
about the indentations of this world  
& how we chose ours, together.

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**Darren C. Demaree** is the author of sixteen poetry collections, most recently “a child walks in the dark”, (Harbor Editions, December 2021). He is the recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award, the Louise Bogan Award from Trio House Press, and the Nancy Dew Taylor Award from Emrys Journal. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the Best of the Net Anthology and the Managing Editor of Ovenbird Poetry. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

Atomic Habits *Jaime Jacques*

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The self-help book suggests:  
 Do not say I want to be,  
 instead say I am.  
 I am the type of person  
 who does the dishes,  
 cleans up the doom piles,  
 waters the plants.  
 I never let the flowers decay in the vase.  
 I portion control,  
 meal plan for days  
 Don't say I want to be rich;  
 say there's more where that came from!  
 Say I write thank you cards,  
 remember birthdays,  
 call every weekend  
 and we laugh and laugh  
 and don't speak about all of this.  
 Say I respond to emails promptly  
 and never take my phone to bed.  
 Say the panic attacks are rogue hormones,  
 or all in my head,  
 (not that this will be the coolest summer  
 of the rest of our lives).  
 Say I am a spider,  
 weaving and weaving a web  
 that anyone could walk through.  
 Say it wasn't all going to end;  
 Would I weave?  
 Don't say I want to be a morning person.  
 Say I am a morning person.  
 Step into the garden at dawn;  
 See the cosmos bloom,  
 the cherry trees bear fruit  
 (despite all of this).  
 Say I too, am made of sun.

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**Jaime Jacques** has been through various incarnations, the most recent of which involves delivering mail and making art in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Previously Jaime worked in communications for international aid organizations before going rogue in the Northern Triangle. Her Creative Non Fiction has appeared in Salon, Narratively, Roads and Kingdoms, and NPR, among others. She is fluent in Spanish, the author of *Moon El Salvador* and lives for tropical storms, strong coffee and spontaneous dance parties.

The Rupture of Membranes *Jeremy T. Karn*

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*for frankie,*

for God's sake, not every bleeding hurts some tastes  
like pineapple juice when it's in the mouth.  
my mother believed that prayers could end your bleeding.

*because your blood traveled faster than water in your body,  
it dug into your folded skins that held your child.*

& because your water breaking never came,  
so the doctor split you wide open on a table like dried wood.  
*he slashed, slashed, & slashed, till you were empty  
of the heaviness that sat in your womb.*

that means your child was lifted from the soft burns of your split stomach.

that means your body was sewed back into  
the memories of holding a child in your navel.

that means a scar was drawn on your stomach to later  
show your son his first home.

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**Jeremy T. Karn's** chapbook, *Miryam Magdalit*, was selected by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani for the New Generation African Poet (African Poetry Book Fund), 2021. His works appeared & forthcoming in the 20.35: Contemporary African Poets Anthology, Hoxie Gorge Review, Ghost Heart Literary Journal, Whale Road, IceFloe Press, Lolwe, FERAL Poetry, Kissing Dynamite, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Olongo Africa, Liminal Transit Review, Auto Focus Lit, Stone Poetry journal, Afro Literary Magazine, Eremite Poetry, and elsewhere. He is the 2020 winner of the ARTmosterrific editor choice award. He tweets @jeremy\_karn96

*Wild Trade Avery Gregurich*

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Needing something wild, we bought a ( ) from a woman in the strip mall parking lot. She carried the keys to the cage and said to keep the ( ) active “or else.” We converted the bathtub in our apartment into an appropriate litter box, filled it with leaves and newspaper inserts. We taped wildlife posters to the tiles and piped in a cassette called Classic Nature. The ( ) slept in the closet, curled on the clean towels. We fed it from a non-stick pot we were too scared to cook in ourselves. At first, we took turns cleaning the tub. We tried to keep its teeth clean, reaching back into its throat for the stuck venison we purchased out-of-state. Feeling guilty, we let it out of the bathroom and the ( ) found a window to look out. It cried more when we tried to take it back into the porcelain, so now the ( ) walks between us, claws tickling the linoleum. We don’t even tug at the rope that the ( ) keeps dragging around anymore. We don’t toss the ball back and forth for fear a neighbor might recognize the predatory sound. I started to blame the ( ) for the silence between us, but we invited it in, paid for it even, so instead we blame the walls for not being wider apart. I swear it was not a ( ) when all of this began. It was just an envelope on the kitchen counter, a woman’s voice in the grocery store that our mother maybe shared, but she never shopped where we have to go now. Tonight’s menu holds lamb from the microwave because the ( ) saw a recipe on TV that it wanted to try and we three are too tired to argue about small things, like cuisine.

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**Avery Gregurich** is a writer living and working in Marengo, Iowa. He was raised next to the Mississippi River, and has never strayed too far from it.

The Words Grew with the Bullets *Arsalan Chalabi*

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My grandmother always told me that the night I was born there was a curfew. At the midnight of the last month of the winter, in 1986, at Bukan in Iranian Kurdistan. The first seconds of my life began with crisis and fear. My grandmother used to narrate:

“A military detachment with four cars was idling in the alley and at the end of the street, thinking that the house whose lights were on at midnight because of my daughter’s childbirth must have accommodated a series of Kurdish partisans, and that there must be something going on!”

The concept of time makes sense to me among words. I grew up among words. The words that were smuggled in. Their presence brought fear, horror, but beauty at the same time. We kept this language in our hearts for a long time. Every day, some of its words were published in newspapers or books in other countries in poems or stories and other texts, and after being smuggled on horseback, they cross the borders into Kurdistan from the mountains. After hundreds of years, this language was secretly updated in the mountains and basements of Kurdistan in books, pamphlets, and newspapers and found its way to the cities. Words passed from town to town and village to village, along with the sound of gunshots fired from all directions, mountains, deserts, plains, and forests. The words grew with the bullets.

The words came down from the mountains along with bullets. They saw the trees. They were seen in the streets, on the wall of the municipality, school, and police station—words and bullets in the bathrooms of mosques, parks, chairs, and bus stations. Words and bullets in the chest, brain, suit pocket, even our breasts, they were everywhere but secret, invisible!

Well, dear reader, I was wondering how to start my story? I mean, from which event and which location should I start? However, now, let me start from prison. I think it is tangible to start a story in the middle of prison; it is perfectly normal. The day I soaked my notebook in the prison library with tea is a good start.

I was drying the pages in my notebook. I had a black hairdryer with an on/off button. It produced a weak warmth which was better for my pages. My Kurdish words were about to drown. If it were not for that hairdryer, hundreds of words would have lost their lives.

It was full of books all around, all in Persian and Arabic. We read the Quran and Hadith ten hours a week. A mullah would come and talk for us 10 hours a week about heaven, hell, God, Satan, religion, Christianity, the United Nations, and America. He talked about everything. I had not spoken to anyone for almost three months. Except in critical situations! Arabic and Persian words had thrown the dust of oblivion on my mother’s language words. Having a Kurdish book, a cassette, and a tape recorder was my only wish when I was sent there for correction.

I slept at night in a large hall among fifty-nine boys from ten to seventeen years old. Everyone spoke Persian. I was mainly in the library, with the notebook and pen I had brought with me on the first day of prison. I was mostly writing. I spent almost three months without my blue words

and cassettes, far from the city and my family; it was scratching my soul every day. My mind was filled with Persian and Arabic words. I would kill time in any way I could to get rid of that hell. It was early spring. I had a week left until freedom.

I took out my notebook and edited my poems, a collection of thirty short poems that I intended to publish. All I could think about was writing. I spent every day practicing writing in Kurdish. I was going to war with Persian and Arabic words with Kurdish words. During the days, I returned defeated and tired of war, and at night I would plunder whatever there was with Kurdish words. I was victorious.

The curfew was ordered from 9 o'clock on the night I was born. My grandmother narrated:

“No house had the right to have its lights on. No one had the right to commute in the city. Several partisan teams had entered Iran from the borders of Iraq Kurdistan. At noon of that day, a quarrel broke out between Kurdish partisan forces and the Iranian army in the gardens of Amirabad Bukan. From that evening on, the whole city was fenced. When darkness covered the city with its wings, the radio was on next to your mother at midnight. It was playing an old Kurdish folk song. We turned on the lights when your mother was in much pain. Your father soon hid the radio. I had not yet cut the umbilical cord when two soldiers were standing over you, your mother and I, staring at us. After the soldiers left the house, your father was happy, and to the delight of the newborn son, he put out the radio and turned it on again. An old Kurdish singer sang alongside a government parasite on a radio station in Europe: **Kurds! OH, breathless Kurds! Oh, oh soulless Kurds! Oh, oh soiless Kurds! Homeless and oppressed Kurds! Suffering for thousands of years! Kurds! Sisyphus! Sisyphus Kurds!**”

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**Arsalan Chalabi** was Born in 1986 in Bukan - Iranian Kurdistan. He has published 13 collections of poems and fiction in Kurdish and Persian. In 2015, he was arrested by Iranian intelligence agency forces and accused of organizing and participating in demonstrations supporting Kobani and the Kurdish people and fled to Iraq after his temporary discharge. He made his journey to Denmark in 2016, where he sought political asylum, and lives there. His other work can be found in Flemmes Vives Anthology, Recours au Poems No. 159, The Curlew, HVEDEKORNE Magazine, Udkant Magazine, and Politiken Newspaper.

The Amazing Shauna Spiegelman *Erin Karbuczky*

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The hall was packed with people in metal folding chairs.

“You would think,” said Angelica, “that they would have sprung for a theater.”

I nodded. Plushy chairs would have been nice. “There,” I said. I’d spotted a set of chairs in the middle of the third row. A little closer than I’d have liked, but seats were seats. We raced over to the chairs, past a couple who was ambling toward them, and planted our asses firmly in place before shrugging off our coats and plopping our purses on the floor between our feet.

“You ever seen ‘er speak before?” said the man next to me. He wore a trucker hat and a tan Carhartt sweatshirt. He was old enough to be my father. But my father would have never come to an event like this.

“Transformational,” his wife said, and nodded.

“Maise and I just discovered her,” said Angelica. “I love her already.”

I wasn’t so sure.

“You watch my seat,” Angelica said to me. “I have to pee.”

“Go on,” said the wife. “I won’t let anyone take your seats.”

We both stood and I took my wallet in case we wanted to get a snack.

Angelica fanned herself. “Hot in here. I always forget it’s warmer inside, in a crowd, than it is outside. Even if it’s cold out.”

In the bathroom we exited our stalls and washed our hands and speculated what we’d see tonight at Shauna Spiegelman’s talk. I didn’t know what to expect. I was still kind of skeptical about what she had to offer that yoga and prayer and my journal couldn’t. I didn’t think I needed anyone to tell me how to live my life. But Angelica had dragged me here. She’d spent the past few months telling me how Shauna – she referred to her on a first name basis – had changed her life. Maybe I’d noticed a small enough change to want to see what the fuss was about. I started to say as much when Shauna Spiegelman herself walked into the restroom. She had her fingers clutched around the charm on her necklace and was running it along the chain, back and forth in a rhythmic motion.

“Peace,” she said when she noticed us.

I dried my hands.

“Peace,” Angelica whispered.

Shauna wore a dress that was fitted to her body like spandex and was patterned to look like the night sky. On her head she wore a crown of stars in her highlighted hair like Hedy Lamarr in Ziegfeld Girl. She walked – no, floated – into a stall and I heard the lock click.

Angelica formed her mouth into a little “o” shape. I smiled and nodded toward the door.

“Ohmigod, Maisy,” she said when we were in the hall making our way back to the auditorium. “Shauna Spiegelman knows who I am now.”

I turned and looked at her. She glowed.

I remained unchanged from the encounter.

As we reentered the auditorium, our seat neighbor flitted past us. “Your stuff is with Bob.” She winked, her white hair tinged yellow in the fluorescent light.

“Got your purses,” grinned Bob when we sat back down. “Had to convince Nance I could handle it if she left, too. You ladies and your bladders.” He’d taken off the hat and his grey hair was a sweaty mess plastered to his forehead.

I leaned down to put my wallet back in my bag.

Nance was already speed-walking back down the aisle toward us. I couldn’t believe someone her age could go so fast.

“I saw her in the bathroom,” she panted as she sat down. “Shauna Spiegelman. She told me she liked my shirt.”

I looked at her. She was wearing a pink t-shirt screen printed with two white kittens in a basket.

“It’s nice,” I said. “Angelica has shirts like that in her closet.”

“I do *not*,” Angelica said, low so Nance wouldn’t hear. The crowd was fidgeting now, and you could hear snips of everyone’s conversations at once. Their words melded together and separated like waves. Once in a while, you’d hear a cough or a laugh.

After another minute or so the music cued on. Singing bowls and a steady, thrumming Om.

Swirls of sound-scapes layered on top made me feel like I was floating in outer space. The lights grew dimmer and dimmer until all that was left were pinpricks of light like floating candles. The projection screen, previously white and dull, lit up now with a mandala pattern in blue and gold.

The audience began to clap and to lower their chatter.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” said a disembodied voice. “Our guest tonight has written seven books on subjects ranging from spiritual consciousness to sacred geometry. Her latest book, *Miracles Every Monday: How Moon Magic and the Art of Prayer Can Manifest Your Dreams to Reality*, is an *instant* LA Times Best Seller, and it is not even released until midnight tonight. Please welcome to the stage, the amazing Shauna Spiegelman.”

Shauna Spiegelman walked up the small staircase on the side of the stage and walked over to the podium. She set her notes down and adjusted the microphone on her headset, which she somehow managed to wear while keeping the crown of stars on, too.

Next to me, Angelica squealed under her breath. I reached my hand over toward her and she squeezed it. I let my hand linger in her on her knee a moment and took my phone out of my



pocket with my other hand. I opened a new tab on Chrome and typed in what I could remember from the mouthful of a title. I clicked on the LA Review of Books review.

“Pay attention,” Angelica whispered.

I put the phone facedown on my lap and took my hand back, patting her arm before resting mine on the armrest between us.

The crowd had continued to clap, and Shauna hadn’t said anything yet. Just feigned awe at the audience. Like she hadn’t seen such a big crowd before.

“Wow,” she said. She was grinning and her mouth took up the entire bottom of her face. But it was endearing, actually. She had on a pink metallic lipstick that I coveted, and her teeth were white and straight. Her voice was raspy and sincere.

“Wow,” she said again, and she put her hands in prayer position over her mouth, bowing slightly before placing them down on her thighs. “What a crowd. What a group. How lucky am I to be standing here with you tonight. What a dream. I want to show you something before we get started.”

She produced a small clicker from the podium and the background of the projector morphed into an image of a collage. There were pictures of exotic locations, words and affirmations like “peace” and “forgiveness” and “find joy in others.” Pictures of best seller lists. Pictures of figures in various yogic poses. And in the corner, a picture of a crowd in an auditorium.

“I manifested you,” said Shauna. “I envisioned you, and here you are. Thank you for coming to my talk.” She bowed. “I want to talk about my book *Miracles Every Monday*, and I thought that it’s so fabulous that today is Monday and that we might make a miracle together. How does that sound?”

The crowd whooped. A man screamed YEAH from the back of the auditorium.

Bob and Nance were standing up, clapping and smiling with open mouths. Angelica tugged on my hand. I stood up with her and clapped, tentative.

“Awesome,” said Shauna. “Here’s what we’re going to do: whenever I say the word ‘miracle,’ I want you to think about rain. By the end of our time together, I want you to believe that it is raining already. And when we leave, don’t be surprised if you feel a little drizzle coming down.”

I snorted and Angelica elbowed me in the rib. What, we were weather gods now? It was nice to believe in things like magic and manifestation, and prayer, and affirmations, but it wasn’t real. No amount of wishing was going to put ten million dollars in your bank account, or cure someone’s cancer. If it did, we’d all be healthy and rich. If it did, Angelica would be my girlfriend and not just a friend, because if wishing worked, she would love me back.

In the dark room with all the flickering lights, Angelica’s profile looked like that of a Grecian goddess. Her tight dark curls were wrapped in a bun with a few tendrils framing her face.

I stopped listening with effort, and let Shauna's lights and words wash over me, while I contemplated my life and all the ways it wasn't working. It wasn't just Angelica, it was everything. I didn't have the job I wanted. I didn't have my own place like I wanted. I saw the destination I desired but couldn't see the path that would take me there. I worried that I was a loser. That I would never find my way and my parents would be eternally disappointed.

Music poured through the speakers again and everyone around me started chanting. I had spaced out, lost my place.

"Om Shanti Om," they repeated. I thought I'd caught up with them, but then I was past them, the only one chanting in the room.

Shauna Spiegelman took it in stride. "My friend from the bathroom," she said. "Fourth time's a charm. *This* is the type of energy we need. Raining down on us." She smiled at me. I pulled my flannel tight and felt my ears go red.

I turned to Angelica and she squeezed her shoulders to her ears in a shrug, smiling all the while. "It's okay," she mouthed.

Next to me Bob had popped a piece of mint bubblegum into his mouth and was snapping and popping the gum. "Just quit smoking," he whispered to me. "You smoke?"

"Smoke what?" I said. There was a fresh joint in my bag waiting to be smoked on the way home.

At the end of the talk, Shauna told us all to look under our seats for a surprise.

It was the book that came with our tickets, but she'd signed them all in metallic pink gel pen. That was the surprise. It reminded me I wanted to know where her lipstick was from, but I would have to ask on Instagram and hope she'd respond.

"I hope you all have a *miraculous* evening," said Shauna from the podium. The lights had come back on and the magic had whooshed out from the room.

People shuffled out in droves and Angelica and I waited with Bob and Nance, taking our time putting on our coats and making sure we had everything we came in with.

"What did you think?" said Nance. She wiggled her eyebrows at us like we were co-conspirators.

"I loved it," said Angelica. "Do you think it's raining?"

"Oh, for sure," said Bob.

Nance agreed.

The room was mostly empty now, save for us and a few other stragglers who likely hoped they'd get to speak to Shauna before she went back to her hotel for the evening. Shauna looked small now.

She did in the bathroom, too, but this was different. The stage had blown her out of proportion, made her look like a giant sunflower. Now she wilted a bit. Must take a lot of energy to get up on stage and smile forever and pretend you love everybody in the room.

I don't know if I could do that.

"You girls have a way home?" asked Nance.

I was twenty-five but people always mistook me for younger. More like eighteen.

I held up my car keys.

We walked out with Bob and Nance, Shauna and her hopeful posse a few yards behind us. I heard a man go on and on about his visions of Jesus and a woman yammer about her own vision board.

I looked back. Shauna looked over it. Like she had places to be.

In the parking lot we split off from Bob and Nance and got into my car. It wasn't raining at all.

"I loved that," said Angelica as she put her seatbelt on. "So much!"

"I'm happy you liked it," I said. I saw her catch a look at me while I fiddled with the radio. I thought my curtain of hair could hide my expression.

"You didn't like it," she said.

I only said, "It isn't raining."

"That's your takeaway?" She took her curls out of her bun and redid it, combing her nails through her hair. "Put on Tegan and Sara."

I reached past her into the glove and grabbed the cd I'd kept long after iPods and iPhones and Spotify took over the music game.

"I thought you didn't like them," I said.

"They're growing on me."

I turned to look at her. She was preoccupied by something, I could tell.

I was about to pull out of my spot now that so much of the lot had cleared. But out of the corner of my eye I watched Shauna Spiegelman lighting up a cigarette outside the venue doors.

"Hold on," I said to Angelica. "I think I forgot something."

"You want me to come with you?"

"No, just wait here."

I got out of the car, not knowing what I was about to do, only that I was walking toward Shauna.

"Hi," she said as I approached her.

"Hi." I put my hands in my pockets. "It isn't raining," I said.

She chuckled. "It still might."

“You promised rain as we walked out.”

She put her hand on my upper arm. “Sweetie,” she said. “Miracles don’t happen on command. They happen when they’re good and ready. Like a flower waiting to bloom. Just because it hasn’t happened yet doesn’t mean it won’t.”

“I like your lipstick,” I said. “What’s the color?”

“Here,” she said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a sealed lipstick tube. “I bought a new one today. You can have it. I’ll buy another.” She took a drag and I tried to find meaning in her words.

She pressed it into my palm and took another drag from her cigarette. She blew the smoke away from my face. Courteous.

“Let me pay you for it,” I said, and remembered my purse was in the car with Angelica.

“Pay it forward instead,” she said. Then she dropped the cigarette to the ground and snubbed it out with the toe of her silver boot.

“I really liked your talk tonight,” I said.

“Oh yeah?” she eyed me, like she knew I wasn’t really there the whole time.

“I did. My friend loves you.”

“Tell your friend I love her, too. Get home safe.” She left me standing by the building and walked toward a silvery jeep. It looked new, or at least freshly washed. I walked back over to my own car, a Toyota that belonged to my older brother when he still lived at home.

When I got back in, Angelica asked me why I didn’t take her with me. She said she was afraid to leave the car because she didn’t know where the keys were. It was a push to start.

“I would have liked to meet her,” she said. She looked down.

I took the lipstick out of my pocket and used my nail to take the plastic off the tube. I took out the wand and dabbed the extra on the rim. Then I looked in the rearview mirror and applied it to my lips. “What do you think?”

“Do mine,” she said, and she leaned in toward me. I painted her lips with Shauna Spiegelman’s lipstick and dabbed at them with a tissue from a mini box I kept in the cupholder.

When I looked back at the windshield, I could tell it had started to rain. Little blurry dots of drizzle and the two of us fogging up the car with our breath.

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**Erin Karbuczky** writes poetry and prose. Through her work, she explores the queer experience, technology, the American Dream, and the uncanny. Her inspirations include Ray Bradbury and Sylvia Plath, as well as myriad contemporary authors. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and two cats.

Where the Show Goes On *Soramimi Hanarejima*

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After her favorite TV show gets cancelled mid-season, she makes weekly trips to an alternate universe where the show is still airing. There, in the comfort of her counterpart's sofa, she watches new episodes, enthralled by the stunningly clever plot twists and ever-shifting dynamics between characters. Which she and her counterpart vehemently comment on during the commercial breaks. Except when the show is going through one of its occasional lulls. Then they chitchat about life when the ads run.

One evening, the episode is particularly slow, and when it cuts to the commercials, her counterpart gushes about a recent trip to the Sensoreum.

"What's that?" she asks.

"Oh, a place that offers this huge range of sensory experiences," her counterpart answers. "I'll take you there. We can even go this weekend, if you don't have plans. It'll be fun."

And it is. Utterly mind blowing as she wears a brain-stimulation cap and luxuriates in the goosebumps pricked by what feels like invisible feathers stroking her forearms. It's just her in a cushy armchair having this "synthetic experience" in a white-walled booth, and it's just perfect. A few minutes later, she's melting [away] in the warm, gentle pressure of a phantasmal hug, then trembling with glee when her body seems to be enveloped by a tropical breeze that is only swaths of neurons firing.

"If you liked that, then you'll love the Auditoreum and Simulacreum," her counterpart says when they meet in the lobby afterwards.

Still atingle from the final sensation of floating in viscous warmth—"the honey bath"—she is thoroughly game for more.

The next Saturday, her counterpart takes her on a whirlwind tour of sensory venues. One plunges her into hyperreal soundscapes; another presents wondrous, innovative materials to touch and even taste in some cases; all enchant her with novelty and nuance.

Afterwards, she and her counterpart go out for a dinner of poké and green curry. Both exhilarate her palate and serve as the final encouragement necessary for her to declare that she will visit this world more often and enjoy the delights it offers. Her counterpart squeals boisterously at the promise of spending more time together.

But two days later, gamma ray bursts make all inter-world travel impossible. At least they don't obliterate most terrestrial life, as these GRBs undoubtedly would if their path through interstellar space were a few hundred light years closer. Instead, the GRBs just streak the sky with green, make TV broadcasts fuzzy and keep her stuck in her own world until they are over. Which could be weeks from now. So in the meantime, what does she do about her newly ignited craving for sensory stimulation? Ignore it? Suppress it? Try to satiate it with the low-tech, comparatively paltry options available in her own world?

When the auroral sky is especially verdant one afternoon, she brews a pot of tea, for the caffeine that might help her think through this. Waiting for the leaves to steep, stares out the kitchen window. Beyond its dusty glass pane, the cityscape appears to lie beneath the emerald waters of a glacial lake—like she could open the window then glide by buildings and float over traffic. Thinking now of the air as water and herself a mermaid in it, she knows that her newfound intrigue with salient sensations is a piece (possibly a crucial one) to a puzzle that has long existed in her mind—that is an aspect of her mind, related to some fundamental question about herself or the world or both that's been waiting just over her mental horizon, past all the thoughts she's

aware of. And now she's closer to it, able to tell that this question and its answer have an importance—a significance that is not so much urgent as inevitable, that she will have to face, regardless of which worlds she does and doesn't have access to.

*Can I move toward... whatever this is?* she wonders.

She pours the first cup of tea. Time to see how far this pot gets her.

The Worst Job in the World *Sam Roberts*

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*Trigger Warning: Images of Suicide, Instances of Suicidal Thought and Ideation, Bodily Harm, Light Gore*

The worst job in the world puppets you awake with the five-thirty alarm. There was a dream, which is gone. While others sleep you tie a knot around your neck, fold down a collar and fasten your cuffs. It is still dark. The birds are quiet except for those confused by the street-lit dawn; they may have sung all night.

The train station is busy. Everyone looks like you. No one speaks. You queue for a return ticket to the city behind a foreigner. The foreigner jabs his finger at the protective glass, hard.

“Way duh diket moor spen sive ere dan on da prahce?” he asks.

The counter clerk screws up her face in incomprehension, leans her ear towards the foreigner and says, “Sorry, *what?*”

The foreigner jabs his finger and says, “Duh diket moor spen sive ere dan on da prahce! Da prahce! No?”

He presses a train ticket against the glass, jabs it with his finger and says, “Da prahce! DA PRAHCE!”

The clerk shakes her head. “I don’t understand...” then inspects the ticket and says, “The price is different for off peak tickets, sir.”

The foreigner smiles. “Yes duh *prahce!*”

“Yes the price!” says the clerk, also smiling.

“I won de chipper prahce!” says the foreigner.

“Off peak tickets are valid after nine o’clock sir.”

The foreigner checks his watch. It is 06:47. “Dis no good!” he says. “Eye ave mitting at naan! Why I cannot make next train for chipper prahce?”

“You need to buy a peak ticket at full price, sir, or travel after nine o’clock.”

In a raised voice the foreigner says, “Waat? Dis is out-raj-us!”

Behind you, one of the commuters in the lengthening queue shouts, “For fuck’s sake hurry up! You’re making everyone late!”

The foreigner ignores this, probably because he is either completely unaware of the inconvenience he is causing or is fully aware and does not care, and repeats to the clerk, “Eye wan chipper prahce!”

You look up at departures and watch the minutes closing in. Your train leaves shortly. If you miss it you will be late.

The counter clerk mutters something into a radio and repeats the same words to the foreigner who simply reiterates his demand. The impasse continues until two security guards arrive and move him to the side.

You buy your ticket and run for the barrier, feed it in; it spits it back at you. You are late for the train but the train is delayed and you just make it. The carriage is overloaded. You stand by the doors in the crush, in silence, feeling cheated.

The journey is uneventful until the train approaches the city when it pulls up and there is a delay. Being late is now unavoidable. The commuters stand together, heads bowed, unmoving like cows at an empty trough. There is an announcement. Someone jumped in front of the train ahead.

One of the commuters catches your eye. He says, "How bloody inconsiderate! We are all going to be late! Why couldn't they have killed themselves at home?"

You reply, "I was hoping for a derailment and many deaths. But a suicide will do."

The commuter turns away, disgusted.

It takes a bus ride and two hours to get to work. These hours are unpaid.

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The office manager, a squat pear-shaped man with notorious breath, informs you as you enter the office, "You are late!" and taps his watch.

"There was a suicide on the line," you reply. "The train was delayed."

"Get an earlier train."

"An earlier train? I got up at half-past five to make the five-past-seven train!"

The manager shrugs, taps his watch and says, "We expect you to be here on time."

"I expect the train to be on time," you say. "Take it up with the railway operator."

The others peek at you above their monitors as though you are a dog vomiting on the floor.

You occupy a swivel chair and a desk which are referred to as yours although the back of the chair is tilted forward and the height of the seat is too high; this is not your usual chair. Someone has pinched it! You get up and hunt the office for your chair, wheeling the wrong chair loudly in front of you until you locate it underneath the skinny behind of an administrator.

"That is my chair," you tell her.

She peers up at you, an old thing in cardigan, glasses and pruned cheeks.

"Is it?" she says.

"Yes. I scrawled my name into the back with a knife."



She gets up and searches for the name; finds it. You claim your chair and push the other one at her.

“It’s just a chair,” she says.

“It’s just *my* chair,” you reply.

You wheel it back, sit in it; it is all wrong. You fiddle with the adjustments until it is how you like it: low to the ground and reclined far back, nearly horizontal. You then pick up your headset, log in and begin. First check the emails: complaint, complaint, spam, complaint. Internal message. Spam. Complaint. Nothing worth dealing with. You then look at the list of customers, select one and dial.

The manager stands behind watching you work, occasionally leaning close to point at data on the screen that interests him and gasses you with his breath.

“I would of called this guy first,” he says, pointing at a name.

“It’s would *have*, not would *of*,” you correct him. “God.”

He is one of the dullest and most awful people you have met and you have met many dull and awful people. He loves his work. He believes that you should love your work. He offers insights, comments, criticism, recommendations, different pitches and different questions all of which you know because you have worked this job for years and are probably slightly better at it than he is, although he is motivated and you are not.

Your telephone rings. The caller complains about the same problem that the last two hundred callers complained about. You repeat the same lines in the same order from the same script, accepting their abuse with gratitude until they are satisfied.

You will never meet these customers but you still must dress in shirt and tie because the Managing Director believes that smartly dressed employees are better than well-paid employees. The clothes make you sweat. The office is equipped with air conditioning however some of the employees, like the administrator, complain about feeling cold, so it remains unused. You begin to sweat and the sweat begins to stink.

The window you are facing cannot be opened. It offers a view of the car park and the expensive sports cars of the management. A brick wall surrounds the car park.

Break time. You use these fifteen minutes to stand in the car park, away from the others and chain smoke cigarettes. The others stand together laughing and talking about work. You manage to smoke five in a row before returning to the office thirty seconds late. The manager taps his watch at you. The others, who are already working, feel superior to you.

The worst job in the world requires you to accept the verbal abuse of customers who are richer than you; they have prettier wives and mistresses than you. They own houses in Chelsea and Mayfair and holiday in Caribbean islands you have never heard of and will never know. They will retire decades before you retire. Some of their children will retire before you. The verbal abuse you receive from these privileged people is common and dull. When the abuse is finished you reply respectfully, pretending to care about them and their problems. You have been awake for six hours, after four hours of sleep and it is not yet lunchtime.

The hour between now and lunch is the longest of the day. You begin to fall asleep but the phone rings. The customer offers the same words in the same order and you reply the same way as you did before. The part of you that speaks and types does so while the rest of you withers.

Lunch ticks over and the clock speeds up. The manager summons you as you are rushing out, cigarette and lighter in hand.

“Have you got a minute?”

“No. What is it?”

“That last call,” he says, “you sounded flat and detached, like you didn’t really mean it? This is what I would of said...”

“Would *have* said! Have! Not *of*!”

You suppress calling him a fucking idiot with great difficulty.

His bullshit explanation occupies five minutes of your sixty minute respite. Lunch is unpaid. You spend the next five minutes smoking and trying to figure out how to claim those five minutes back from company time, however you remember that you were late; equilibrium has re-established its choke hold and it is useless fighting elemental forces. Instead you lock yourself in the disabled toilet where there is space to lay on the floor, rest a toilet roll under your head and fall asleep.

The worst job in the world requires you to work for a further four hours and thirty minutes. The embryonic joy of lunch flushes away. Even the others feel beaten. Managers begin to work on all of you, driving you towards impossible targets and imaginary benefits. Their drive is money and the fear of no money. Your drive is to get them off your back.

In the hours following lunch you begin to question why you are here and arrive at the same conclusion as before, that you are here because you know no different. You are here because you cannot escape here. You were conscripted after leaving school, there was a war, the enemy won and you and everyone else became prisoners. The worst job in the world hides this from you until the moment you discover the truth and then it is too late to change. You must remain their prisoner until the sentence is served in full.

Between abusive telephone calls, the others discuss news stories they observed as they took lunch at their desks. An airliner crashed in Indonesia killing one hundred and fifty six passengers! A trawler capsized in the English Channel; four missing! A bridge collapsed, a hurricane ripped up a city, a petrol tanker exploded on a motorway, etcetera, etcetera. None of this matters because you are trapped in a horror story that no one will ever read.

A second and final fifteen minute break arrives, vanishing into smoke. You are back on time yet no one notices. Victories and conformity are ignored; only failures are highlighted. You slouch in your chair, recline as far as possible and observe the second hand of a clock slowly finding its way around the afternoon like a blind beggar’s stick. The worst job in the world interferes with the progress of time, shortening breaks and lengthening the hours that hurt you the most.

Today is Tuesday. There are still three days of this left before the weekend. Three days. Of this. And a fortnight until pay day. And more months and years of this. Forever.

The end does not come last. At five thirty the worst job in the world spits you back onto the pavement nearly twelve hours after you left your rented room. It busses you to a train station platform where you stand amongst hundreds of others, staring up at a large digital clock with your destiny flashing upon it in orange characters, guessing at the reasons behind the latest delay. Terrorist attack? Not enough railway staff? Too many? None? No one knows. You watch that clock eating into your time, claiming your numbers for itself. One day that clock will murder you. Time is the worst genocidal maniac of them all.

Eventually the train pulls in, a sad flat-faced commuter loco with five airless carriages, rumbling along the platform.

It is fifteen yards away when you lower yourself onto the track, stand between the rails and close your eyes. There is a screech of breaks. Screams. For some reason you remember this morning's dream. You were laying on the edge of a cliff. It was a long drop. You were trying to hold on but could find nothing to grip. You did not want to let go but had to. And fell.

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The clean-up crew have seen it all before. There are four of them. All dressed in orange high-vis. The police erected screens around the front of the train so that no one could see and the platform is closed. The incoming trains have been diverted to other platforms. The announcements keep coming over the public address system but there are no longer any passengers to hear them.

The clean-up crew boss unrolls a black body bag and unzips it. The others bring a pressure washer on a long hose, buckets of soap, detergent, scrubbing brushes and disinfectant. Then they approach the loco and stand either side, staring at your remains. Your head and torso are on the far side; your legs and feet on the near side and your entrails splattered in front of the driver's window.

They gather your legs first. Your left leg is bent backwards. Your right leg is undamaged and in perfect condition. Already the police have found and removed your wallet and phone, so no point searching your pockets for money. They simply bag you up ready for the morgue.

"Boss," says one of the crew. "Look. The eyes. Why are the eyes like that?"

He walks over to the far side of the train, where your head fell. The back of your head is crushed into the front and your eyeballs are several feet away.

"He must have turned around before it hit him," says the boss. "That's what happens when a train hits you in the back of the head. Your eyeballs fly out, just like that," and he makes popping noises with his lips.

"Fuck me," says the crewman.

"Pick them up, then."

The crewman stares at your eyeballs and your crushed eyeless head and back at the boss.  
“No fucking way am I touching that!”

The other crewmen say absolutely nothing in response to the boss’s questioning gaze.

“Bunch of melts,” says the boss.

He walks over. Kneels down. Picks up your eyeballs. Stands. Says, “Want to see my party trick?”

He juggles your eyeballs in one hand, the balls getting higher and higher until he catches one, then the other, bows and says, “Eye eye shipmates!”

They laugh. All of them. As they are supposed to.

The crew boss will drink himself to death within three years.

The crewman who found your eyes will spend the rest of his life on powerful anti-depressant drugs.

The other crewmen, who bagged your legs, will become clean-up crew bosses. One will die of a heart attack in his fifties. The other will die by accidental overdose on his twenty-third birthday.

The sole surviving member of the clean-up crew will remember your eyes. He will think about your eyes every day until he dies. Your eyes. Spinning in the air, the optic nerve flicking blood and gore into the boss’s hair.

The worst job in the world was seen through your eyes and theirs.

Your revenge.

It would have made you smile.

Pet People *frankie allegra*

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*To my four-legged friends- past, present, and future*

To say I grew up a pet person feels like trivialization. To put it another way: ancient civilizations lived their lives around the sun; when it rose, when it set. I grew up living my life around animals: when they rose and when they slept. First it was Max and Tigger, then it was Cleo and Marie, and then it was Oliver. Now, it is Mr. Tumnus. Mr. Tumnus is the first pet who is uniquely mine; before, they were shared in terms of responsibility and love and paid for exclusively by my parents. Now, this cat depends on me and me alone for survival. I was initially drunk on the high of the responsibility; now, when I see his monthly pet insurance premiums hit, I feel quite a different way.

What it means to be a pet person: I do not allow my fiancé, Will, to get into bed with me unless he is fully showered. Mr. Tumnus, for his part, licks his butthole with his small, leathery tongue haphazardly, traipses through his litter and beneath the couch, rolls on the ground at his leisure, and then crawls beneath the covers with me, rests his small head on my pillow. Three days ago, he woke me up at 4:30 am by sneezing directly on my face, and his little feline boogers went flying everywhere. I don't have an explanation for why this is tolerable.

\*

My mother bought a new car in July. She insisted it be a convertible, even though she doesn't like convertibles. My mother is anal and hyperactive; a convertible represents the ultimate waste of time to her—putting down the roof, putting it up when she gets on a highway, messing up her hair. Nevertheless, she bought a black Beetle with a black soft-top. Why? Because our family dog, Oliver, an 11-year old, gassy English Mastiff, likes feeling the wind in his enormous cheek folds. So, a convertible.

It is difficult to quantify the love my mother has for Oliver. When she gets home from work, you can hear her bellowing through the house: *joia della mia vita* and *amico piu caro*, which translate to “joy of my life” and “my best friend.” After an extended greeting to Oliver, where she throws her arms around his colossal neck and kisses him on his grey hard, she goes and gets changed out of her work clothes, and she and Oliver have cheese and a glass of wine together. Oliver has the cheese, and she has the wine. Then, and only then, will she say “Frank, we're leaving,” which means they are going on a walk, and I am allowed to come. I have never been called the joy of my mother's life, nor her best friend. Those titles are reserved exclusively for Oliver.

Oliver was initially my dog, which is to say, a dog bought for my enjoyment, but he became my mother's dog when I went to college. My dad's business surged at the time, which had him traveling nonstop for work, so it was just my mother and the mastiff alone in our house. This is when Oliver transformed from dog to son. Each day I was told new information about him: Oliver can speak Italian. Oliver practices telekinesis and knows when I'm about to take him on a walk. Oliver began going to the grocery store with my mother, with the top down on her old car, a PT cruiser convertible, because Oliver, I was told, enjoyed the feeling of the wind in his jowls.

When I went home on breaks, I found what I had left, a dog, but my mother insisted that I couldn't see what she could see. And it is true: I didn't. I found a poorly behaved, earnest 200-lb beast who had my mother buying him personal packs of prosciutto, likely questioning his good fortune.

But Oliver did something we didn't: he followed my mother like a shadow from room to room. When she wanted to take him on a walk, he went. When she fed him, he ate. When she sat on the couch to watch the news, he sat next to her. My sister and I were not as easy to control: we were in our late teens and early 20s, and college had given us gulps of independence, living in different states, making our own decisions, choosing for ourselves when we ate and walked and sat. My mother, being Italian, tried to treat us like our canine sibling: "it's time for a walk!" She'd declare, flinging open my closed bedroom door. But I didn't have a leash, and she couldn't make me. We went to college, moved away, got boyfriends, did how and what we pleased. Oliver was different, Oliver stayed. He sat. When prompted, he could shake hands.

Is this why animals call to us? Do we humans crave total manipulation over others, and this is why we procreate, and then, when our creations develop consciousness of their own, we turn to the next best thing, domesticated quadrupeds? I don't know. What I do know is that Mr. Tumnus, no matter how much shredded mozzarella he eats, will always be small enough for me to pick up and carry, to move, to control, and this compactness is something I cherish.

\*

When we first started dating, I asked Will if he was a cat person or a dog person and I don't remember his exact answer, but he distinctly implied he was just a person. This did not sit well with me. In my world, you need to be either a cat person or a dog person, but ideally both. Still, I resisted an on-the-spot conversion, knowing those often failed.

Instead, I went the slower route: each time we saw a dog together in passing, I would do but I regularly did, which is shout "hi, doggo," and get on knees to greet the canine— but I would bring Will to his knees with me. He petted a Great Dane behind the ears and admired the soft folds. He delighted in the Chow Chow's black tongue, its red panda face. When we saw kittens in pet store windows, I'd quietly make voices for them, narrate their inner lives. We would spend weekends at the Washington Square Dog Park, first passing by, and then eventually sitting. When Will came to visit my family home, I showed him the acacia tree where our dog Max was buried, the cypress under which we buried Rene, Cleo's magnolia tree. I think he began to understand the value in not just being a person, and then I saw the photo of Mr. Tumnus's head buried into his feline mother's side, up for adoption, and I texted it to Will and said "please."

I had a plan: a cat was a gateway animal to my ultimate objective, a dog. Will would see just how easy cats were: they didn't need to be walked, could entertain themselves, required little in the way of vet bills. He would soon want the alpacas and chickens that were a part of my larger plan for a full-on menagerie. I did not share this scheme with Will, but I did share the Amazon bill for Mr. Tumnus's new bed, litterbox, and toys.

\*

Pets are having a moment. I don't use Facebook much, but there is a Facebook group called Cool Dog Group that has 759,500 members, and I periodically check in. In general, I like what I see. Basically, people on the internet post photos of their respective dogs, and these photos garner likes and comments. "Our new cute Alfie," captions someone on a photo of a goldendoodle puppy. "My sweet baby Mocha turned 15 and there was no better way to celebrate but to have a Quinceañera," writes someone else, beneath a photo of a particularly crusty looking Chihuahua wearing a crown and a tutu. "Happy Birthday sweet baby," comments someone. "Happy birthday cutie" comments someone else." This corner of the internet is devoted to celebrating canines and the people who love them.

There are celebrity pets on Instagram. Recently, Grumpy Cat (2.6 million followers) died due to a urinary tract infection gone awry, and her supporters mourned. Other celebrity pets—influencers in their own right—wrote tributes to her on their accounts. I don't know how, given the lack of opposable thumbs, but it was touching nonetheless. This housecat had a world beyond its house, a following, teenagers in other countries who would paint photorealistic watercolor sketches of her. Grumpy Cat has a fleet of merchandise, calendars, mugs, but she also had someone who loved her. Her owner, a woman named Tabatha Bundesen, was 29 and working as a waitress at the time her brother took a photo of her cat and posted it to Reddit. The photo become an internet sensation with over one million views in 48 hours, and within two years, Bundesen allegedly generated nearly \$100 million from Grumpy Cat's paid appearances, book deals, and modeling career, according to *Business Insider*.

It's absurd for sure but go Google a photo of Grumpy Cat (may she rest in peace). Tell me, what feeling does she evoke? How much is that feeling worth? By some accounts, it's priceless.

\*

The Proustian questionnaire has a question that asks, "What is the lowest depth of misery?" The answer, to me, is instant: watching our two beloved childhood pets, Cleo and Marie, get put down. To hear Cleo's last sigh when the potassium hit her blood stream, to feel Marie's old, tabby body go limp in my arms. To eventually leave them laying there in that small vet clinic room, and return home with one less family member. To pick up their ashes a few weeks later in a box so small it stupefied. All that life, reduced to so little. When my parents thought about putting our house up for sale a few years ago, my sister and I asked them if they could get Cleo and Marie's cremated bodies to come with us; Cleo, buried beneath the magnolia tree she used to lay under in the summer, and Marie, beneath the cypress she used to spend afternoons on, hunting birds. Our parents obliged, and the gardeners dug, but came up with nothing. Our pets were disintegrated, as were the boxes that hold them. "I thought the boxes were more like coffins," my mother told me over the phone. How were we supposed to know? It feels right, to have Cleo and Marie eternally at the house they grew up in. We never sold the house. Correlation does not imply causality, but it implies something. Love, maybe.

\*

I am in law school, and four days before my biggest writing assignment of the semester is due and two days after Mr. Tumnus has become my new roommate, I am watching him as he attempts to drink out of my water glass on the desk. He is putting his little paws on the lip of the cup, his little whiskers dotted with drops of water as he dips his head in, when he pushes a bit too hard and the entirety of the glass spills on my computer. I scream, I tilt it upside down, and then I see Mr. Tumnus huddled in a corner, startled by my shriek, and a lifetime of rage melts away. I comfort my kitten for his mistake, and when I pay the \$480 to resuscitate the machine, I do not charge him for it, metaphorically or literally. If anyone else gave me \$500 worth of computer damage, it would be payment plus interest for emotional distress. But this is the thing with pets: when they chew our phone chargers to pieces, claw the couch, gnaw the edges off coffee tables, the anger is short or not at all. They are faultless because they don't know any better, or if they do, we pretend they don't. Perhaps we all have con artists living in our homes, sleeping in the corners of our beds. Either that, or angels.

The allure of animals is heady. When I am chosen as the person whom Mr. Tumnus plunks his furry bottom on during the NBA Finals, I experience a joy that radiates from within. Better than a peach on a summer afternoon, locking eyes with a stranger across a bar and knowing it wasn't an accident, a hot shower after a long day, and nearly every other cliché. This small creature with a brain and soul all his own picked me from a group of other TV-watchers. This is cause for celebration. When they sit when we tell them to, when they cozy up next to you in bed, when a butt-licking tongue reaches for your face—these are the moments we crave, because they tell us our care is not all for naught, that it matters, that we are seen.

\*

Pets are a luxury, but nobody thinks of them like this. And yet it's true; an animal on a farm works, makes you money. A pet just spends it: vet bills, food, toys, a sitter for when you are out of town. My mother and I went to Rwanda last April and she asked our guide why nobody had dogs. He laughed and said: "We can barely feed our children." I willed my car seat to devour me.

In other countries, pets are not only valued, but sensationalized: look at Hello Kitty in Japan. Hello Kitty depicts a Japanese Bobtail cat with a red bow on its head and no mouth, and by 2014, the Hello Kitty franchise was valued at about \$8 billion a year. When asked why Hello Kitty has no mouth, spokespeople for her company creator, Sanrio, replied: "she speaks from the heart."

\*

What is the difference between an owner and a parent? It is hard for me to say. An owner has command of a brute, an owner tames. An owner possesses. A parent creates, and a parent nurtures. This is as far as my brain takes me, but here is what I know: Mr. Tumnus gets combative when I clean his shit out of the litter box. He doesn't want me to take it out, and so he tries to swat the little green shovel out of my hand. I crouch, I plead with him, I lock him out of the bathroom and hear his little paws pounding on the door. In these moments, I question who owns who.

\*



It is all too easy to become a pet person. Some are born this way, with their first babysitter being a Rottweiler named Max and a cat named Tigger, like myself, and others transform. I see Will's metamorphosis, slow but sure. Now, when we see a dog walking down the street, his eyes light up first. I watch him hold Mr. Tumnus as he sleeps like a work of art, and I watch him kiss his furry little cheeks with the tenderness of a father with a newborn. Bit by bit, the fur sticks to his heart. Maybe that's a metaphor, but also, our clothes are consistently covered with fur.

Will and Mr. Tumnus initially shared a mutual skepticism for one another, but gradually, affection eked in. Their bond was formed over the unlikely instrument of a hard drive: Will worked on his computer while Mr. Tumnus slept on the heat-generating machine. I would leave them in this position in the morning on my way to school and come back to find them in exactly the same positions at night. Soon, a paw would be absently stretched over Will's wrist, or I'd find Will's hand touching the velvety back crevice of Mr. Tumnus's ear. I knew my dreams of a menagerie could one day be realized when Will sat me down and with grave severity told me that he worried Mr. Tumnus was lonely, would I consider a second cat?

Two weeks later, we adopted Ernie, an anxious and deeply abused one year old cat with a genetic mutation resulting in an extra toe on each paw. I no longer feel so far off from my aspirations of alpacas.

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The way I see it, pet people sit on a spectrum. There are those that are anti-pets, people who were raised without animals, people who don't greet dogs, and their depraved like. I say this jokingly but also semi-seriously; it may be a hot take, but I think everyone should be raised with a pet. Learning empathy and understanding for a different creature, to pick it up gently and properly, to shovel its shit, is a valuable lesson for a child, in my opinion.

Then there are the average pet people, those that call themselves owners instead of parents, who see an animal more like a college roommate than a child or friend. These people generally don't give their dogs human food, or their cats Christmas presents. These people are what society deems normal.

Then there are, shall we say, the slightly more fanatical. I fit this classification. As a relatively friendless child, I memorized and read the American Kennel Club Guide to Dogs daily, which led to a ludicrous skillset of knowing nearly every dog breed recognized in the mid 90s. I light a candle for Mr. Tumnus' birthday and have been known to leave dinner parties so as not to leave him by himself for too long.

There are those that are beyond the pale, considered freaks. My mother's old colleague, for example, a woman with the last name Soares, pronounced "Soar-us," who is the parent to a 300-lb behemoth names Dinah. Dinah Soares, get it? She desperately wants you to get it. This woman runs Dinah's Facebook page with daily updates, and what's more, spends her retirement making Dinah's meals. Dinah eats better than some two Michelin star restaurants. A recent meal of

Dinah's, as seen on her Facebook page: turkey neck with microgreens, kefir, and veal liver, garnished with edible flowers. Another post inquires, "if Dinah wrote an autobiography, what would the title be?" I don't judge people like this, because I too could picture Dinah writing a book after a plate of puréed blueberries and alpaca. This is how I know I am a pet person. Animal lives in my veins.

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Perhaps we love our pets so much because there is a sad truth buried beneath their existence: in most cases, you will outlive your precious Sparky. This creature will come into your life as a kitten or puppy, and one tragic day years later, you will take it to the vet and walk away empty-handed. It is, as far as humans are concerned, a truncated lifespan, childhood and adulthood and seniority compressed into a canister of 15 years. But isn't death what makes life beautiful, why we find more pleasure in fresh flowers than fake ones, this very fragile thing that consumes so much poetry, so much anguish, so much joy?

I don't know what I will do when Mr. Tumnus dies. Weep, definitively. But this cat carries so much more weight in my life than his 20 pounds can belie. The truth is that love is not word enough for it, for what I have for him. Awe is more apt. He is never embarrassed, never harps on his failures, always follows his impulses, showers those he loves with affection and isn't afraid to ask—no, demand—alone time. He treats himself well and rarely gets angry. He doesn't like brushing his teeth, but then again, no one's perfect. He is a small man clad in orange fur, and he is often the best part of my day.

I now understand my mother's fixation with Oliver, what *joia della mia vita* truly means. When Oliver invariably passes on to the great beyond, we will mourn him the way others, those that aren't pet people, those that are just people, mourn a family member. Scorn us if you please. But all dogs go to heaven, and this will comfort us.

In the meantime, if ever you find yourself in Northern California, keep an eye out for a black Volkswagen Beetle convertible. Maybe you will catch a glimpse of one of my favorite sights, my mother and Oliver coming back from the dry cleaner or the grocery store. Perhaps you will see them whizzing by, two heads: one, blonde, desperate to be loved, and the other, old, infallible, and fur.

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September 1 *Trey Burnette*

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The bright August sun glistened off the deep blue water of Lake Arrowhead. In their attempt to refresh their bodies, overly tan water skiers with peroxide-bleached hair trickled inside for the unneeded calories of a McDonald's soft serve vanilla ice cream cone. My Happy Meal with a cheeseburger and Coke sat before me. Mom had a Filet-O-Fish and a Diet Coke.

I was fifteen, almost sixteen. I was skinny with a coiffed head of dark brown curls and a perpetual smile. My mom's short black hair was naturally frosted with gray, dark circles rested above her creamy cheekbones, and a twinkle of refreshed hope peeked from her espresso-colored eyes. She was eight months divorced from my ex-stepfather.

After a seven-month stay with my grandmother, Wanny, and Aunt Skeeter, we moved here on August 1 and got away from the smog in Riverside and the discomfort that Skeeter provided Mom. We found a two-bedroom apartment on the downslope of a hill, overlooking the parking lot of a convenience store. The apartment was a former medical office and underneath a dentist's office. There were two bathrooms across the hall from each other. One was missing a toilet, and one was missing a shower.

In the living room, there was a black futon couch, a wood-veneer television stand, and a television. A painting of a Native American woman with an empty bowl hung over the futon. Down the hall, just beyond the bathrooms, was exam room number one, Mom's bedroom. A mattress and box spring without a headboard rested in the corner, neatly made. Cabinets that once housed free samples of pharmaceuticals and Johnson & Johnson bandages and latex gloves now stored her clothes and undergarments. My bedroom, past Mom's room, exam room number two, was twice the size of Mom's. Sheets laid on the floor where a bed should rest, a blue lamp sat near the wall, and built-in cabinets acted as my dresser.

Four hundred and fifty dollars a month.

Mom supported us with her disability check and with payments from Al, which were something related to the repayment of her retirement money settled in the divorce. She was about to start graduate school at Cal State San Bernardino. She decided to get her master's degree in special education. I was about to begin eleventh grade in what would be my eleventh new school, Rim of the World High School. I had decided that I simply needed to keep Mom alive and graduate, and then I could think about the life I wanted to pursue.

Tired and hopeful, lunch at McDonald's was a treat. Mom was ashamed that going to McDonald's required permission from her pocketbook, but her return to school was an acknowledgment that, like everything, it was only temporary.

"Thanks for lunch."

She smiled. "No problem."

"Are we going to be okay until the first?"

"Yes, I have sixty dollars in my checking account. It will be tight, but it is only a few days."

"They're hiring here. I can get an application and bring it back after my birthday." I always imagined my first job would be at the Gap, but there were only a few places for teenagers to work in Lake Arrowhead, and my need for money far outweighed any need of my ego's. She had our budget marked to the penny; any contribution I could make would be a great relief to her.

"You need to settle into school before you get a job."

I thought of the wonderfulness that being sixteen and working would bring:

freedom and a bit of ease. My mind drifted to a recent murder in the area.

“Would you still love me if I murdered someone?”

“Trey, you’re not going to murder anyone.”

I looked beyond the choppy blue surface of the lake, to the lakefront mansions peeking out of the tall pines, behind the countless number of boat docks. I thought of the open house I’d made my mom visit yesterday: the Ralph Lauren furnishings and the promise of the good life on the lakefront.

“Trey.” She grabbed my attention. “You know there is nothing you could do or be that would make me not love you more than anything in this world.”

I stared at her blankly, afraid of what she was saying. *I am not coming out in a McDonald’s.*

On the first night of September, the sky was magnificent and brilliant: hot pink, tangerine, and touches of canary yellow. The reflection of the setting sun through the smog made something beautiful from something destructive.

We stood in front of Aunt Skeeter’s Tudor-with-a-Spanish-tile-roof California tract home: Wanny, Aunt Skeeter, Mom, and me. Goodbyes and I love you’s. “Happy birthday” one last time from Wanny, with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Mom and I got back into the Mustang.

“Drive safely,” Aunt Skeeter called out.

“Yeah, not too fast!” Wanny added.

We fastened our seatbelts. I smiled and pressed on the accelerator, steering us home.

“Did you have a fun day?” Mom asked.

“I always have fun when I am with you.” Spending my sixteenth birthday thrift-store shopping for a small dinette set for a dumpy apartment in the woods and ending it with a dinner at The Old Spaghetti Factory was not the most exciting way to celebrate, but I still didn’t have any friends, so what else was I going to do? It was comforting, settling into our new home—no Al to bother me, and no Skeeter to bother Mom. I did get my license that morning—I was one step closer to a little control of my own life. Mom emptied her lungs and took a puff of medication from her inhaler. It had been a long hot day, and she was tired. We were both tired.

In San Bernardino, I exited Waterman Canyon and we began our ascent up Highway 18, the Rim of the World Highway. In the twenty minutes since we’d left Wanny’s, Mom’s wheezing had not eased. The long summer day had caught up to her.

“Pull into that Shell; I can get some hot coffee.”

“Are you sure that’s going to be enough? Do you want to go to the hospital?” We weren’t far from Saint Bernardine’s.

“I’ll be fine. I can make it home and use my nebulizer.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine.”

Her hand grasped the cup—white Styrofoam with red and yellow labeling—Shell. Her silver medical bracelet dangled from her left wrist. Mom sipped her coffee. I put the car in drive and exited the station. On the corner, there was a blue sign that read “H” with an arrow that pointed east.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?” I asked. She shook her head. I proceeded up the mountain. Mom rested the cup on her leg and exhaled. The air tried to escape her lungs. “It’s not too late; I can still turn around.”

“I’ll be fine.” She forced herself to exhale.

My chest tightened. My foot grew heavy on the gas; I felt the vibration of the torque under my right foot and up through my leg. My left foot firmly planted itself on the floorboard, and my hands at ten and two tightened their grasp onto the black leather of the steering wheel. I concentrated on my breath and focused on the road ahead of us.

The Rim of the World Highway was like a black asphalt sidewinder that clung to the cliffs of the San Bernardino Mountains. The first half was four lanes, the second half two lanes and noticeably more narrow. Signs warned of falling rocks, steep cliffs, and lookout points along the road to the top.

Mom focused on her breath. I focused on the road. The California sun set. It touched the western horizon, gently sitting in the breast of the indigo silhouette of the mountains that surround the western side of the Inland Empire. The last of the brilliant pinks and oranges faded into the darkening sky above. The stars struggled to emerge from beyond the pollution. Below the mountains, the city lights awakened and shimmered.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. Drive safely.”

My foot extended, and the throttle of the V-8 engine rumbled. I leaned into the endless mountain curves. *Dear God, please don’t let me crash.* I thought of my childhood motorcycle riding—*ease the gas and lean into the curves*—my new mantra.

In the corner of my right eye sat Mom. Just beyond her, the night sky and a two thousand foot drop that grew deeper as we raced up the mountain highway. The road narrowed to two lanes. The car in front of me drove at a responsible and cautious speed, slowing me. With my right index finger, I clicked on the hazard lights. The driver in front of me didn’t react, probably thinking I was some jerk who needed to slow down, learn to drive, and be more patient. He drove more slowly—regulating me. *Pull over.* I flashed and flickered the Mustang’s high beams. Finally, he pulled into a lookout point. I passed him. He would never know what I was doing driving so fast up that road.

We were above the smog line: the city lights dimmed, the sky cleared, and the stars brightened.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Mom shook her head. “We’re almost home. Do you want to go to the hospital?”

“No. Home,” Mom said in a voice that was suffocating.

We were less than a mile from our apartment. My body steered on adrenalin, the tires squealed, and the Mustang growled as I punched the gas coming out of every bend in the road.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

“Go.” She said as she struggled to breathe. She motioned her left hand forward. “Go,” she said, out of air.

“Go where? Home?” She shook her head. I looked to the road. Her hand motioned forward. “Where? The hospital?” I asked. “Yes? Yes?” Her hand motioned forward again. I released my tension into the pedal; the acceleration pulled me deeper into the seat.

I passed the turn-off to our apartment and headed toward the mountain hospital—only one mile away. I took a right curve and a sharp left; Mom fell against me and then away. Bam—her head crashed against the passenger window. Her coffee cup rolled empty on the floorboard. “Mom!” Silence. The engine roared.

We reached Mountain Communities Hospital. My hand jabbed the horn—over and over and over. Alarming and obnoxious, it was my siren. The Mustang burst up the driveway of the

small hospital. I flashed the high beams and solidly laid on the horn. A small group of teenagers scattered away from the cub near the emergency room door. A nurse appeared, peering into the blinding light of my headlights.

I slid the car to the curb in front of the sliding glass entrance. More employees emerged. With the car running, I ejected out of the driver's side. "Help! My mom can't breathe." I rushed to the passenger side. "Help me—she can't breathe!" A team of hospital staff rushed the passenger door and pulled Mom out. "She has asthma. She is in respiratory failure."

A nurse ripped her shirt and bra open. Her left breast was exposed. I turned my head. They rushed her inside. I moved the Mustang and then called Wanny and Aunt Skeeter.

They answered the phone simultaneously. "Hello."

"Skeeter?" Wanny asked.

"Mother?" Skeeter asked.

"What are...", both mumbled in confusion.

"Hello. It's Trey. Mom's in the hospital. Lake Arrowhead. She had an asthma attack on the way home."

Inside, I paced the waiting room. There was a blonde woman reading an old magazine; she smiled. A doctor appeared—his eyes were blue with fear, his face was handsome and frozen, and his brunette hair was beginning to grey. He was not prepared. He motioned, and I followed him.

We sat in a small, sterile conference room with two chairs that faced a single chair with a side table next to it. This was the room. He sat facing me and said, "I'm sorry."

My chest collapsed, and my head fell into his lap. *We lost*. His hand laid still on my back. The fight was over.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. The room grew still and time became immeasurable as tears ran from my eyes. "I tried everything I could. Her respiratory system was so locked; there was nothing I could do." His left pant leg absorbed my tears.

I didn't know why that time was different, why she hadn't made it. She had always pulled through at the end. I wondered what I had done wrong, why I hadn't made her go to the hospital down the hill. I recounted every step and wondered how I might be able to change what had happened. But Mom was dead. I sat there with the quiet doctor, neither one of us able to change what was done.

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**Trey Burnette**, a writer and photographer, is an MFA graduate from the University of California, Riverside. His areas of study were nonfiction and screenwriting; he also studied comedy writing with The Groundlings and The Second City in Los Angeles. His up-coming memoir, *I Hear You're Funny*, is expanded from his one-man play, *Rim of the World*, performed at the Powerhouse Theatre in Los Angeles. Trey has written two comedy pilots: *Here You Are* and *Naughty Darlings*, and served as the nonfiction editor for *The Coachella Review*. He has a BA in psychology from the University of Southern California.