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Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	page 3
Formula Romance, Caru Cadoc	page 4
Gnosis Kardia, Eliza Kelley	page 16
Time Machine, Anne Wagener	page 22
White Hallways, Victor David Giron	page 26
The Boy Who Threw Rocks at Trains, Gavin Broom	page 37
You and Me and the End of the World, M. R. Lang	page 48

Editor's Note: Hospitals, Trains, and the End of the World

What up, people. It's almost December, and you know what that means... something, I'm sure, depending on the various factors in your life. Good for you. It also means that this, our third issue of Jersey Devil Press, is out. And we would like to dedicate this issue to the greatest and urine-smelling-est metropolis on the planet, New York City.

Why? Because we've got a plethora of stories – or, more accurately, six – dealing with various combinations of hospitals, trains, creepy strangers, and the end of the world. And if that doesn't say New York, I don't know what does.

Written by our esteemed authors Anne Wagener, M. R. Lang, Eliza Kelley, Victor David Giron, Caru Cadoc, and Gavin Broom, I can hyperbolically guarantee there's something for everyone.

Also, for what it's worth, this is the issue where we can finally claim to be an international magazine. Thanks for living in Scotland, Gavin!

-- Eirik Gumeny

Formula Romance

Caru Cadoc

Rolling out of Los Angeles, Steven imagined his arrival as a scene in a romance comedy: *Noticing 'unavailable' on her caller I.D., Gala asks where he's calling from. He replies 'look outside,' and from her window she sees him hanging up the phone in the street below.*

He turned back to *The Times* to distract himself. There was only a small story about the flurries—covering a protest of the new petal incinerator in Inglewood.

...Rev. Jones shouted through a bullhorn, "The neighborhoods in which our Caucasian brethren reside," he mentioned Santa Monica, Westwood and Culver City, "have not a single incinerator among them! Now we got two!"...

At first, when the flurries still dominated the news, reporters had rushed out in heavy gusts to be filmed with backdrops of whirling pink. Breaking footage of the first storm was seared into the collective memory. Reviewing quarterly reports at Kaufman Property Management, Steven had noticed people gathering at the break-room television and followed, fearing a terrorist attack. Everyone had crowded the windows to see them flutter down like mammoth pink snowflakes.

When the news agencies realized the phenomenon was global, people wondered if they blew in from outer space—somehow surviving the

atmospheric incinerations of other debris. Transmissions to orbiting astronauts were not returned, the reception presumably lost.

Weeks later, rumors spread that the international space station was due to run out of food. In a press conference, a disheveled scientist mechanically read, "It is true a mission to the space station is not currently feasible due to transmission conditions, but deployed astronauts have enough supplies to last years." He didn't elaborate or take questions—leaving as reporters shouted, "How many years?"

Steven still occasionally saw, standing in the line at Vons, tabloids pronouncing: *Flurries or Furies? Astronauts Presumed Dead.*

He was amazed at how fluidly everyone had returned to their daily routines. The morning after the first flurry, the president addressed the nation saying the world's best scientists were working around the clock. Eyes gently skimming the teleprompter, he highlighted the emergency priorities of keeping roads clear and ensuring no one, especially the elderly in rural areas, were trapped in their homes, emphasizing everyone's *responsibility for their own loved ones and neighbors. We are working with local governments to retrofit snowplows and pick-up trucks into street sweepers. More information will be forthcoming as the situation develops. Thank you and God bless America.*

Apart from his old USC roommate, Nick, showing up at his door in a petal inspired frenzy, normalcy returned. Steven went back to watching Monday Night Football (Zamboni like carts raking the fields during half-time, the bestial athletes sporting pink smears on their uniforms), back to helping LLCs squirm through tax loopholes at Kaufman, back to awkward dates across white tablecloths and baskets of Italian bread.

Then, six months into the flurries and less than a week after Nick signed him up for Facebook, in the avalanche of messages from forgotten acquaintances

was a friend-request from Gala. *The Gala*. She had wanted to be an artist and he'd fallen hard for the acrylic smears on her jeans. Fallen hard, after her mother died sophomore year, for the sexually mythic aura of teenagers with dead parents. Fallen hard for her dark humor about it, for gleefully pulling the "dead-mom card" to convince him to join her for movies he didn't want to see. But when he summoned the courage for a confession she had said, under wincing half-Chinese eyes, that she only wanted to be "amazing friends."

So, the message with the request read, *who are you these days?*

That was Gala. Shift one letter of one word and revolutionize a cliché.

He clicked accept, knowing she'd be able to see the phone number on his profile. She called the next night.

After the laughter and mutual professions of how weird it was to hear each other again, he learned she was still in Chicago, living in a loft and "playing the starving artist." He could hear her smile through the line. He was "an accountant, a total sellout, I admit it," and she replied with wonderful, shameless laughter: "I knew it! I totally knew it!"

Soon they were talking everyday about their lives, routines, past relationships. Gala was waitressing for her day job. Her current project was a collage called *Raining Men*. It took the oldies hit literally with men falling from the sky, splattering on the street in comedic bloody gore, women stepping out of stores with designer bags and avoiding the brains and entrails on the concrete. She spent her free time in the Harold Washington archives finding photos from wars and catastrophes to use for the corpses. Keeping the conversation off the banalities of his cubical, Steven brought up his eccentric friend Nick—who had moved to Antioch after college but saw the petal storms as a life affirmation, packed up his car, and drove back to act.

"He wants *Hollywood*?" Gala disgustedly, delightedly sneered.

He remembered her contagious excitement. On his seventeenth birthday she'd taken him to his favorite Italian restaurant and gasped at the menu. *White sauce*, she looked over the rim with wide, excited eyes. *I haven't had white sauce in forever. I'm definitely having the Chicken Alfredo.* She dropped the menu with dramatic flair.

"Nick corrects people who say he's trying to make it," Steven went into his deep imitation of Nick's voice, "I just wanna see the scene."

"Ah," she replied. "Not *pursue*, *peruse*."

At thirty-two, with no acting experience, even that had seemed unlikely. But Nick was finding work as an extra, making enough money since he slept in Steven's living room—even bringing home girls he'd met on set. Steven left out the argument they'd had about sex on the leather couch. He didn't want to seem yuppie to her.

"His new thing's planning a drive to Tijuana. He read about Kerouac massaging Mexican prostitutes and wants to go buy time with one to give her a massage."

"You *live* with this guy? You're *crazy!*" Her voice was wonderfully shocked, suggesting his own eccentric bravado for living with such a nut. Steven segued into whether *she* was living with anyone.

Just a roommate. He mentioned the *Relationship Status* on her profile had read *In a Relationship*. She explained she was seeing a guy casually but wasn't "diving-in."

"Or even wading in," she quickly added. "Just a shallow bath to wash off my ex."

Gala Lee has changed her relationship status to: It's Complicated.

Three weeks later, the night fading to morning, their conversation fading to silence and neither initiating the hang up, she said, "I wish you were here."

Toasting a bagel for breakfast, Steven asked if surprising her in Chicago, just showing up, would be romantic or creepy.

“Creepy?” Nick asked through a half-chewed mouthful of microwave mozzarella stick. “You *got* to! Petals are falling from the fucking *sky!*”

He said the petal line daily. Like the storms themselves, its romance had been faded by constant exposure. Still, Nick’s flower-induced joi de vie was infectious. Steven had felt it, and chomped at the bit of his *own* life, but until now had no goal to chase with the Zen-like focus Nick threw into extra-ing and women.

The train ride would take just under two days. Since satellite communications were generally blocked by the unpredictable flurries, traffic control routed air travel through landlines prior to flights. The cost skyrocketed—far too high for anyone but business execs, the military and entertainment elites. A renaissance of train travel blossomed.

He was secretly giddy for days. He knew he didn’t know her now but lamented the stagnation of his past five years. He wanted to charge into her with the refreshed recklessness of what Nick called “neo-youth”: the refined carefree abandon some geriatrics return to, cleansed of the arrogant-insecure pendulum of “rough-draft youth.”

“Don’t scream my name when you fuck her,” Nick joked, dropping him off at the station—the same line he used whenever Steven left for a date.

“I’ll do my best.”

The train was delayed and it was already past midnight when Steven's Audi pulled up outside her place. He tended to rent a Lexus on vacations but still worried about seeming yuppie. There was no payphone outside her building for romance comedy fantasies. But across the intersection was one of the new booths, installed after the flurries effectively killed cellular reception. She might see a figure hanging up the phone inside if the petals didn't pick up. He called—no answer. He returned to the Audi and watched the building's front door under the washed out fluttering streetlight, turning the car on occasionally to wipe off the gently gathering foliage.

"Here," he remembered her saying, during the last week they had hung out before he left for college, grabbing his hand and leading him through the glass doors of a Crate and Barrel.

"Excuse me," she asked the sales clerk. "We're looking for a barrel."

"A what?"

"One of those big wooden barrels. The kind monks keep wine in."

"We don't carry barrels."

"Any crates?"

The lady, seeing the game, turned her back on the pair while pointing, "Only the white ones over there."

So Gala, Steven had written in his effusive teenage diary later that day, stroked her pale porcelain chin skeptically. Laying a hand politely on the clerk's back she says, "I'd like to speak with your manager please."

At the time they thought it was hilarious. He'd written that she was *a guerilla performance artist battling gentrification*. But four years later, working at

the front desk of a USC dormitory, Steven was confronted by a freshman in a frat shirt with a tank-topped girl in pajama pants, freshly curled hair, and make-up.

“The so called ‘*bathrooms*,’” the frat boy raised an eyebrow theatrically, “only have showers. No baths. But this official dorm brochure, here on page fifteen,” he laid the pamphlet on the desk, “refers to them, in writing, as ‘*bathrooms*.’” He pointed to the word. “Technically, that’s false advertising. And I demand,” he paused and stifled a smirk as the girl giggled, “my bath.”

Steven had immediately remembered and empathized with the woman Gala mocked years before. Luckily, Nick was working that shift too and fielded the question.

“Dude, are you telling me you have no better way of trying to get laid than dragging this poor chick here and pulling *this* boring shit? That’s pathetic. Go sneak in some beer or something.”

Sitting in the Audi at thirty-three, fourteen years after bowing to his mother’s pressure and changing majors from digital cinema to public finance, on the *Number Crunchers* accounting team of Kaufman’s interdepartmental softball league, Steven realized he now identified with the Crate and Barrel manager who’d threatened to call the police if they didn’t “leave immediately,” and snorted to himself.

He checked his watch: 1:21. He wondered where she was. In her apartment, ignoring his calls, in bed with the guy? On a date? *On her way home with someone?* His mind launched into second tier fantasies of his reactions. If another man showed up he’d just drive back to the train. Then again, maybe she

was gone because she just had a death in the family. Maybe she would wear pajamas on the couch and nestle her tear-streaked face into his engulfing arm.

Even from across the street he recognized the walk. She bounced on her toes like a little kid. Alone.

He waited ten minutes before calling.

“Look out your window.”

“What?”

“Look out over Wolcott. Across the intersection.”

“I don’t have a window that looks onto Wolcott. I live on the other side of the building.”

“Fuck,” Steven smiled. “Then just come down and let me in.”

Her arms thrown around his neck, he felt on his temple her cheeks were flexed into a smile through her kiss.

After the “tour of my chateau” – scratched hardwood floors and naked brick walls – she took him out a window to the flattop roof of a lower building.

“My balcony,” she smiled, picking up a half buried broom and sweeping a small spot free of petals. “I sit on the ground so much all the asses of my jeans are stained. It’ll start a trend. Abercrombie and Fitch’ll smear pink paint on the butts of their jeans to stay hip with the kids.”

The petals. The humid August night. And Gala.

“Speaking of kids—I thought you’d have some by now,” she said, brushing petals from the short black spikes of her hair. Her boyish haircut was countered by the mascara, the curves under her tank top, the blue denim stretching tight on her thighs still smeared with paint.

“Always took you for a romantic.”

“Fuck babies,” Steven said. Gala grinned as he smiled—he was quoting a rant she had given him back in high school.

“All they do is eat and shit and,” he noticed the grin wasn’t toward *him*, but out into the sky, “cry and piss and drool. They’re like old people.”

She nodded nostalgically.

Nick, in an impassioned rant, announced every conversation is a child of the participants—from conception to untimely or miserably drawn out death. Steven, sitting on the roof as she changed the subject from one mutual acquaintance to another, watching the contours of the conversation develop like a teenage body—looked solidly at Gala’s eyes as he spoke, as she spoke, and in the silences. But her eyes kept moving. To the sky, him, the roof, the light of a window, darting around as she talked like he was her brother. In the absence of a returned glance, he noticed in the light from her window the delicate crow’s feet slicing tiny rays into the corners of her restless eyes.

Even late into the night, when—telling himself he had nothing to lose and everything to gain—he *really* looked at her, she *really* didn’t look back and everything was embarrassingly clear. Then she casually and tragically asked,

“So what brings you out to Chicago anyway?”

“The wedding of a an old buddy from college.” He had preplanned the lie for an emergency.

She nodded.

“What are you thinking?” he asked during a conversational lull, fantasizing she would, with typical gallantry or perhaps a last ditch effort (maybe she was just nervous all along), reply *wondering when you’ll kiss me*.

“About the stars,” she said. “I miss them. You never see good stars anymore. Not that Chicago had clear nights before all this, but I liked seeing *some* stars.”

She shrugged.

Stephen tried to put this decelerating escapade in the same reflective light. He remembered another of Nick’s rants: that Life is God raping you. You can squirm under the thrusting and anthropomorphize, orient, sanctify or despise, cry like an abused lover or even get bohemian and decide that if you’re getting raped anyway you might as well enjoy it. But ultimately you’re getting raped. He was powerless to make Gala want to give form and texture to the half-kiss festering in his mouth, sinking down to his chest and, robbed of its own potential, brooding like a ghetto teenager in prison.

Realizing he was comparing kisses to fetuses and impoverished teenage convicts, he decided it was time to leave.

Gala was still looking off into the huge quivering shadow. Steven imagined watching the scene on a Depression era silver screen—Gala looking dreamily into the gusts, him looking the same direction with wide, exasperated eyes.

“Well,” he stood and shook his pants to clear the stray petals, “it’s getting late. I should check into my hotel.” The night, the roof, the girl—it was all a bad dramatic sequel to an anticlimactic teenage soap opera.

He watched the clasp of her black bra under the back of the white tank top in the low light while she stood up. She said hurriedly, as though she’d been planning to say this and now seized the imperfect moment as a final chance, “Ask your friend Nick if a petal storm is any more phenomenal than snow.”

He could see she was fishing for a parting smile or a comment of what an interesting thought that was and to spite her he only replied, “Okay.”

They wiped the crushed petals off their shoes on a welcome mat under the windowsill. Hugging in the doorway, she told him to call for lunch before he left town. He smiled, agreed and drove straight to the train station.

Waking slowly in his seat the next morning, Steven stretched his back and looked out the train window. Hundreds of Latinos waded the fields with snow blowers billowing tiny clouds of pink in front of them to save the crops. Petals drizzled down from the vast Nebraskan sky. He remembered sitting on the steps of Whitney Young with Gala in a snow flurry. She had insisted they eat lunch outside because, "Jagged little shards of water are fluttering from the sky!" He refused but she shamelessly smiled, "I'm pulling the dead-mom card. Vamos."

Looking up, she said, "They're so unique and anonymous."

Steven bit into his sandwich, one side of his body warm, pressed against hers.

"That one," she pointed with her red mitten as though he could make out the one she meant, "is named Roderick."

He bunched a half-chewed chunk of ham and cheese into the side of his mouth, "Roderick?"

"Isn't that a great name for a snowflake?" dimples pushed into her pale Asian cheeks. "Your turn."

"That one," he stifled a smile through his full mouth, "is named Snowflake."

It was then, when she made a playful gargoyle face at him the in cold, scrunching up her cheeks and sticking out her tongue, that he had realized he loved her.

Steven summarized the trip to Nick with a shrug.

“It’s a sign!” Nick stabbed a finger in the air, pulling his rusted Corolla out of the train station parking lot. “To Mexico! The hookers await our massage!”

Steven nodded.

“Cheer up!” Nick smiled. “Petals are falling from the fucking *sky!*”

Gnosis Kardia

Eliza Kelley

She sleeps propped on a pillow, her bed slightly elevated, her eyes closed but not fluttering as they say happens during a dream. I hesitate in the doorway, concentrating against the weight of my face, my expression guarded and locked like those bars on either side of her skeletal forearms and shins that are draped with light cotton blankets, the kind used for swaddling newborns. I look at the rails and wish they were steel, polished with the hospital smell that is invisible but everywhere, like the tension keeping my head from falling into my hands. But the rails are plastic. Molded forms with icon buttons and no words.

I've been in this room all my life, inside that something final, that vein where saline drips unseen, that biohazard bin full of her urine pads and the IVs she ripped out when no one was looking. Restraints encircle her waist. Velcro braces straddle each of her forearms, their padding attached to long cotton laces tied behind the bed to keep her hands apart. Her skin is mottled with burgundy hemorrhages seeping through parchment. Her breath fills the room with the sour warmth of bread dough left to rise too long.

Now I am too close; she seizes my hand. One eye opens and I stand on the hump of a back seat floor, my chin resting between the driver and passenger seats on the way to a funeral I can't remember except for her face turned suddenly to mine, these yellow fingernails, the forefinger that digs into my soft skin, a crescent of blood dug into my hand for whatever it was I did wrong. My jaw tingles now, expecting the same gasp of pain but her grasp softens. She draws my hand closer, lays her cheek in my palm. A tear falls on the moon scar.

Take me home now, she says, and another tear waits in the corner of the closed eye. She sleeps for a moment long enough for me to back away and fall into a chair against the window. I watch the new tear gather to a droplet. The one eye opens again, loiters on roses embroidered at the neckline of my dress. Paper-white lines in her face press closer together. Ashes of roses, Annie, don't make him touch me, she says, and then drifts away again.

I follow the map of gray base lines pushing up raised flakes of dead skin on her tiny calves. The sheet is littered with flecks of dry skin. Narcissus petals on a linen table cloth. Over the table edge my fingers sweep the dry Christmas blooms into a pile. The house is quiet and cold in January. It is time for jonquils but nothing surges under the white except the watermark left by a serving dish. No one changed the linen after no one came to dinner. The stain seeps through the bandage on her elbow and into an ochre outline around an open wound where they said she must have taken a razor blade to a cancerous skin growth the same morning she collapsed.

She moves again. The sheets slough off her shoulders into folds across her lap, covering the fists on either side that rock her into a sitting position. From under that unmoving eye the blank side of her face sashays downward, hangs below her chin. I see layers of living room sheers across the picture window where I hide behind pinch-pleated draperies. I smell the lavender oil Annie dabs on each wrist and combs through her white hair at morning. I think I'm getting a teensy bit too old, she says, and Annie's rose-print hem lifts almost to her knees as it does when she reaches for flour from the pantry shelf. The window shakes at the blast and the white sheers are splattered now, strips of raw pink to gray wet slick papier-mâché; I peel one strip away from my arm. It stretches, glistens mucous, sticks to my fingers and it won't shake off. My father lifts me up, pushes my face down to kiss her forehead. The lavender is formaldehyde, and

black stitches pinch together a crazy quilt under her white hair. The dark lid closes.

My mother smiles half the smile she kept for him, reaches out, takes the cigarette he offers and holds it between her lips. She asks him for a light. I stand and walk to the white wall, to the blackboard where someone wrote the day, month, and year in blue chalk. I point and read the blue words to her and look to see if she understands, but she sees him through me, spits anger, says she'll just ask a stranger for a light. I sit back down next to the oxygen tank. Maybe he is here. Maybe her taunting made him jealous after all. Or maybe I'm seeing things because she does. My father says I do that. He says no matter the sickness in someone else, I think I have it too. I imitate. I emulate. I become. Hypochondriac, he murmurs at me from the ash.

At least I know what year it is, I say to the urn on a buffet shelf. I talk back, still under my breath, still afraid of his hands, but tempted to pour his gray powder down the toilet. I pull him from the shower stall. He lands on the toilet seat, screams at the water snakes, shivers as I shave his neck, threatens to vomit after I dress him and threatens the same all the way to the airport. But he never turns to look back at me while the flight attendants lead him down the hallway to his plane, steadying him against their shoulders, this poor father of mine who cannot speak clearly because of a recent stroke. They would not board him if they knew. So much depends on the lie. At the wall of windows I stop to tie my sneakers and watch his plane back away. Go ahead and puke now, I say, and the eyes of a dark-suited man move up from his newspaper to sting my back as I walk down the terminal corridor.

But my mother doesn't see cottonmouths cutting across shower stall tiles. There are spiders here, traveling florescent walls. They devour each other until only one is left to watch from the web of shadow. There, she says, In the

corner—Red—Red Eyes. Christ. And I don't even know what "DT's" stands for. But I know the black spider belly will grow taut and burst, spew newborn demons, fanged and ravenous. Soon there will be entire worlds colliding within these white partition walls. The sound of approach becomes a vibration so intense I expect an angry nurse to peer through the observation window, then storm into the room and demand an immediate explanation for all the commotion.

They like it quiet here, you know. It's part of the prescription, part of the game, the first and last chapter in the book I grew up with. A book not bound in burgundy velvet, its gilded family tree laid open on the parlor table, but a tome covered in skin, tanned with a code of silence etched on each vellum page. I imagine the nurses on this ward must take some noble oath, like: Don't ever tell anyone about these mad utterances, this human spillage, this atrocity. But I know they like to listen, the way the neighbors did. Then one of them will say oh, poor soul, and I will imagine weaving my fingers through a handful of her hair, twisting her head around to make her look. I want to kick the side of my mother's ribs until she rattles; I want to show everyone there's nothing left in that body. Leftover ice in an empty glass.

But the worlds. I almost forgot. They are not the kind of worlds with moons and rings of colorful atmospheres, not the kind that define a universe or hang on posters in classrooms or from fishing line suspended inside science project cardboard boxes spray-painted black. Planets don't collide, and there are too many of them here to count, and they are shape-changers, forms without form or liquid or gas, like eyes and red. Like the moment before the first word is spoken at our turn to speak, the word that waits too long because we can't assemble any sound between lips trembling before a consonant. The word that fills a bladder unable to hold its weight, warms thighs, drenches knee socks and

overflows saddle shoe arches. Are you just going to stand there in that puddle? Spell water, I said, say it! Now spell the word and say it again!

I need to wash my hands, my face. I walk to the sink, lean toward the water, and the pontoon boat dips under lake waves. They toss the anchor into weedy shallows. He pushes me from the edge. Wade through to shore, he says. In thunder and water thigh-high to them, I wrench each bare footstep out of the muck, choke and gag at each murky splash down my throat. Lightning splits a pine crying out from the embankment as my father and his brother hold me down, pick leeches from my legs, search the crevices of my body. My teeth chatter and cut through muffled screams and I bleed in the rain. The woman next to me looks up at the mark around my throat. My god, what happened to you, the woman says. Another world. Don't be afraid, I tell her, and I brush the wet strands of hair from her face. You are safe now. The mark is a halo, the circle that shines around a moon after a storm.

But in the mirror, outdoor light brightens behind us through the window blinds, streams to the tangled ash blond hair around my mother's face. I turn around to an impact that knocks the wind away, expands and explodes into every color. This is the final presence, the chance taken, the ache underneath the place where my right hand flies up as if to make a pledge or to keep one, or at least to try to remember the words. But the breath, the exhale, the entire prophecy, is nothing more than a whispered name.

I sit down on the edge of the bed. Tremors flutter my mother's eyelashes like wind in a feather. I stare at her downcast eyelids while she gathers quarters, millions of them, she says, spilled in a silver lake bordered by these rigid hills, the sharp rise of a blanketed femur and tibia landscape. The tire rope unravels mid-swing. For three days I cannot walk, cannot make my way to the table for supper. He laughs and says you'll cut out the crap when you get hungry

enough. She drives me to the hospital after we're sure he is passed out. The doctor reaches up, clips an x-ray to the light cabinet. Too late now, he says, unless you want to re-break the leg. My arms are tied down. They stretch the length of side arm table appendages swung out and locked in position. My heart is a line of mountains, a tone sounded at each peak. These are not bells. I am not looking down at gargoyles guarding a stone cross. I want to go home. I want to see the painted rainbow, the colored lights strung across the rooftop garden. I can't feel my legs but I hear the fracture, the glass inkbottle burst on a brick step.

The bones of her legs move like cliffs crossed by swift sunlight between clouds. She leans right then left, her arms pull at their restraints, alternating sides like a mechanical thing, its pincer hands taking precise turns retrieving coins from the sheet. I want to help her with the ones in the center, just out of her reach.

But I can't. Even my fingertips are numb. Cold plaster gauze wrapping on my leg stretched strait hardens under fluorescent light. Here's a nickel, the doctor says through his green mask, it's shiny, see. He flips the coin into the air. It lands on the instrument tray, spins on the edge of a stainless steel reflection.

ELIZA KELLEY is a Dakota portrait artist, writer and teacher in Buffalo, NY. Her work centers on the voices of the nameless, dead or alive, the ones who invent new street dances, play guitar at the metro, and sing vodka lullabies to donated tombstones. Recent fiction, poetry, and essay publications appear in *RKVRVY*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Pedestal*, *CONTE*, *Origami Condom*, and *Trillium*, among other magazines, journals and anthologies.

Time Machine

Anne Wagener

At first I think it's just the wind, but then I realize someone is behind me. I step back, and one of my Fuji apples rolls away. The stranger wears a black trench coat and an unsettling expression. He bends down and picks up my apple, grasping it in his palm with no apparent intention of giving it back. A few seconds lapse as we stare at each other.

A beat.

I'm standing now with my back to the car and only the shopping cart between me and this stranger, holding my apple and slowly rubbing his index finger back and forth across it. He's in his early forties, probably, and he's all roundness and circumference—no wonder he wants my wide Fuji apple.

"I thought you might need some help with your bags," he says. His voice is very middle-class, and I'd almost call it kind if I wasn't alone with him in a deserted parking lot. "I was behind you in line, and I thought the cashier should have offered to help you take these out to your car."

He pulls a Snickers bar from his pocket, and seeing him reach into his coat sends a little shock through me.

"I don't need any help, thanks," I say, trying to keep my voice even. One part of my brain is formulating speech, and the other is running fast with text, stock ticker style: *shove shopping cart to incapacitate him then jump into car and drive off. Throw milk jug at face. Slide key between index and middle fingers and punch him.*

"Oh," he says, and smiles. He's still holding my apple, but instead of giving it back to me, he offers me the Snickers. "Do you want this? Hmm?"

“No thanks,” I say. “I should get going.”

He nods but makes no sign of moving away.

“Actually, I could use some help. See, I’m working on this project.”

My hands begin to shake, but I keep the rest of my body steady. I nod.

“I’m building a time machine,” he says, cocking his head to one side. “It’s almost done, see, but there’s one part that’s missing. It’s a computer chip that goes on the motherboard.”

The stock ticker resets to scroll one word over and over: *psycho!*

“I need your help,” he says. He holds up the Snickers. “There’s a few of these in it for you.”

I slide my right hand into my pocket, fingers groping for keys.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything about computers.”

He shakes his head and says, “No matter, I just need a fresh set of eyes is all. See, I’m going to go back to the last decade and make millions of dollars inventing the Internet. If you come with me, we can split the money.”

The door to my car is unlocked, and my fingers have found the car key. Before I can move, the cart begins to roll slowly toward another car that’s parked a few spots away. If he turns to look, or move after it, that’ll give me a chance to get in the car. But he stands in the same place, motionless, his head still cocked to one side.

“I’m really going to need your help.”

He takes a step closer to me. Now there’s nothing between us but cold, cold air and some leaves kicked up by the wind. In my pocket, I slide the car key between my fingers. My hands are numb from the cold.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help you,” I say again. The shopping cart makes a thud as it hits the other car, and I jump.

He takes another step closer and puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Please!” His voice rises half an octave. “I need to finish my time machine!”

At that moment, the sliding door to the grocery store opens and the cashier walks out, pushing a row of shopping carts in front of him. Checking out my groceries earlier, he hadn't spoken a word to me and had looked as if he'd been hypnotized by the red light of the barcode scanner.

“Hey!” I shout. The stranger has his hand on my shoulder and is talking loudly about computer chips. His breath is acrid, and I gag. The cashier hasn't heard me over the sound of the shopping carts rumbling and the wind.

“Help!” I'm screaming now, and my heart is louder than the stranger's ranting. The cashier looks up at me, looks me right in the eye, and keeps pushing the carts.

“Please, help me!” I call to him. He loads the carts into the corral and looks back at me, blankly, as if he's not sure what to do.

“Please!” I scream again, flailing my arms. This alarms the stranger, who takes a step back. Trying to catch him off balance, I punch him in the eye, hard, with my key.

Without waiting to see the effect, I open the car door, jump in the front seat, slam the car door behind me, hit the lock button, and turn the key in the ignition. My car grumbles with the effort of starting in the cold, finally revving up. I put it into drive and speed off, looking for just an instant at the stranger in my rearview mirror. He is covering his face with one hand and holding my Fuji apple in the other.

Sobbing, I speed past the cashier. He looks at me with an empty expression, as if he only sees barcodes everywhere, and not faces.

ANNE WAGENER lives and works in the Washington, DC area. To survive the commute, she listens to books on tape and scribbles notes for stories at stoplights (and occasionally while the car is moving). She is working on a collection of short stories.

White Hallways

Victor David Giron

Maria sat smoking a cigarette on the wood deck of her friend's apartment overlooking a dimly lit alley. The garage doors featured cryptic tagging in black and red spray-paint. All she could recognize was the shape of a crown. Latin Kings. There was a time when Maria could have deciphered all of the letters. Her inability to do so now reminded her of when she and Alex were little, living with their parents just blocks away, on the other side of the Logan Square circle, back when they didn't know how to speak English.

Though she couldn't see the white eagle column, she knew it was on the other side of the red-bricked building standing to her left, there in the middle of the circle, in between the intersection of Logan Boulevard, Milwaukee Avenue, and Kedzie. She could almost feel its presence, as if a hovering ghost that observed her from the corner of a room.

Maria and Alex had driven by the circle on the way back from the hospital after visiting with their father, Manuel, just about an hour earlier. In the silence of the early morning and murkiness of the street-lights, the place seemed eerily similar to when they lived there almost 30 years ago. Sure, it had a few cafes and restaurants now, and a bunch of white people who fancied themselves artists had moved there. But unlike the nearby neighborhoods of Wicker Park and Bucktown (that now looked like outdoor shopping malls), it still had the feeling of a place society ignored.

She also thought of how she vividly remembered details from their childhood that Alex didn't.

Alex always said to friends when introducing Maria that they played in rain puddles when they were little, right in front of the building they lived in. But she knew those puddles were really in front of the Spanish-speaking church they went to that showed those awful movies of what it was supposed to be like to go to Hell.

Alex had asked their father earlier at the hospital to tell them once again where he met their mother. He always told people his parents met in some park. But Maria knew they met in an upholstery shop over in Pilsen, close to where their parents first lived after coming to Chicago, and that they got married soon after she became pregnant with Alex.

Their father answered Alex in his drug-induced state by not answering the question, and instead said in a professorial manner, "Some people, when they're stoned, drunk, standing there looking at the ladies on the corner, some people, they just shouldn't get married... But they do, yeah, they do... They get married right away, and they do it. You only live once, and so I guess you just do it ... That's all... That's all..."

He then went on to some conversation he was having with someone not in the room about Limburger cheese, the kind you find in Wisconsin.

Alex also never seemed to remember the Latin Kings that lived in their building. The bastards would stand in front of the entrance to the building and stare at them as they would walk in through the door, especially the bigger one, who the others called "Dragon." He had a buzzed head with a long black tail running down the back of his neck, a go-tee, and tattoos covering his arms. He would stand there almost glowing, the hairs on his chin vibrating, the blood-yellow of his eyes still visible in the apocryphal bottom of her dreams. Maria remembered the night when their father pounded on the door, and after their mother ran to open it, he was down on the floor trying to protect his face with his

torn hands while four of the gang-bangers kicked him. He had blood running down his face and onto his white under-shirt. Their mother screamed and took her shoes off and ran at them, swinging at their heads. One of them pushed her back so hard that she fell to the floor. Maria and Alex were crying as they held each other, while the gang-bangers yelled out, "Fuck you, you wetbacks, motherfuckers," just before spitting on their father and leaving.

Alex never remembered any of this stuff, though he was always considered the smarter of the two. It was as if he lived in a state of denial. She, on the other hand, knew, remembered it all, and lived with these memories and others she never dare share with anyone else, not even with herself anymore. She carried them as scares etched on her very skin, and inside her nicotine- and tar-laden lungs.

It was no wonder she always ran away from home as a teenager. It was no wonder she could never complete any kind of schooling. It was no wonder she was always attracted to men who carried equally as massive scars. They would inevitably hit her, often because she begged them to. She didn't care. She knew. She didn't need a damn psychologist to tell her that. She stopped going to her Al-Anon meetings when they kept saying over and over that children of alcoholic parents tend to seek out partners that treat them similar to how their troubled parents treated them. She already knew that. That was her way of coping.

They had arrived at the hospital earlier in the evening and their father complained about how Alex had forgotten to get onions and cilantro with the burrito they brought him from La Pasadita, the dirty burrito joint over on Ashland and Division. Their father always made them go there after church on Sundays, after which they would go see a Clint Eastwood, Chuck Norris, or Sylvester Stallone movie up at the Logan Square Theatre. He loved those steak

burritos, but only with the onions and cilantro. While he ate his burrito, he kept saying that everyone had taken the fun out of it, and blamed his second wife, Alicia, saying that after 20 years she still couldn't get this one thing right. Maria couldn't handle it anymore and snapped at her father telling him that it wasn't Alicia's fault and that he shouldn't be such a cranky old man, which made him smile as he continued to eat his burrito.

"Dad, how do you think you got hepatitis?" Maria asked their father later in the evening while they were sitting in the room. Alex shook his head in disagreement with the question as he watched the soundless television puke out its images, with the only noise in the room being that of the beeping medical equipment surrounding their father. It was a question she'd asked him many times before, but this time she hoped that he'd answer differently.

She knew hepatitis can be caused by severe alcohol consumption. But she also knew that the type their father carried was more likely transmitted through contact with infected blood. Their father would often be gone days, and would return in a daze, all shaky and sweaty, as if recovering from a severe fever. He'd probably done drugs like heroine, had sex with prostitutes, and other such things. Maria wondered whether he'd ever admit that, if not to them, then hopefully to himself, especially now.

"There was blood... I just remember blood... The car, it was the accident..." her father responded as he always did to Maria's question, referring to some imaginary car accident.

Alex gave Maria a cold look, and then tried to change the subject by asking, "Hey Pa, how's the Mexican national team doing these days?"

After ignoring Alex by staring at the television, their father broke the silence and asked him, "Man, what's wrong with you? You getting fat again?"

“What? No. What do you mean dad? You always say that. I’ve weighed the same for a long time now.”

“Your face, it’s puffy, your head’s getting bigger,” he told Alex, as he started to laugh in a strained way, which made Maria laugh.

“What are you laughing about?” he told Maria, turning to look at her. “You, you’re still too skinny, way too skinny.”

“Well, it’s better than being fat,” she responded, laughing, making their father laugh harder, while Alex started to blush and told her to shut up. Alex had always been skinny like her, but over the last couple of years he had in fact gained some weight. His receding hairline did make it seem like his head was getting bigger.

After another brief pause, their father started to laugh again, really loud, making him cough, as he stared up at the ceiling.

Alex finally asked him what was so funny, and as he was getting teary-eyed, he answered, “The dog, the dog...”

“What dog, dad? What do you mean?”

“That dog... the one on the ice...,” he kept saying, still laughing, which made Maria, Alex, and Alicia also start to laugh. “It kept chasing her around, and around, and around. I kept telling her to stop, but she didn’t, she kept on running in a circle and so did that damn dog...”

“Oh, you mean up on the ice, on the lake?” asked Maria.

“Yeah, on the lake,” their father answered, continuing to laugh, with Alicia now by the bed saying in Spanish, “Calm down, old man, calm down.”

He stopped laughing, turned toward Alicia with a hazy stare, and said, “Hey, *vieja*, why don’t you go get me something to eat again, just something.”

"But, *negro*, don't you remember? The doctors said you can't eat until after the surgery," responded Alicia, using all her tired energy to be forceful, looking at Maria and Alex for reassurance.

Manuel turned his head toward the television, shook it disapprovingly, and said, "Always, always, to this day, you've never helped me. You've always been against me. All I want is something to eat again. That's all... That's all..."

"What dog?" Alex asked Maria, trying to get back to the original subject.

"Don't you remember?" she answered, and after letting him think about it for a second, she explained. "Remember how dad used to take us to see the ice-fishers up on that lake in Wisconsin, when we'd try to go skiing? Well this one time, we were watching some men fish, and this big dog came running and tried to play with me. I freaked out and started running around the hole, and the dog started chasing me. I wouldn't stop, neither would the dog, and so we just ran around in circles until dad finally picked me up, and then he yelled at you for laughing."

"Oh, yeah," answered Alex, smiling. "Also, like that one time when it was snowing and we were all walking down the sidewalk, and you slipped and fell and started crying after we saw that you fell on dog-shit? Dad also yelled at me for laughing after that, remember?"

"Huh?" Maria thought to herself, "he actually remembered something."

Their dad was smiling and laughing again, again talking about the dog, that damn dog. He suddenly stopped, and after a moment of heavy breathing said out loud in Spanish, more to himself than anybody else, "Oh, look, it's just that maybe God, dear God, has let me at least laugh one last time, this one last time, here with my children." Maria, Alex, and Alicia smiled, looked at each other, thought about saying something, but instead they turned and stared at the television.

The rest of the night they kept telling their father that he needed to sleep, but he couldn't, and so they listened to him ramble on about things such as the fried duck he used to eat when he was in his 20s somewhere up by Foster and Lawrence. He became upset because no one had brought him one. He also kept going on about how the church people should have stayed overnight so they could have sang his favorite Jesus songs while following him down the hallway towards the operating room—he said that's how it should have been done, but the church people just didn't have the patience for it.

The surgery wasn't going to be until around 5 a.m., and although Alicia thought they should stay, Alex was tired and didn't see the point of staying. So they left and said they'd be back in the morning, possibly before their father went into surgery.

Alex told his father to be strong, that everything would be fine, and that they would go find that fried duck after he was out of the hospital. After Alex left the room, Maria walked over to say goodbye.

She stopped right next to her father and looked over his unnaturally dark skin that looked like worn leather, his little ruffled gray hairs, his inflated belly that looked like it could be punctured with a needle, his absurdly swollen ankles tightly covered by over-stretched white socks, and all the tubes that ran along his arms towards little holes pricked through his skin. She thought about how the holes in his veins were now the sole remnants of a desperate dream that started so many years ago. And this made her think of how we spend most of our lives growing, so much of it decaying, and when the end comes, it comes like this, if you're lucky, on a mechanical bed with bleach-cleaned white sheets. She kissed the top of his forehead and put her hand on his chest. She told him that she loved him, and he grabbed hold of her hand. She kissed him on the cheek,

leaned over, and whispered in a deathly low volume that only he could hear, "Dad, I know you're sorry, and I forgive you." His face tightened up, his dark yellow eyes became watery, a vein bubbled under the skin of his forehead, and instead of offering a reply he stared up at the ceiling to somewhere else.

Alex and Maria left the hospital's parking lot and drove down Garfield Park Drive, going past Martin Luther King Drive. Maria stared at the 40-ounce consuming men stumbling along the sidewalk, coping with it in their own way. They turned onto the Dan Ryan and headed north towards Chicago's sky-line that, in the past, had always comforted her.

She listened as Alex went on about how they shouldn't be surprised if their father didn't make it through the surgery because he was very sick, and that they all needed to be strong, especially for Alicia who never knew anything else except to care for their father. He said that Alicia was finally going to have to learn English, though, because he wasn't going to continue doing everything for her. He also contemplated that maybe he and Maria should've stayed through the surgery, as Alicia had wanted them to. But then again, he said, it would probably be ok, just like last time. And that's how he justified he would keep his plans for later in the day with this girl Linda he was going on about all night.

Maria could feel the cool wind hit her face as she lit another cigarette. Alex played one of his mixes that he seemed to be proud of. They passed Chinatown, Pilsen, and the upholstery shop district on Cullerton where their father worked for so many years, for a company owned by an Italian man who he simply referred to as *El Italiano*.

"Why did you have to ask dad again about his hepatitis?" Alex asked

Maria as they approached the Loop, about to veer off northwest toward Logan Square. “Dad’s suffered so much already and he’s tried so hard in recent years to make amends for the way he was. There’s no reason for you to be so damn stubborn all the time and rub it in the poor man’s face that way.”

This sort of statement by Alex, on previous occasions, would have resulted in a viscous shouting match between the two of them, but this time Maria wasn’t in that sort of mood.

Sure, Maria knew their father had stopped drinking for a long time, and always went to his Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. She had even gone to see him get up and testify, after which they would partake in the evening’s assortment of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, pasta, and punch. She had gone with him and his family to the small church down in Calumet and heard him sing along to the church band’s songs about Jesus. And she was aware of how their father’s pastor had come to the hospital to pray for him every day, and how the pastor would always say that their father was a special man because every time he came to the hospital, he could tell their father was surrounded by Jesus and loved ones—and that’s special, to be surrounded by Jesus and loved ones.

But still, she kept thinking that despite these pleas for salvation from an omnipresent being, her father still had never directly apologized to anyone—especially to her—for what he did. She had given him one last chance there at the hospital, but he didn’t. Now, she could only hope that he had the courage to apologize on his own, in his own thoughts, with his God, perhaps there while staring off at the ceiling as she looked over him, or maybe on his medical bed while being wheeled down those miserable white hallways towards the operating room where he would fall asleep for the last time.

Instead of answering Alex, who kept looking at her for some sort of reply and preparing his comeback, Maria puffed on her cigarette and could feel the avalanche come sliding down her face. She couldn't help her cheeks from tightening, and her throat from exploding.

Alex thought to ask what the matter was, thought that maybe now was the time to talk, wondered what an older brother should say in a situation like this, but instead he focused on the road and the cars passing by.

Maria was not surprised when 5 a.m. came and Alex never called to say he was on the way to pick her up. She was still sitting on the wood deck, and staring off at the alley, watching it turn lighter and lighter as the sun made its way over Lake Michigan and the roof-tops of the surrounding three-flat buildings. She thought about trying to find a way onto the roof of the building so she could see the metallic blue-green of Chicago's sunrise, how it glowed off the buildings. But then she thought about the eagle-column again, about how it would still be standing there, and so she thought to just stay put and wait for the alley to fully turn yellowish gray.

During a few hours of fractured, uncomfortable sleep in the plastic deck chair she'd been sitting on, Maria kept seeing images from the previous night parade through her mind: Alex's clear anxiety over wanting to talk to her in the car, especially before she left, and how he never said anything (like always) and instead just shook his head in silent disagreement. The way Alicia always looked at her when she tried to speak to their father. Their father's thin, shattered, crazed-preacher-like dark face as he stared at the television and professed to an audience that was absent to everyone else in the room.

In a sudden moment, Maria came to full consciousness as she noticed a movement in the alley. She straightened up, grimaced at the pain in her neck and lower back, and looked again at what seemed like a shadow move between two garages across the way, both bearing the crown of the Kings. “It was probably a cat” she thought to herself, though didn’t really believe it. She definitely saw something move. She then felt the buzzing of her cell-phone in her jean pocket. After taking it out and seeing that it was Alicia calling, she thought maybe it would better to not answer and let it go to voicemail as she often did when anybody called. Seeing Alicia’s name continue to appear on the phone, though, she took a deep breath, hit the green talk button, and said hello in her broken Spanish.

White Hallways was also published this month at Rougarou, the literary journal of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

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The Boy Who Threw Rocks at Trains

Gavin Broom

On most mornings, Ben would be like any of the other zombies on the train. His nose would be stuck in a battered novel or his pen would be poised over a cryptic crossword clue that his sleepy brain couldn't comprehend, never mind solve, or he'd be simply avoiding eye contact with his fellow passengers in some other way. It wouldn't be unusual for him to spend the entire commute staring at his lap or the battery gauge on his iPod or the collection of lunchtime stains on his tie.

This morning, though, somewhere between Larbert and Croy, Ben finds himself looking up at a sky far too blue to rightfully belong to a Monday, when the train eases to one of those unexplained halts that makes commuting such a pointlessly stressful way to spend twelve hours every week. While the carriage sits and waits, his attention wanders until he notices that the shape his gaze has settled on, over by an old cement factory silo, is, in fact, a boy: skinny, dirty blond hair, around ten years old.

Bare-chested, the boy stands amongst the weeds and dirt on the embankment with a white shirt tied round his waist, leaning into the slope like he's pulling a stunt on a skateboard. Maybe he feels the attention or perhaps Ben's luck had washed off in the shower but moments after the boy's arm flails like he's grasping for balance, a rock the size of a potato appears out of the summer sky and crashes into the window, right in line with Ben's nose.

"Jesus!" Ben cries, jerking back from the window. The three others who share his table either glare at his lack of commute etiquette or just ignore him.

"Did you see that? Did you see that kid?"

The grumbling engine roars as though it's been stung and the train pulls away. As it passes the silo, Ben stares as the boy climbs to the top of the embankment, his path shrouded in the dust his retreat has kicked up, and once he reaches the crest, he stands and throws his head back and his arms up in a V.

Ben's pulse pounds against his eardrums while he absorbs the fact that both the window and his face are intact. A small white spot that could easily be a piece of bird shit gives the only sign of impact, although maybe that was there already. He can't be sure.

"Did you see that?" he asks again but by this point, attention has gone back to papers, novels, laps.

Ben raises a finger to the mark on the window and spends the rest of the commute and most of his day trying to decide if it was normal for it to burn so hot.

Tuesday brings clouds. Ben's sitting in a different carriage this morning as he thinks this will make it less likely for him to see anyone who witnessed his embarrassing little outburst yesterday. During the journey, the hum of the train's engine does nothing to lighten his eyelids and he finds himself frequently drifting off, only to jerk awake when his chin drops against his chest. Each time this happens, and it happens a lot, he checks the faces of the people around his table and standing in the aisle in case he's been snoring or mumbling. He needn't bother.

"Sorry," he says to the middle-aged woman sitting next to him. He has no reason to apologise but feels like he needs to hear his own voice and maybe get confirmation that he exists outside of his own head.

"No problem," she says without looking at him but her two words are enough and he feels better, more alert.

He's still immersed in this relief when he inadvertently turns and looks out of the window and, even though today's sky is heavy, grim and low and it's almost grey enough to be October instead of May, it only takes a second for him to realise where he is. He's somewhere between Larbert and Croy and that old, faded silo can't be too far away. This morning, though, the train is showing no signs of slowing down, the drone maintains its pitch and the relief swells so much that he has to disguise a laugh with a cough. Today might be a better day.

The boy is standing further down the embankment this morning. Again, his shirt is round his waist but because he's closer, and even though the train is moving at fifty or sixty miles an hour, Ben can see the boy has his tie round his head like Rambo and a small pile of rocks at his feet. Ben notices the boy's arms are above his head in triumph just as a rock explodes against the window.

Ben's instincts once more push him away from the impact but this time he ends up falling over the middle-aged woman's lap and his forehead connects with her chin.

"Fucking hell, I'm so sorry," Ben says. One hand covers his mouth while the other makes the mistake of touching her shoulder. She quickly slaps him away.

"It's okay," the woman says.

"I got such a fright."

"It's okay."

"It was the boy who threw the rock, you see?"

She shakes her head and blinks, a mixture of confusion and rage and upset scattered across her face. Moments later, she leaves her seat and disappears into the forest of standing passengers in the aisle. No one takes her place.

"It was the boy," Ben explains. "He threw a rock. It hit the window. Did you not hear it?"

He doesn't expect a response so he's not surprised when he doesn't get one. Instead, he slides across the vacant seat and pushes his way through to the toilet where he stays until the train reaches Glasgow.

Things look different in the light of day and Ben thinks that maybe he did sleep for an hour or so and he didn't spend the entire night watching the digits in his clock slowly advance. The reason he thinks this is he remembers a dream in which the boy is screaming his joy to the skies, arms up in that victory pose, and nothing Ben says or does is enough to make him stop or explain. Even when he hits the boy, he feels his punches are too feeble to attract a reaction. When the boy suddenly snarled at him and he woke with a jump two minutes before his alarm was due to go off, he felt very small and exposed lying alone in his double bed. He may have cried while he stood under the shower.

Whether he slept or not, another Wednesday morning has rolled around and Ben thinks that this might very well be the day he's going to die. He's having a heart attack, he decides. It's been building all week. The lack of proper sleep and the caffeine he's consumed to compensate has contracted his chest to the point where it's about ready to burst, right here, right now, at a ScotRail table on another new carriage on his morning train to Glasgow.

When he receives a tap on the arm, Ben plucks out his earphones and turns to face a young guy in an HMV polo shirt. The guy flinches a little, which tells Ben his own drained complexion is as noticeable as he fears and the chill in the film of sweat that covers every inch of his skin drops another few degrees.

"I think that's your phone, mate," the HMV guy says.

For a moment, Ben's about as confused as he's ever been but then the pieces fall into place and the sensation he had assumed was an oncoming cardiac arrest is actually his mobile phone vibrating in his shirt pocket.

"Thanks," Ben says, managing a smile as he retrieves his phone because if he isn't having a heart attack, maybe he'll survive the day after all.

It's a number that shows on the display rather than a name, but Ben recognises it, mostly because he remembers removing its owner from his address book last weekend.

"Amy?"

He gets a different feeling in his chest as he says her name.

"Ben," she says. "Sorry to bug you."

"No, no, it's fine. Where are you?"

"On the train going into work," she snaps. "Probably on the train that's five minutes behind yours. Where else am I likely to be at this time in the morning?"

"I'm only asking. I'm not checking up on you or anything."

Ben has a quick look at the faces of his audience. They all do a good impression of not paying attention.

She sighs, saying, "I know. That wasn't fair. I'm sorry. I'm a little tetchy just now. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"Forget it," Ben says. He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. "So what's up?"

"Ben, I was wondering if you could arrange to be somewhere else on Friday night after work so I can come over and collect the rest of my stuff."

Another new feeling introduces itself to his chest.

"You realise you're not the only one on a train full of people right now? You realise there are people within earshot at this end, too?"

"I'm very aware of that," Amy replies. "It's better if we don't argue again and if it takes an audience of complete strangers to make sure that happens, so be it."

"So be it," Ben repeats. "You've been saying that a lot recently."

There's a pause that's about long enough to make him think she's been cut off and just as he's inhaling a breath to say her name, a number of things happen, more or less at the same time.

Ben notices that the LED tickertape display hanging from the carriage ceiling announces that the next stop will be Croy.

There's a massive bang on the window next to his right ear.

In his peripheral vision, or maybe in his imagination, he sees the boy flashing by with raised arms and face pointing to the sky.

He makes the same, semi-paralysed scream for the third day in a row.

There's an identical bang in his left ear; the ear that has a phone pressed up against it.

Amy screams.

"Amy?" he says, sounding desperate, knowing that people can hear, not caring. "Amy, are you okay?"

"Ben, I have to go," she says and the line dies.

It's Thursday and it's raining and Ben didn't sleep last night but he's in no danger of snoozing on the train this morning. Instead, he sits and stares out at dark, wet towns, fields and unhappy cows as they roll by. The train sits at Larbert for a long time after the final passengers have boarded and the doors closed. Someone at the table behind him whispers something about the possibility of dodgy points on the line near Croy.

Ben sighs and fogs up the window with his breath. Once they're beyond Croy, he decides, the train can fall off the tracks for all he cares. If he never makes it into work, it wouldn't matter that much in the grand scheme of things. It just needs a few more miles.

"We need to get moving," he says aloud.

The discussion behind him moves on to ponder what exactly points are and what can cause them to fail as often as they do, when there's a series of beeps and the train glides away from the station as though unaware of the drama it had been causing. Ben wipes the condensation from the window and waits.

The train keeps a good pace while it runs alongside lethargic rush hour traffic on the dual carriageway. Shortly after the line drifts toward woodland, Ben feels the speed die, then just after an embankment begins to form at the side of the tracks, the brakes are applied for definite. Ben suspected this would happen. He doesn't know why, but somehow he knew that the train would come to another of its mid-station stops today and it would choose to do so near an old cement factory silo.

The window is free from condensation but he clears it again anyway to be absolutely sure because the boy isn't anywhere on the slope. Then his focus moves into the near distance and that's when he sees him.

He's standing at the bottom of the embankment maybe fifteen feet away, on the grey stones at the side of the opposite tracks, his shirt round his waist, his

tie round his head, his hair wet and a darker brown, stuck flat to his head. As Ben sees the boy through his own reflection on the train window, he notices that the boy has a familiar shape to his face, like he's seen him before, although there's something about the pointed chin that doesn't quite match up. Before Ben has a chance to contemplate this properly, the boy throws another rock, but this time it's tossed underhand and judged with such skill that it barely brushes Ben's window before trickling out of sight. The boy's arms shoot to the sky, his face up, accepting the bullets of rain as they fall and he shouts words that are lost in the air and weather. For the first time, though, Ben realises that the cries aren't in victory or joy. Instead, they come with anger and pain and fear.

Ben shoots his attention to his neighbour: a plump girl in a Nirvana t-shirt with piercings across her face.

"Can you see that boy?" he asks as he taps on the window.

Nirvana girl briefly leans and checks outside before going back to her magazine. She doesn't speak but she shakes her head, no.

"Seriously," Ben says, shouting a little now, more insistent, "I'm not joking, can you please tell me that you can see that kid?"

"Mister, there's nobody out there," she says with an uneasy smile that suggests she might think, or at least hope, that this is a joke.

"Sorry, can you get out of my way?" His mouth is suddenly so dry and his tongue so swollen that most of the words get trapped behind his lips. Rather than repeat himself, he gives up and manages an exaggerated stretch to step over her knees. Once in the aisle, he crouches and weaves his way towards the exit. The process of travelling these few feet feels like it takes an hour and attracts a million tuts of disapproval but when he reaches the doors and checks out of the smaller window, he sees the boy is still there, still screaming to the heavens.

Ben pushes the unlit OPEN button and when it has no effect, he starts punching it.

"Open," he snarls. "Fucking open."

And then he's battering the button and slamming the palms of his hands against the door, shouting, swearing and at some point after the train has pulled away and continued its journey towards Croy, he begins to wish he could wake up.

The taxi driver doesn't know anything about cement companies between Larbert and Croy, but he indulges Ben's request and follows the train line into Glasgow by road as close as he can. During the journey, the driver asks about plans for the weekend and any upcoming summer holidays and because he's concentrating very hard, Ben is able to answer like a normal person. He's even suited and booted in the hope that this will help the act, even though Fridays are usually dress down days at work.

He expects to be able to see the silo from the road but as he gets closer to Croy the trees between him and the railway become too tall and thick for that to be possible. Eventually, they pass an entrance that's so overgrown and dead it would be missed if no one looked out for it. Ben panics and yells at the driver to stop at the side of the road, anywhere at the side of the road. After a brief exchange that kills any chance of being remembered as a sane, healthy person, the driver does as he's told and lets Ben out.

Ignoring how it must look to anyone driving by and at the expense of a few buttons from his suit jacket, Ben squeezes through the gap between the rusty front gates of the factory. From there, he follows his internal compass through

the abandoned yard to where he knows the silo, embankment and train tracks must be. During this walk, the only life he encounters is a grey squirrel that dashes across his path before it vanishes up a tree. He's alone.

So when he pushes through a hedge and finds himself at the top of the famous embankment, he's not surprised there's no sign of the boy and, after further investigation, no sign of any piles of rocks. He's still alone, just him and a squirrel, and not only is the boy not there, he knows the boy won't show up this morning because he doesn't need to anymore. His job is done. With this knowledge, Ben finds he knows what to do and he loosens his tie, removes his torn jacket and switches his phone from shirt to trouser pocket. Within a minute, he's halfway down the embankment, leaning into the slope like he's about to perform a stunt on a skateboard. His shirt tied around his waist, his tie around his forehead, a rock in his hand, an ear pricked towards the sound of an approaching train.

As though it's preparing to stop, a train—his train, he's sure—crawls into view from round a bend and between the tree coverage. He licks his lips, tests the weight of the rock and hopes the dwindling pace will be enough to carry the train to where destiny has placed him. Foot by foot, inch by inch, it creeps towards range. What happens next takes a very long time to process in Ben's head.

First, there's an explosion that doesn't come from any rock hitting glass and is strong enough to push Ben onto his backside. A carriage towards the back of his train rears into the air with a roar and then rushes forward as though someone has flicked the tracks like a rug or a whip. There's a demonic screech of metal while the carriages buckle and spasm and this massive introduction of energy ripples through the rest of the train. Glass in windows shatters and pours from the carriages, far enough for Ben to feel a fragment fly by his side. Black

smoke rises over the tree line in the near distance and the air fills with the scent of burning fuel and fabric and hair. His train lands on its side between the tracks and still, somehow, it scrapes forward as though determined to reach Croy, no matter what. At the back, something metallic and crushed has welded itself on to the final carriage in his train.

His phone is vibrating in his pocket and absently he wonders how long that's been happening. While he's still trying to work through all that's happened, he drops the rock that he'd been trying to crush in his grip and pulls the phone from his trouser pocket. The screen has cracked but still manages to show that unnamed, familiar number.

He lets it ring, though, and he doesn't press the answer button because walking out of the trees to his left, holding her shoes in one hand and her phone to her ear in the other, comes Amy and her eyes are trained right on him as though she expected him to be here. She's dressed for work but he knows she wasn't on the train, just like he knew where to come this morning and just like he knew the boy was screaming his anger to the sky. He only hopes she's really there and not his mind playing tricks because there's something he's just noticed about the angle of her chin and he wants to talk to her about that. He pushes himself to his feet and walks towards her, looking forward to finding out something that might be enough to eventually become everything.

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You and Me and the End of the World

M. R. Lang

“So... what do you want to be when you grow up?”

The recent graduates from Eastly High School started to gather at the park hours ago. It was decided that tonight shall be the party to end all parties. Because, not only is today the last of high school, it is the last day. By the time the party's over, there will be no more parties. Whether or not they all know, nobody really cares. The two to survive the night, we shall call, Adam and Eve.

Eve stops dancing on the edge of the sidewalk for a moment to think.

“Remembered... loved... the last one standing.”

She takes another moment to consider what she'd said. She closes her eyes and raises her arms in victory.

Adam keeps staring at the page taped inside the store's window: “HELP US WELCOME REBECCA BACK TO OUR FAMILY 6/24.” His eyes stay on the note as he turns his face towards Eve.

“Hey. Rebecca's back.”

“Who's Rebecca?”

“Don't know. But I feel reassured knowing she's back.”

A car blows by Eve going at least 50 and the two almost meet in a very awkward way. She shuts her eyes lightly and savors the wind. Adam leans into a light pole and watches with a smile.

Adam looks as the bank's digital thermometer turns into its digital clock.

"We're going to be late. Let's go. We'll miss the good freaks."

Stopping her twirls, Eve walks backwards to the car outside the pharmacy, and leans the back of her head on the roof.

"I'm not going."

He turns to leave, knowing she'll be right behind him soon.

"It's the end of the world. Of course, you're going."

Sara transferred to the school a few months ago. Her "use your rules to go fuck yourself" attitude won over classmates who thought she was "nu-punk" which meant something to whoever said it first. In reality, Sara's just a punk. She goes to the parties because there's always booze and usually drugs. She gets them free. When she doesn't thank you for them that means you're cool.

Eve pulls on Adam's sleeve, as if that's the on switch for his ears.

"Why are we walking towards Sara? She hates everyone."

"I like people who hate everyone. Very relatable. Good liars, too."

Eve goes to the opposite side of the picnic table Sara's sitting on and grabs one of the drinks Sara didn't thank anyone for.

Sara mostly ignores Eve, but turns a cocked eye towards Adam.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"Avoiding responsibility."

Adam nods to a wristband on Sara's left arm. If nothing else, accessories tend to bring attention. Sara wasn't one for attention, really. Then again, someone like Sara knows how to cut one's wrists properly. A horizontal cut along one wrist must be Sara's way of saying, "oh yeah?!" Whatever the answer is to that questions is, it isn't "yeah!"

"I was trying to... shave... my watch..."

Eve stands and turns. Grabbing Adam's jacket, she walks them off.

"Well, better luck next time."

When they woke up yesterday, they both knew. The world would end and whatever comes after would begin. Selected by God, Fate, sheer force of will... they don't take the time to consider it. Why the world ends, how it will end, why they'll survive... doesn't seem to matter. Even if the flow happens to be in the molten steel coming from the skyscrapers that used to live in Main City up north, go with it. Adam can't stop his nose from whistling when he breathes too hard. Eve can't even stop the ends of her hair from curling up when it gets too long. The end of the world is over their heads. The world will end, and they will watch.

Alan and James had taken down the Christmas lights from one of the gazeboes in the park, and are now replacing them with 9-volt batteries and many small strings of wire.

Eve tiptoes up on the outside of the gazebo and gets her finger up close to a battery to see how hot it is.

“Where’d all the batteries come from?”

James kicks the box full of 9-volts.

“Smoke detectors. Snagged on our way here.”

Adam chuckles.

“I guess the chance that the fire finally starts the night two toasters steal the detector batteries are slim.”

“Eh,” Alan scoffs. “It’s my stance that if a fire starts, the race needs to remember ‘fire bad’ without the piercing beep noises. Otherwise, Baby Darwin cries.”

Eve touches a battery and jumps back a little.

“So, uh... why?”

“Is pretty,” Alan moans.

“Never thought you two would be much for aesthetics.”

Adam offers Eve his cup of what tastes like paint thinner and sadness to cool off her finger. She dunks her finger in the cup and takes a swig.

“We’re seeing if it can get hot enough to actually start a fire.”

James puts a battery to his tongue to see if it’s alive enough to use.

“It’s an expression of anger, irony, and boredom. Mostly boredom.”

“I’d say it’s mostly irony.”

Adam watches Eve’s face as she tries to figure out what she just drank.

“Irony and 9-Volts. Should totally be a cover band.”

“Electronica covers of Sixties folk songs. We are Irony and 9-Volts,” she sneers with a rock sign, the now empty cup hanging from her singed finger.

They didn't bother with graduation or the last day of school. Anyone else who survives won't care if you have a diploma. They'll just be happy if you'll share your water or aren't a zombie foraging for brain meats. They spent the last two days of recorded history together. Watching their favorite movies and shows in case it's the last chance. Talking about the advantages of living in a post-apocalyptic world. Such as the destruction of Wal-Mart's, Starbucks, and L.A. No more ring-tones, no more spam, all the Twinkies that will never grow old. Survivor: Earth. There were jokes about that Twilight Zone episode where that guy's glasses broke.

The scariest thing about the end of the world is whether or not you and your loved ones will survive. Adam and Eve have nothing to be afraid of.

Amy is both the only student this year to have a parent in World War II and to graduate at sixteen. Seeing her father now makes her think of all the kids to be born to old, decrepit couples living and having sex far, far beyond their years thanks to modern medicine. Amy thinks modern medicine should cure young, poor people before making rich, old people live despite their decaying innards. She also drinks heavily.

Jay pierced his left eyebrow at the start of freshman year. People say he did it to make people think he was punkrock. Later that year, he started walking around school with a cigarette behind his ear around teachers. People say he did it so people would think he didn't care. Sophomore year, Jay got a tattoo of a lion pouncing on his right wrist. People say he did it so people would say he's tough.

For a time, he wore a beaded dog collar. For another time, he'd speak with a fake, Madonna-English accent. People never say that Jay likes to control what people think about him, but if they did, they'd finally be right.

Alison was a cancer survivor by the age of eleven. It was touted as a miracle and the doctors all told her she was very lucky. Every time she's screwed up since then, her parents yell and scream about how she's living her second chance, and about how most people aren't so lucky. After cooling down, her parents always try to make up for yelling with a gift, and her friends all tell her how lucky she is. Alison spends a lot of her time on Internet journals and forums trying to console terminal patients. She watches specials on TV about good people who are dying from illness. For the last seven years, Alison has never once felt lucky. Every breath makes her feel guilty for surviving.

Ryan thinks about friends who died when he wasn't around. Steven cries himself to sleep thinking about the horrible people he knows who will all succeed him. Jamie signed her name with hearts until her boyfriend betrayed her with a word.

Standing across the street from the park, Adam and Eve watch their former classmates and co-inhabitants of planet Earth. They dance, they drink, they be merry despite themselves.

"God," she sighs. "They all look so happy. I hope we won't have to bury them."

"I wouldn't worry about it. We're about to inherit all the Febreze in the world."

Adam produces a small flask from his jacket, and fills Eve's little cup back up.

Eve coughs out a little laugh, trying not to cry.

"Toast?"

"Here's to the end of the world."

They drink and squeeze in close.

The car that almost hit Eve earlier flies by them and the park, seemingly going nowhere. The car's stereo pumps out the bass that's probably from a song, but no one can tell for sure. The car's left headlight goes out as it hits a mailbox up on a curb. The car's driver suddenly crashes from his amphetamine high. The driver's car suddenly crashes from the driver's amphetamine crash. Neither survive the night. Somewhere, a gazebo burns. Really, it signifies nothing.

Adam looks at Eve. Eve looks at Adam. The fires start. The world comes to an end.

Of course, the end of the world isn't necessarily the end of the story...

M. R. LANG is the leading cause of death among the elderly and infirm. He is not a Commonwealth. His hobbies include the destruction of all you hold dear, and he is a fan of puppies.