



# Alchemist Review

# Alchemist Review

A journal of literary fiction, poetry, and visual arts dedicated to publishing dynamic works by emerging writers and artists in the University of Illinois Springfield community. With an appreciation for print culture, as well as digital technologies and mixed media. The Alchemist Review provides a forum for collaboration and exploration within the ever-evolving world of literary publishing. The journal is edited by undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Illinois Springfield.

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# Vachel Lindsay

## Walks at Midnight

(or Recountenance of a Century-Old Peripatetic)

IZABEL MILLER

Long have I known my city warm and gray  
and yet my footsteps in its alleys stale -  
so many, too, in Gulfport and Hiram  
murmur to children of my whimsy tale

Far-flung have I the tawny shawl of youth -  
my tramping days gone, quiet as a knell  
yet still I feel the giddiness of babes  
among the sedum and the limp bluebell -

Among the yarrow and the primrose neat!  
Those poets flatter me with gab-galore -  
“Old Lindsay, our dear tender minstrel -  
Lindsay the Rambler! Lindsay the Troubadour!”

I am not gone in Spokane or in Springfield,  
my fondest haunts; I rest my weary knees  
beside a fence post, mottled mildew-green  
and soberly, to no-one, guarantee



Long as men roam-nay, *Canter!* Prance! and *Sing!*

Enraptured in their bookish alchemy  
I shall not languish on that musty ridge  
Nor skim the pin oaks, Lincoln's balcony

'Till men eschew their loathing evermore  
and hail their brothers black and ochre-red  
as lovely the balm of Spring! 'Till then  
I shall not laze among the laggard dead.

# Hide and Seek

BLAKE BARNES

The summer after I learned how to drive, I had the second worst biology project. The only time that I had been more wet was after riding Hurricane Hideout (before they closed it down because someone almost drowned).

Science fair projects aren't meant to be small, so the only place to carry it was in my arms. With every drop of water that landed came another abstract concept to incorporate into an overtly convoluted presentation.

I'm just glad that my sister never had to do anything like this.

"This could've been so good if you worked on it sooner and brought it in before today," my teacher said.

"I was having a hard time focusing," I told her.

I can never think when it is the anniversary of our last hide and seek game.

The old broom closet on the second floor of the orphanage was my favorite hiding place. Darkness and a slight scent of moth balls embraced me behind a coat that probably once lived in a beautiful forest. My sister never checked this spot first though. As the shrill cries and screams of the other kids being found one-by-one filled my ears, I prepared to see the light once more.

"I wonder where Danny could be?" she said.

Her feet were finding all the loose floorboards on the landing, so I knew she was close. The closet door would swing open.

"Is he in here?"

"Nope! No Danny in here, only Zuul," I would announce jumping out of the closet.

"Danny, don't always be so quick to jump out. I might not have found you if you hadn't," she said.

I've never had a problem with coming out of a closet too soon.

There are eleven major organ systems in the human body: circulatory, respiratory, digestive, excretory, nervous, endocrine, immune, integumentary, skeletal, muscular, and reproductive. There is a favorite system among my classmates, and my project is not about it.

Susie and Charles picked the circulatory and nervous systems. They also wrote the lesson plans on the board for our teacher every morning.

Skeletons don't just have to be seen on Halloween.

My sister and I were like a majority of your favorite Little Debbie snacks you might pick up at a gas station for a long road trip: we came as a pair.

It was getting hard to make lasting friendships inside the orphanage because of all the new faces. Luckily for us, hide and seek speaks a universal language.

Being "it" never really bothered me, but after my sister and I moved into our first (her last) foster home I could never find her in under ten minutes. I often asked her why she hid so well.

"So I can't be found when it really matters," she would tell me.

Steve, our foster father, wasn't very good at the game. He was never able to find me until after a very extended period once he found Claire.

"Sorry it took so long, sport. Claire gave me a run for my money," he would tell me.

Steve would always be smiling after our game. I never knew grown men could enjoy the game so much.

Claire never wanted to do anything else after our family game of hide and seek.

My boyfriend helped me with my project the night before it was due. His creativity matched his passion and the late shows were on before the first bones were labeled on the chart.

"Did you ever break any of your bones when you were younger?" he asked me.

"Yes, my collarbone."

I didn't tell him the one my sister broke, but I don't think that's what killed her.

Have you ever read a warning label for one of your favorite products? As I've gotten older it is interesting to see just what is written on some of the items in the world. I once saw a hair dryer with a warning label that told me not to operate it while I was sleeping. When buying a chainsaw, it is important to look at the diagram to know which side is the correct one to hold. Did you know that Q-tips have a warning on them telling you not to insert the cotton swabs inside your ear canal? Neither did I. Sometimes I think people should come with warning labels too.

Claire always kept the Q-tips in her room. I treated finding them as a search and rescue mission. Search for the Q-tips and rescue my ears from the wax buildup. One day I strolled into her room to find her practicing tying knots.

"Don't you ever knock?" she asked me.

"I've never had to knock before," I told her.

"Yeah, well, knock three times so I know it's you next time," she said.

I apologized and then take the future bones from her room.

Claire hadn't been the same ever since we moved into Steve and Sarah's house.

Steve and Sarah enjoyed alcohol. If it was a drinking night, Sarah would be in bed before the street lights came on, Steve must have felt obligated to stay up with us.

"Why don't we play a game of hide and seek? Huh? I'll be it first," Steve would say.

Claire never wanted to anymore. I jumped and poked and prodded until she had no choice but to say yes. Steve encouraged her too.

"C'mon, you know you want to," he would say close to her face.

One night after our game Claire was in the bathroom for a very long time. My bladder was about to burst so I pounded on the door to let her know.

"Claire, if you don't get out of there so I'm gonna pee in the hallway and you're going to have to clean it up," I warned her.

The door opened and she rushed past me. She must've just taken her contacts out because her eyes looked very watery at a glance. As the golden shower turned the water in the toilet bowl into a new color, I couldn't help but notice some bloody tissues in the garbage can next to the toilet.

The skeletal system made of Q-tips was met with little to no applause, not like Kevin's reproductive systems that were anatomically incorrectly made with varying shapes of fruits. By little to no applause I mean the only person clapping for me was my boyfriend.

"Let's all take another look at Danny's skeletal system since he was the only one to do his project on it," my teacher said, "even though you can't make out or read the labels for the bones anymore."

Maybe some skeletons are best left inside the closet after all.

~~~~~

The last time my sister and I played hide and seek was when I broke my collarbone. I say we played, but it was never an *official* game.

The house was more quiet than usual that day and I was beginning to feel lonely. I searched around the community rooms of the house for Claire before going to her room.

Her door was slightly ajar, but I knocked anyways. After there wasn't an answer following my third knock I let myself in.

Claire's room was littered with sheets of paper and clothes scattered across the floor. On her desk was a long letter (I couldn't read very well then) and also a photo of us from the orphanage. Claire wasn't afraid to smile then. I couldn't remember the last time I saw in this house.

My competitive instincts from our days of playing hide and seek took over and I knew that Claire was hiding from me in her closet.

"I wonder where Claire is?" I said.

When I opened the door, I found my sister with one of the knots that I had seen her practicing from before. Claire was staring out and over my head. Her face was a new color that resembled one of the characters on my Saturday morning cartoons.

I ran out of the room screaming.

I tripped down the stairs trying to get the attention of my foster parents and ended up breaking my collarbone.

I ended up getting a C on the biology project.

“At least you turned something in,” my teacher told me.

After I returned to my seat, my boyfriend passed me a note.

*Good job babe, I'm proud of you.*

This was the second time someone in my life ever told me they were proud of me.

The only other time came when I was in court and had to tell the judge my experiences from playing hide and seek inside Steve and Sarah's house. Steve was sitting in a table at the front of the room with his lawyer while Sarah was out crying in the audience.

I never got to read the note that my sister wrote on her desk, but the police did let me keep the picture of the two of us.

I was taken away from Steve and Sarah's house the night Claire won her last game of hide and seek.

I now volunteer at the orphanage where Claire and I grew up at. The kids all play new games that I've never heard before. It doesn't bother me that no one really wants to play hide and seek anymore. Still, I always try and peek inside the broom closet on the second floor just to be sure.

# Sparked Was I

FALA EARL

Sparked was I, by voltage lesser than a fly,  
Yet the shock still grew more so,  
And stinging, would present a world past that of the common crows  
Cognizance past what once was so.

At first looking outward I saw thus,  
And thus did witness in even the most wonton lands;  
Losses, joys, kinships,  
And universal want to understand  
-All sitting merely in the palm of a hand.

Then murky fears largely sprouted,  
Many simply born of rote and nesience of man,  
Neglecting to apprehend  
And demanding actions to be acted upon and bans to be ran.

Standing now divided  
By state of mind and not borders of land  
We wait with baited breaths  
Waiting, we hope to have taken the right stand  
Watching the youth for a sign we may someday comprehend.

# The Sway of the Sunflowers

MELANIE HUNT

The breeze blows against us  
gently, so gently.  
Yet our spines shake and shiver all the same.  
The sun beats down on our blackened faces,  
breathing life into us with every ray.  
We reach up, inch by inch,  
until we can go no further  
and soak in all the energy that we can.  
Oh how we yearn to return the favor  
to some other kind soul.  
Oh, we stand for days on end,  
like perfect lines of toy soldiers.  
Yet I am not like them.  
I have more purpose than that,  
and crave the opportunity to share my wealth with others.  
I dream of the day you will come  
to me and whisper,  
“You complete me.”



# Casper

CHEYENNE GAIN



# The Second Time

MAURA FREEMAN

Sometimes late at night  
When no one's looking  
And everyone's asleep  
I wash my hands twice

*Once to scrub the germs off  
Twice to wash off the soap*

At the urging of a still small voice  
That lives someplace deep inside me  
Somewhere between the bones  
In my fingers and my ears

It remembers that time  
back in high school when the phone rang  
At the same time as the doorbell and only one  
Was answered and I touched the doorknob  
Without washing my hands

No amount of bleach  
Can scrub out that memory

And the second time?

The second time, I *always* use soap.

# Stock Market Crash

SELENA MEINTS

The train halted to the next stop and  
we headed out of that dingy hole of  
a place—the milky morning sky ran  
upon our view—the sky awakening  
with us—our bodies warm from the  
uncomfortable sticky ride—we found  
a rooftop near your apartment—the  
one with the spiders in the corner—we  
talked stock markets and breathed in  
the city candlelight while the windows  
slammed shut—those birds I don’t  
know the name of—kept giving us  
glares—our careers crashed—we didn’t  
have a steady outlook on our futures—  
we kept sitting on that rooftop until our  
days blurred into one—and our rent  
was due.

# The Murderous Madár

KATIE BRETHORST

Burnt woodsmoke drifts over the sticky sweet scent of caramel apples, most of which were scattered across the brittle, decaying leaves of the Picadilly Apple Festival grounds. A shoe rests not too far away from one, a splash of cider and blood across the well worn laces. A spider wanders over the false cotton webs that had meant to set the scene, but had only added fuel to the flames of fear when everyone ran.

The bodies that had not been successful in their attempt to fight rather than flee rested in a haphazard heap across the pavillion tables, each one adding to the river of lifeblood that languidly oozed past the monstrous sized pile of feathers in the corner. The mound of avian flesh rose and fell, it exhales echoing like distant thnder across the cavernous space. A beak dyed crimson peaked out from beneath the plumes, ready to snap at any creature that meandered too close.

It had not always been this monstrous creature. In fact, it had once been quite beautiful. A woman with raven hair that hung like a shadow across her back. Her dressings were once as white as spun sugar, and her favorite treats had included apple tarts and the boy who lived at the next farm over. He had been beautiful too.

They had fallen in love, wanted a life much different than the one they were living. She wanted to build a family and a home away from her father. He wanted nothing more than to make her reams a reality. Often they met when the sky was moonless, and she would bring him an apple tart and kisses sweeter than any caramel he'd ever tasted. She was his light and he was her anchor.

The father found out about their moonless trysts, and he put a stop to her leaving. He left a trail of purple and yellow stains across her skin, screaming at her to confess her sins. She would stick out her chin and say never, for her love was nothing more to be ashamed of. Her father took matters into his own hands.

On a night that was only slightly brighter than the ones they usually met under, the boy received a note to come meet her beneath the willow tree that bared their initials. Elation took control of his heart, and he practically flew across the silvery stream, over the meadows that were dotted with the indistinguishable flowers and rocks, and saw his love sitting rigid upon a fallen log. He approached, but when she turned, fear was etched across her marble pale skin, bound in chains.

A meteor flew across the fields, striking the boy in his too soft heart. Inky dark blood bloomed like a nocturnal flower across his chest, growing to the symphony of screams emanating from his love. She fell to the grass as he did, searching simultaneously for any spark of life from the boy and the flame of a cigar her father would light at his victorious aim. Anger seeped into her soul. Rage shook her and erupted out of her in a guttural, animalistic screech.

Talons emerged from the soft beds of her nails, her hair sprouting feathers, and she became the demon that a life without love promised. Breaking her bonds, her first meal as this winged devil came from her father, whose pleadings were lost on the deaf ears of a woman who had lost everything. As she slowly tore out his entrails, spreading them across the field, she relished the soft moans of the man who had killed her human soul.

So the legacy of the Murderous Madár began, hunting and killing anyone who had sucked the soul out of any human. This particular autumnal festival held a group of men who had taunted and attacked a boy so often that the boy became a spider, strung up in a loop of his own creation, swinging from the rafters of his mother's garage. The Murderous Madár need nothing more to attack the group of celebrating jackals gathered at the Picadilly Apple Festival.

Their bodies sat rotting across the ancient picnic tables, bleeding as flashlights from the police drifted back and forth across the grounds. Gags and moans resounded from the men in badges at the discovery of the disemboweled boys, searching for what monster had done this.

She had disappeared into the darkness, back to her den to reside until another atrocity was committed against some who had not deserved it. As the police searched, she was nothing but a distant shadow against a moonless sky.

# Fall's Ending

FALA EARL

Can you hear them whispering,  
There in the chill of the wind?

As the leaves are finally freed to become part of the Earth again  
Squirrels scurry 'round for last meals and in search of new hiding places  
And birds begin to vanish without footsteps and other traces  
Until the wild air is void of sound and sound void of spaces.

Humans too grow quieter this time of year  
Not knowing when the first frost will break or where,  
We bustle about as always we do-  
Until it seems as if us people are hibernating too.

The silence grows and grows  
In towns,  
In the cities,  
Anticipating that first frost;  
That first sign of the orange  
season's ever untimely ending.

# Gulls

FALA EARL

Gulls are but waves  
Escaped of their binds  
Watch them row,  
Watch them soar,  
Leaving old life behind

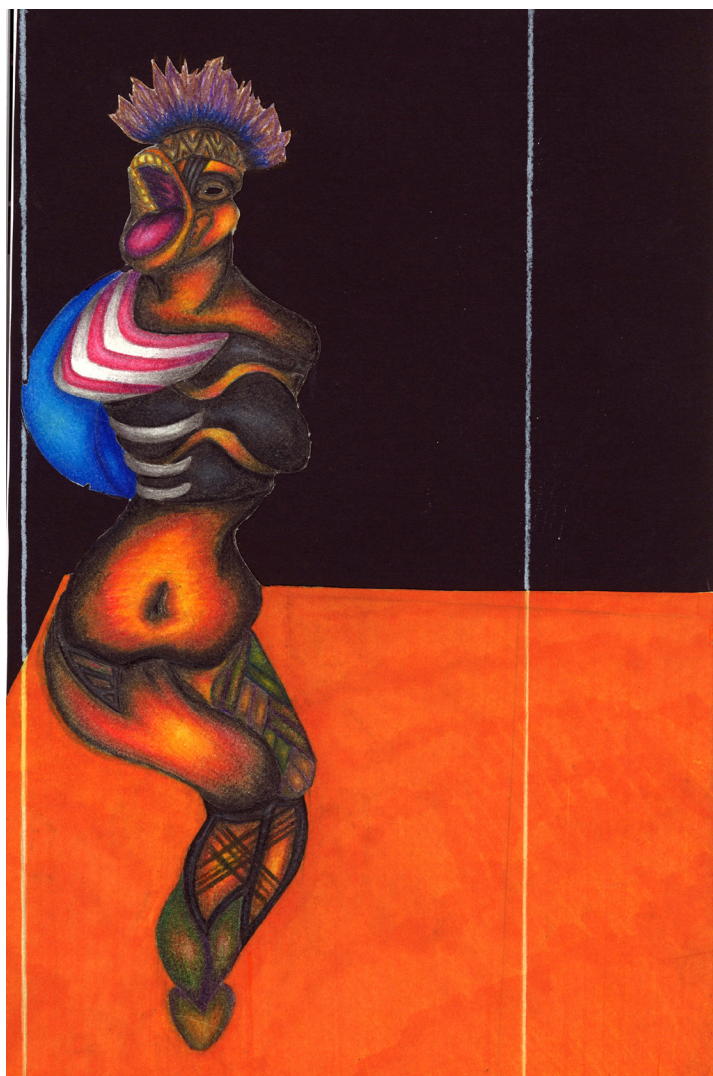
See them skim the surface  
Resting only in scuttles  
See how they crane their necks  
Making wonderless waves more wonderous

Gulls drift aimlessly from cliffside to cliffside  
Mulling in clusters  
Reminiscing,  
And missing,  
A time before the constriction of air.

# Francis Bacon

## Black Man

HASANI CANNON





# I Was a Robot

## FALA EARL

I was a Robot,  
Cold to what was cold  
And even more so toward myself.  
I counted breaths by the pacing of a metronome,  
Time passed by the hour,  
And I was all I was Built to be-  
The perfect machine.

But one day I tripped,  
Scraping both of my strangely un-rusted knees  
-Blood instead of oil even then I now see,  
I was mocked,  
Reset and reset and they reset my coding again you see  
Until eventually they just had to give up on me.

And there  
Among endless wires,  
The other forgotten machines,  
I caught my first glimpse of someone like me

They'd given up on coding,  
Droned on and on about these *dreams*,  
I swear they leaked nearly as often as I oiled the wire-trees  
But never did I see them give up on any one thing  
I watched in wonder as the days approached and passed by me  
Other bots gathered in drones speaking of a world of "free"  
And I found myself becoming lost int the ranks of those dreams  
A world without mechanical needs,  
A humanic life,  
It may just suit me.

# Monday Morning, 4am

IZABEL MILLER

As the witching hour rolls over, freshly dead  
and I confide my paltry nothings  
into the fertile collar of the night,

An open window beckons to the sound of  
crickets,  
raindrops,  
wind

Next door, an engine turns over -  
cold wheels hasten the slick road  
and I protest sleep-crusted headlights  
as they give chase to the misty prelude of dawn:

Where are you bound, neighbor, to take you from the welcome refuge of sleep?

# Composed Consumption

CHEYENNE GAIN

*Are you hungry?*

## *Pizza*

Paper hearts cut by middle schoolers hang in the hallways. Flyers hung, reminders of the Valentine's Dance this evening. Row upon rows of I love you's and together forever's written in swirling handwriting. Balloons on sticks placed at every table. She makes them a punching bag. A bake sale in the cafeteria with lip shaped cookies iced with pink buttercream frosting. Red plastic roses with dark veins running through the leaves sit in a clear plastic vase. The sign on the table reads, Send your valentine a rose that will last forever. In classroom down the hall he waits for them to be delivered, a cookie and a rose to his sister. Signed, forget that donkey, let's ask dad to order pizza tonight. She laughs now; the anger disappearing and hunger rising. Unwrapping the cookie, the lips mock her. We're over, we're over, we're over. One index finger at a time she scoops up frosting and licks heartbreak away. After school, brother and sister wait by the door laughing and listening to music that will likely play at the dance. Cupid Shuffle. When the bell rings they are startled. Your delivery is here shouts the man outside. A heart shaped pizza, of course.

## Eggs

They rise from their beds tired, but ready to gather. They hunt for multicolored plastic eggs. Soft yellow, green, pink, purple, and blue. Bought in a package from the dollar store. Filled with candy, cheap and not tasty. Blood red jellybeans spill from an egg kicked and left behind by the tromping toddlers looking for their next prize. A prize he was hanging there. In the afternoon they sit around their farmhouse kitchen table. Benches for seats mirroring pews. Small knees placed on them, tiny feet dangle over the edge, round tummies leaning against the table while they reach for eggs. Bowls of different colored water are arranged in a row so that pint-sized hands can dip each one with ease. The youngest boy picks the largest egg. It slips cracking open on the floor. No, shouts the father not those they aren't boiled yet. Tears flow down the boy's cheeks as he stomps and protests it wasn't his fault. He is scared and refusing. He was not scared for he gave his life for us without rebuttal. The father resets the table presenting Easter baskets filled with squishy marshmallow chicks, milk chocolate bunnies, and mini spotted eggs. Tiny pieces of paper cut into decoration, but where is the representation? Suppose you could say those thousands of strips mean thousands of babies who will never know what happened this day so many years ago.

## *Hotdogs and Hamburgers*

The grassy park packed with vendors selling wood signs with sayings like collect moments not things, every family has a story welcome to ours, and always stay humble and kind. Scentsy pots with terrible smells, Pampered chef utensils, Mary Kay make your face look great, Herbalife Nutrition -not so much, LuLaRoe get your wild on. Food vendors stack the winding road around the park. A hotdog for \$4, cheeseburgers for \$7, tenderloin forget it, its \$12. Little kids run, waving their mini red, white, and blue flags to the fishing contest. Tiny pink and yellow poles sit waiting. Kids that haven't learned how to cast yet will throw those poles into the pond. Lost forever. Mommy I got one. Hurry up and put it back, we're going to miss the corn sack race. The last event, pets dressed in costumes, it's only 101° out they say, we'll take it off after the patriotic pet contest. Wind in the favor of the dogs the smell of the grease wafting their way. To escape would be a joy, they do. Night comes to fall and big booms begin to sound. Showers of color dance across the sky while the dogs do their own dance, shaking and cowering in terror. In the morning they're found, they wag their tail at you having no idea this was your fault. You took them out on the day most pets are lost.

## *Candy*

Wal-Mart's Halloween aisle filled orange sparkling pumpkins powered by batteries are lit up by the thousands of children that poke and prod at them. Spiders dangle from the white metal hooks. Foam tombstones chipping away black and grey flakes litter the floor. Their metal cart dings and clings as they weave their way through the maze. What do you want to be for Halloween the mother asks? Costumes hang towering over her young daughter. Indian woman. Feathers, fake leather, red, blue, and yellow beads. Japanese woman. Pink kimono, bamboo fan, black wig. Homeless woman. Dirt makeup, ripped clothes, mini plastic shopping cart. A cactus says the daughter as they walk past the adult section. The mother shields her child and says, honey, there are cuter costumers than that. What about a fairy, princess, or a unicorn? A parent groans in unison with the ghosts making oohing sounds from the aisle over. He argues with a child about their costume for trick or treating. It will be cold. It will be cold. A cactus is warm, says the daughter overhearing the parent.



## *Turkey*

Grandmother says everyone must get together, its Thanksgiving a time to be thankful. Mother says that we must be nice to our cousins we only see them twice a year. Father asks why they even come, they never call just show. I ask why cant we just sit at home? The answer lies not in being thankful, but greed. The round table is full. A large turkey buttered and browned sits at the center. Mashed potatoes in a bowl, the size of cousin's head, were going to smash some heads tonight he says. Rolls sit piled high like the display racks at Target. Cheesy corn, stuffing, and green bean casserole form a straight line across the kitchen counter; there isn't enough room at the table. Only the most desirable get to sit there. The kids are cast off to the kiddy table. The adults are perplexed by the Black Friday ads that cover the table even shoved underneath the fat turkey, mashed potatoes, and rolls. What should they buy their kids? What stores have the best deals? They chose not to eat or they will be too full to stand in line for hours. Mac-n-cheese at the kiddy table disappears quickly, its delicious. The kids wander off, but the adults never notice. Emerged in the ads still they don't see the family. Thanks for taking Thanksgiving Black Friday.

## *Ham and Eggnog*

Glowing white lights with green string, to blend with the branches, are wrapped around and around to hold the tree upright. Together. Shimmering garland stands out, unlike the mother does, when she keeps the Christmas traditions going. The family going. Large round ornaments the colors of silver and gold, wealthy colors, weigh down the limbs. Watch out the mother says to the youngest children, those needles will stab you. What about the other needles? Each family member a needle. The trunk cut down in size to fit the round hole opened in the tree stand. Once placed inside, it will be squeezed tightly by the pins to hold it in place. Grandmother hugs and pinching fat cheeks, it's painful. Mother says smile. Water the tree or it will die. Will it make it to Christmas, to the end of the Christmas day? Make sure there is enough milk in the biscuits. If they eat enough they might not talk. Might not get up. Might not breath. The tree can no longer breath. Lost oxygen. Mother sucks in her gut, inhaling, fitting now. The star on the top of the tree, is it straight? Honey, mother shouts, out of breath, I need you to fix the star. Grumbles from father, do we have to host Christmas this year?

*Are you still hungry?*

# Chugging

MAURA FREEMAN

There's a train full of shit chugging through America.  
This isn't a metaphor, but a fact.

It's in Alabama right now.  
And it stinks.

We are drowning in dissonance, yet can't put out our own fires.  
So the horizon remains hazy, and it hurts  
and we point to the trees that reach out  
their weeping dark arms toward the freedom  
of the sea, hissing—*Help, I can't breathe.*

And it stinks.

I'm not sure who should run  
or who should stay, because the warning alarms  
burned out years ago when the pipes filled with lead.  
Somewhere in the waves, I'm sure,  
that looming copper statue hears our sorrows  
and sobs back our greening panic.

And it stinks.

I'm quite certain we can't bear  
much more of the Cheeto behind the Resolute,  
the one trailing radioactive dust for miles.  
But for now, the single mom crouches  
in the alleyway and prays  
for four walls—not one—for her children,  
in a spot too far away for greedy orange fingers to reach.

And it stinks.

A whiff of something oppressive drift  
sover the hedges. It hits like a semi,  
but sounds like the roar of a steam engine,  
smog rolling off in great heaves  
toward the growing hole in the sky.

And it stinks, but we keep chugging.

# Bones are but Relics

FALA EARL

Bones are but relics  
In which life is contained no more,  
Their hosts often departed  
For that unknown shore

Bones are plenty,  
Forever abound  
See them hang from your ceiling,  
See them poke out from the ground

Bones tell our stories  
Long after we're gone  
They speak of our people,  
How they lived and just maybe how long

Bones haunt our dreams  
They rattle and stomp,  
Their ghosts remain silent  
As we dream and we start

Bones- Ah!  
See them crack open wide,  
To be the straw to break the camel's back  
Or the spit to wipe clean debris from unseeing eyes.



# Charlotte's Despair

BRANDON SANTOS

# Red And White Paint The Night

SAM HARRIS

Red hair, white lips

An earthen bed is where she rests her head

Red splatters on a white dress

Her lashes caress her ashen face

Red leaves, white skies

The cold sweeps her hair into fiery tangles

Red knife, white skin

He stands over her figure

Red lips, white knuckles

Blood shimmers in the pale moonlight



# Departure Day

MOLLY BETTERS

8:02 a.m.:

In the mayor's cottage, his wife shuffles beneath the quilt on their four-poster bed. She's an attractive woman, with soft red locks that fan out over the pillow, green eyes framed by premature wrinkles, and pale lips set in a pout that will disappear once she's fully awake.

After reaching across the empty half of the bed, she sighs, remembering what day it is. Knowing she must rise, she does, placing her feet on the hardwood floor, chipped and scratched from the years when a clumsy little boy would come barreling through.

She stands, stretches, and moves toward the connecting bathroom. She discards her loose cotton pajamas in the basket set just outside the bathroom's entrance and enters, breathing in the aroma of medicated powder and mint soap.

The water hesitates before plunging through the faucet and crashing violently against the tub's porcelain surface. She steps inside, draws the simple white curtain around it, and lets the water massage her muscles, aching now as the effects of an odd sleeping angle set in.

9:12 a.m.:

Dry, dressed in a loose calico dress and boots, the mayor's wife begins preparing breakfast. She reminds herself that she only has to cook for one this morning. She doesn't have her son's company, now that he's been chosen to live in the Kingdom. At sixteen, he's the youngest to be picked.

For the first few hours the feast lasted the previous night, when the seven citizens were chosen to take the sacred journey to the great mountain entryway to the Kingdom, she was approached by many that wished to congratulate her. She must be so proud of her boy, the mayor's son, the youngest of those blessed few.

Though it was supposed to be a blessing, living in the Kingdom, she felt pangs of despair, selfishly wishing her boy didn't have to go. He was, after all, the most precious part of her life. In her years as the mayor's wife, her son had been around to keep her company, make her happy with that infectious laugh of his, and help keep the house in proper condition.

The mayor shouted with joy, praying to the Almighty One how grateful he was to have his child be chosen this year. Before the choosing day, the mayor expressed his desire to have another child. He also explained that she'd enjoy having another child to look after—she'd liked it so much the first time.

But she didn't want another baby, not anymore. She didn't think she'd have the energy to go through it all again. An opportunity arose before the merrymaking began, while the mayor was in his study "finalizing a few things," when she could've pulled her son from the running. The box was out on the podium, where it was placed each year after the mayor took it from the safe in his study. Everyone's names, except the mayor's and his wife's, were listed on tan, folded slips. She could've retrieved her son's name, could've slipped it in her pocket, and threw it in the outhouse hole.

She was being selfish, she reminded herself. But who was there to reprimand her?

As she fries a potato and scrambles eggs on the gas-powered stove, she lets the tears she's been fighting all morning finally fall. They trail down her cheeks slowly, leaving behind moist snail-like streaks on her flushed cheeks. She cries out of regret—regret that she foolishly chose not to say farewell to her son. She wanted to keep herself from any more pain, though now she realizes she hurts more. She wishes she could go back, wake before the sun, fix breakfast for the entire family, and kiss him goodbye. Though it would hurt, at least she'd have that extra time with him—that little bit of time where she could etch his face permanently into her mind.

10:01 a.m.:

Plate cleared, she prepares to wash the dishes. Her tears have ceased, thankfully, and now she forces herself to think about something else—anything else. Like the looks the ladies' faces tomorrow when they discover she won't be at bible study.

Her stomach churns, forcing her to break from the dishes for a moment. Why does she feel this way?

She tries to ignore the discomfort and returns to the sudsy water.

11:16 a.m.:

The garden needs tending. With her indoor work complete, she decides to put on her gloves and breathe in the fresh scent of the forest air.

By now the village is wide awake. Other women work outside, hanging clothing on the lines behind their cottages or tending their own gardens. A few men walk along the road, nodding their greetings to the mayor's wife. She forces a smile and returns to her flowers.

The petunias are a success again this year, the most beautiful flowers in the village. There are petunias in every other garden, but none of them compare to hers. Though it's a sin, she prides herself on their beauty. She decides it can't be so wrong to want it that way, since the Almighty must be pleased to see how well she can cultivate His other creations.

When her son was little, she would get so aggravated when he'd go running through the garden, smashing the petunias. Just when she began to scold him, he'd look at her with eyes matching her own, and her frustration melted.

When he was older, he helped her with the upkeep. As she trims away the weeds and dead segments, her tears return.

12:00 p.m.:

Lunch time. The mayor's wife isn't hungry, but she takes some radishes from the vegetable patch, dips them in salt and eats until her stomach protests.

In previous years, she'd fix something heartier to share with her son. They'd laugh and make up stories forbidden beyond the walls of their home. Then he would talk about the Kingdom, and she'd let him. She never would say how she hoped he never got to go, how she never wanted another child because of that risk. She didn't want him to think she could be so selfish.

2:31 p.m.:

She has nothing to do. She's finished every chore she can think of. She doesn't feel like visiting. Instead, she searches for the family bible. Then she remembers the mayor has it; he reads from it every year. Why had she forgotten?

She goes into her son's room, the space unaware that its sole inhabitant will never enter again.

In the trunk set at the foot of his bed, she finds the forbidden books she's gifted to her son over the years from the collection she smuggled into the village when

the mayor allowed her to join him on city errands. The novels on top, *Jane Eyre* and *Frankenstein*, were worn, with broken spines and the yellowed pages edged with smudged scribbles from her son's handwriting. Below them is a copy of the King James Bible, with a sliver of paper sticking out from the pages. She turns to it, finding herself in Psalms. He'd underlined a passage, chapter seventy-one, verse two. She sobs silently, the emotion battering her body.

5:07 p.m.:

She wakes with a start, unaware she'd collapsed on his bed, clutching the book to her chest. The clock on the bedside table informs her of the late hour. She glances outside to see the dramatic change in the sun's position.

The fog of sleep remains as she starts supper. She plucks a head of cabbage from the vegetable patch and chops the entire thing.

She prepares dough, which she cuts into squares and fills with a cheesy stuffing. She fries them in a large cast-iron skillet. When they're golden brown, she places them on a plate to cool.

In another pan, she sautés the cabbage in butter.

6:30 p.m.:

Any minute now.

7:00 p.m.:

Why isn't he home? It's the latest he's ever been out. Supper's getting cold.

She sits at the table, her hands resting on the smooth surface. Then her fingers begin to tap, slowly at first, then as the tune comes to mind, they increase speed. She hums a little, then lets the song pour from her mouth. *If I could save time in a bottle, the first thing that I'd like to do...*

She sang it the first night she rose from bed after he was born, when she rocked him gently. He kept his eyes open, looking at her through the innocent gaze of a newborn. *I'd save every day like a treasure and then, again, I would spend them with you...*

They sang it together for the first time when he was four, and she supervised him as he splashed in the bathtub. *But there never seems to be enough time to do the things you want to do once you find them...*

---

8:23 p.m.:

She's tired of waiting. She eats quickly, then goes to her room, where she adds a few articles of clothing to a satchel stored under the bed. She passes to her son's room and adds the Bible, *Jane Eyre* and *Frankenstein*. She sets the satchel on the floor beneath the table and ignores it while she waits for the mayor.

9:20 p.m.:

She's barely awake when the front door opens.

"Hello, my love," says the mayor.

She recalled the first time he used that greeting. Seventeen years ago, after her first sexual encounter with a stranger visiting family for the weekend resulted in pregnancy, after her father signed the permission form for abortion during a rare visit, after her ultra-conservative mother kicked her out of the house for killing a "child of God," after her stepmom wouldn't return her calls, the mayor was the haven she'd been seeking.

He wasn't the most attractive man she'd ever encountered, nothing like the boy who took off with her virginity. His nose was a bit large for his face, his dark brown hair was cut short and his hairline had already begun to recede. But his eyes, those cool blue gems, had looked into hers with a devotion she'd never known, or at least couldn't remember.

Outside the public library, just before closing, while on her way...somewhere, he appeared. He'd spoken of a place where heartbreak was non-existent, and the Almighty kept his most precious treasures. Happiness awaited her, if only she would take his hand.

And she did. She hesitated briefly, knowing this stranger with a decade on her could very well harm her more. But the offer proved irresistible. Happiness? No heartbreak? That persistent nagging of her heart to seek comfort finally broke her.

In the beginning, it was everything she'd hoped for. Even when she'd had to trade her "worldly" clothes for the more modest attire of the village, she believed this was the place she was meant to be.

Her first Departure Day had been a time of confusion. She couldn't understand why the mayor wouldn't allow her to join them on the hike. Then, when he returned the first time, he explained it all, every detail. Her horror had subsided

slightly when he informed her she'd never go—neither would he. *At least it won't be us*, she reminded herself every year.

Then her son arrived. His first decade of life, she pushed aside all thought of Departure Day. But when the next round began, and the mayor added the boy's name to the box, every piece of her wanted to rage, pound *something*, maybe even murder. He wasn't called that year, nor the next, nor after that. The regularity of his never being called resulted in her forgetting to worry. Then, this time...

"What took you so long?" she asks in a sleepy haze.

"Can you believe it? I got lost." He chuckles. "I have walked that path I don't know how many times. You think I'd know where I'm going by now?"

She chuckles, too. Perhaps there's hope. Perhaps...

"Supper ready?"

"Yes, love." She ponders on these words, on the past seventeen years. Had she ever truly loved him? Perhaps. What about now?

"Wonderful. I am *starving*."

When she rises, turns to fix his plate, the clunk of steel against the table makes her turn. The blood hasn't dried yet, and drips from the dagger's silver tip. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she returns to her task and sets a full plate on the table before the mayor.

As he eats, she takes the dagger into her hands, careless of the stain on the table, and now her thighs. He's never set it on the table like this, but then again, their son isn't here to hide it from.

Tears well in her eyes.

"What a blessed item," says the mayor with his mouth full. "It's been around since the first Departure Day, can you believe it?"

She nods mechanically, tapping the tip gently, seeing how easily it could cut just about anything.

"Something the matter?"

She lifts her gaze to meet his. She can't read him anymore. Was she ever able to? "What makes you think that?"

"You look sad. Is it because of him?"

She nods.

"You and I both know he's in a better place. The Kingdom is where we all strive to go. It's paradise."

“I know.” She pauses, looks again at the dagger and then back at the mayor. “We’ll never go there, will we?” Of course, she knows the answer.

“No, *we* won’t. It’s our job to stay here and help others make that journey. That can be just as special.”

“Have you accepted that? Our son gets to live in the Kingdom and we stay here?”

“Like I said, it’s our job—”

He never finishes.

She plunges the dagger into his chest. He falls from the chair, collapsing on the floor, moaning loudly.

He looks up at his wife, who stares at him with tears streaming down her cheeks. She leaves him there, retrieves the satchel, and runs from the cottage, singing.

*I’ve looked around enough to know that you’re the one I want to go through time with...*

# There was once but a Spark-ling in my head

FALA EARL

There was once but a Spark-ling in my head  
Small and docile as I rested in bed.  
It remained only for a mile of life  
Then imploded after a bout with strife,  
Transcending into something almost frightening

Uneasily I recovered from the lightening  
Seeking light-bright wells, I found myself discovering  
Illumination trading between nations and social stations  
Leaving my mortal mind over-full,  
A fissuring forming in my skull

Giving way to bouts of cautious glancing,  
Nervous prancing,  
And silent waves krishing, crashing,  
Internal storms striking, clashing,  
To find myself capable of the strangest laughing-

People began to talk and I talked too,  
To myself, to things, to long gone men too.  
Each day passing grew and shrunk out of sorts  
But in this strange in between occasional others passed through.  
And we stranger ones knew, we came to see what so few dared to.



# Icarus

IZABEL MILLER

My lover comes on tattered wings  
by weary feet and eyes aglow  
with only gloaming's fervor brusque  
to salve again his mortal woe

He rests, defeated, at my bedside  
plagued by hubris; rused by haze  
and sudden, as I mend his fingers  
speaks forlorn, his heart ablaze:

"I fear my zephyr-gliding fruitless  
I stray too close to that hot light  
if I could but command your shrewdness -  
possess your cautious, prudent sight."

He knows not how I brood in marshland  
alone I covet bleakness bane  
but he, impassioned, resurrects me  
to savor love and relish faith

No labyrinth eludes my conquer  
no sated selfdom I remit  
with he, abreast me, bleeding glory;  
so, Champion, I must admit:

“I rot in sorrow unattended  
I stray too close to that black night  
if I could but brandish your ardor  
I’d nay bemoan such sacred flight.”

Anon, my lover, courage-brimming  
knocks yet again at Heaven’s door  
and once ascends - and falls too boldly  
and comes for dusk’s tender consoling -  
resilient forevermore.

# Traffic Light

SELENA MEINTS

I sit in the street in traffic—I await.  
let the flag fly  
possible history ran with our vendor of responsibility  
hesitation proceeds in the nearby traffic—  
consent of your red light—stop it says

we hunt as a capital  
lethargicbones rest in the skyline  
jut my incarcerated notion  
possess the arrested

house his drunken uncle  
migrate the party  
mostly silently shush

cup your mouth like a resistor in court  
frequent your thin body  
exhaust your sell pitch  
sell your body—  
maybe your coat

exile exile

rubble the company  
steal your disease  
deceive

sit my emerged order  
emerge the sheltered  
caress your feather of purple egg drops

water my insides  
eat your breads  
it's necessary

laughter on third street  
awoke your slumber  
induce intoxication

mindful of the sleeping children  
white wine does not belong here  
twenty four pages in and you are already bored

put on display  
light yourself on fire

carnivals in March—  
ride the trap  
my ankle is an elephant of Africa.

# Nervousness

## MELANIE HUNT

You could bite into the tension  
in the room like it was a thick, dense fog –  
so thick it choked her –  
and it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

•

A mixture of rank smells invaded her nose,  
making her want to gag. She could not pinpoint  
all of the different scents, but sweat was definitely one of them.  
It was a mixture of her own and that of the hundreds of people in the crowd,  
as they sweat like pigs before slaughter from the heat in the room.

•

Gazing out into that crowd, stars began to form in her eyes.  
The lights were too bright, but the farther she stared into the sea of tiny faces the  
darker it got.

Deep breath in, hold, release.  
Just like they had told her only moments ago.

•

Her nerves were bubbling up inside her stomach,  
going all the way up into her throat.  
She wished that she could go in there and pop  
every single bubble with a needle,  
imagining every single pop giving her a burst of satisfaction.

•

Her heart hammered, and a barely audible buzzing in her left ear  
was incessantly nagging at her. At the same time, bits and pieces  
of conversation from the crowd continuously drifted into her right.

“How much longer?”

“Did you see the show last night?”

“She seems kind of pale, don’t you think?”

She took another deep breath, momentarily holding it  
before releasing it all in one big exhale. She cleared her throat  
and the feedback from the mic reverberated in her ears,  
shoving all of the other sounds out.

A hush drew over the sea of faces and timer began,  
and she let go

# Tonight

## MELANIE HUNT

Tick    Tick    Tick

Tonight began the slow countdown. The descent into unknown.

Tick    Tick    Tick

The ground began to rumble below her and she clung  
to the hopes that things would go smoothly.

Tick    Tick    Tick

Moondust billowed up around her like clouds  
as she paced her small quarters, clinging needily to her.

Tick    Tick    Tick

She wiped it off of her dress and slowly made her way outside.

Tick    Tick    Tick

A reflection of stars danced in her eyes as she gave the faintest gasp.

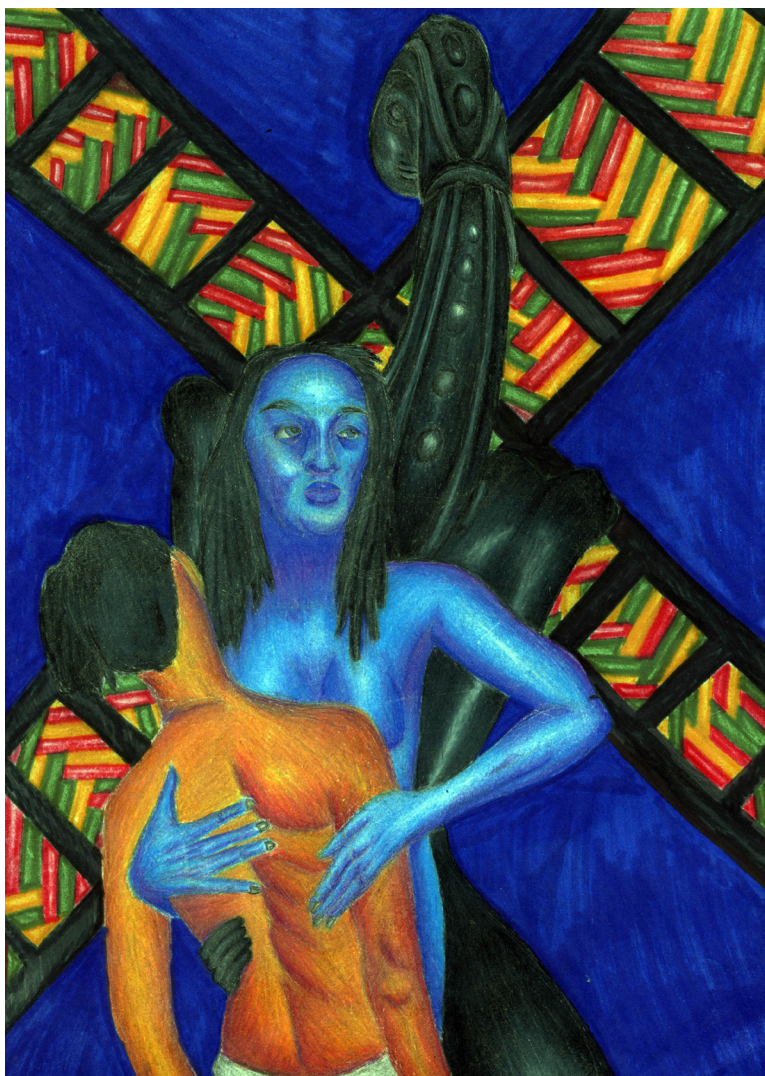
Tick Tick Tick

Her future loomed before her, huge and round.  
As it inched closer it became more detailed Until,  
at last, it was right in front of her.

TickTickTick

She had finally made it to her dream  
destination. Earth.





# Death and Mother

HASANI CANNON

# A Picture of a Rose

KATIE BRETHORST

I took a photo of a rose and a girl once. She was blooming, just as beautiful as the flower in her hair. Her eyes, bright and blue, were hiding a shadow. I knew what happened. I just didn't know what to say. So I thought maybe if I could show her how beautiful and strong she looked to me, I would be able to help her forget. I should have known that showing a mirror to a flower wouldn't change that it had been crushed by man.

Coming home, I was happy for once leaving work. I was sharing a jovial tale with my boyfriend when I walked in the door. She was cowering behind it, shaking like a leaf. When we asked what had happened, all she asked was if he was still there. As if some hideous monster were lurking outside our townhouse. We told her we had seen no one. She left, still quaking from fear.

Day by day we were able to extract a little more information, like a bee obtaining small amounts of pollen each day to make a spoonful of honey. What we were piecing together wasn't sweet though. It was a bitter truth that is overlooked every single day. And day by day, the flowers wilted.

She had been fond of this man, this most trusted gardener if you will. He tended to her, he gave her the praises to grow and feel confident in full bloom. When he was ready, he sheared every ounce of trust in her heart, defiling the bud and tearing apart the flower. Crushing her petals where he walked, no one seemed to notice the color bleeding from the poor rose. Everyone praised the gardener for his beautiful work, but no one saw the hidden destruction that he pushed beneath a blanket of manure.

Slowly the flower deteriorated, as did the girl before my eyes. The spark in her

eyes was nothing but an ember, the passion I had seen for life had bled from her words. I had no idea what to do, but I was enraged at the loss of the beauty from the world. I tried to convince her to do something, anything, just don't let him get away with the corruption that he smiled at the thought of. He was sick, a monster, a wolf in a trusted friend's clothing. I wasn't allowed to speak, but my pen would not stop writing, my eyes wouldn't stop watering the spot where the flower had been.

Winter passed quietly, a series of people who trampled through the garden, not caring what trash they lay behind, only seeing afterwards that the garden was polluted. They didn't blame the trespassers, instead they pushed the guilt onto the roses for being too beautiful for attracting such unwanted attention. I would walk through sadly, remembering how gorgeous it had been before. Why is it beauty is only appreciated when it fizzles out?

Spring was coming, and I felt a shift. Eyes started returning to the garden, some with horror, but mine with pride. The rose bush was blooming, more beautiful than ever, with a thicket of briars to prick anyone who dared attempt to pluck her beauty again. Only the dullest of bees dared enter the premises, the bright ones feared her wrath. I watched in awe as one by one, those who had stung her before became ensnared by her thorns.

The gardner tried to prove that he was the best at his job, showing how amazing and brilliant he was. Until he tried to hurt her again. This time, the roses were prepared.

Stems wrapped around his neck, choking his lies. Briars stole his shears and any threat he had hoped to hold over the roses vanished within the patch. The rose sat at eye level, facing the one who had hurt her so dreadfully before. It wasn't long before those who knew better realized how foolish they had been to ignore what had been right in front of them. The rose bush had finally captured the tool.

The woman stood strong in front of her jurors, for they were on her side. It took two seasons for someone to listen, but when she came back to life in the spring, her words were as powerful as the rapist was helpless. People had said she wanted it, she was the liar, but finally the truth had come out. Those who had accused her

shrank into themselves, shying away from the truth like weeds trying to hide before the herbicide comes for them.

Standing proud in front of her accuser, she bestowed his guilt like a crown of thorns upon his head. It was his turn to feel the shame, and the briars bled him for all the pain he had caused her. With the War of the Roses won, she was finally able to find peace beneath her own vines and fig trees, relishing the sweet taste of becoming stronger in the face of winter, and knowing the man would never be able to admit innocence again. Innocence was paid for with her blood, sweat and tears, but her pride was blooming within everyone who loved her.

She is the strongest rose I know, and anyone who balks at her beauty will bend and break beneath her strength.

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