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Table of Contents:

Editor’s Note	3
The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief, Elise Matthews	4
How to Wash a Magic Carpet, Lauren O'Donnell	16
With Spider, Kelly Magee and Carol Guess	19
Relics, Valya Dudycz Lupescu	25
The Dog with the Rhinestone Eyes, Mary Renzi	29

Editor's Note

There's no denying the world can be a scary-ass place. Earthquakes, tornadoes, pollution, serial killers, mimes, the impending zombie apocalypse, existential angst, Spongebob-fuckin'-Squarepants—the list goes on and on. So this month, we've assembled a team of superheroes to kick-punch your greatest fears right in their cold, cold hearts:

Tropophobia (fear of change): "The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief," Elise Matthews – POW!

Ablutophobia (fear of washing): "How to Wash a Magic Carpet," Lauren O'Donnell – SPLOOSH!

Arachnophobia (fear of spiders): "With Spider," Kelly Magee and Carol Guess – BAM!

Thanatophobia (fear of death): "Relics," Valya Dudycz Lupescu – ZORK!

Teratophobia (fear of abnormality): "The Dog with the Rhinestone Eyes," Mary Renzi – BORT!

We're tremongously excited to introduce a couple of brand-new voices alongside some seasoned pros (whom we're also thrilled to include, natch). I guess what we're trying to say is that it is a truth universally acknowledged that any writer whose story appears in this issue must be in possession of some mad skillz.

— Laura Garrison

The Many Incarnations of Blazer Chief

Elise Matthews

Blazer Chief, a black Labrador, pranced down Cedar Street in late April, 1948, and set up court in the abandoned farmhouse a few yards from the mayor's house. At night he slept inside the house, and during the day he'd sit for hours on the rickety front porch and watch us. Chief never begged for anything, but we began leaving him gifts—mostly leftovers when we could spare them. Before long, those of us who were farmers brought him scraps from our slaughters. We put a bucket at the old well next to the house and filled it each morning.

It was hard to say what drew us to Chief. We all had dogs—working dogs on the farms and pets for the rest of us. Dogs were about as ordinary as people in Megargel, Texas. Maybe it was his stillness, his demeanor. It wasn't that he demanded our respect and attention but that he had earned both somehow without doing anything other than being there.

Maybe it was the timing. Things were finally settling down after the war. We'd had time to adjust to normal life and start building families again. We were figuring out who we were. He came to us with his head held high and looked as optimistic as we felt, so we took it for a sign—from God or whomever—that we were on the right path. And we wanted to show that we understood and appreciated, so Chief became Megargel's dog.

Our dogs accepted Chief's elevated status. From the moment he entered town, the other dogs all deferred to him. None challenged

him, even the most alpha among them. Our dogs also stopped challenging us when Chief was nearby. They stopped barking for no reason. He calmed them somehow.

We had no choice but to be devoted to this miraculous dog, and that was more than fine with us.

Every day, Chief stood sentry, as if we were his to protect. There was talk of the mayor adopting him so he'd have a better house to live in and since we'd been planning on tearing that old farmhouse down the next summer. But it was decided that Chief belonged to all of us and none of us, and he'd chosen the old farmhouse, so we wouldn't make him move.

That didn't stop the mayor—who thought owning Chief would lend him extra support in future elections—from trying to lure the dog. He'd leave treats on the edge of his property, and when Chief went to retrieve them, the mayor would offer something even more enticing from his doorway. But Chief never went into any house but his own.

Chief remained poised when approached and never growled, so our children quickly attached themselves to him. When school let out, they went straight to his house. In the summer, when they finished all of their chores each day, it was to Chief's house they ran. We had a difficult time calling them home for dinner. They liked to play games in his yard, read, or just lie in the grass and watch clouds.

When the temperature dropped that winter, we gave Chief blankets, as many as we could spare. Before the first freeze, we worried the blankets wouldn't be enough, so we went to work on

his house. We made sure the old pot-belly stove worked and insulated that room as best we could. We brought all his blankets into that room, installed a large cat hole in the door to accommodate his size, and left the door closed to keep out as much weather as possible. Each night, we built a fire in the stove, and Chief slept in the pile of blankets in front of it. The fire never lasted all night, but it lasted long enough.

When winter turned to spring, we thought he might get bored with us and leave, but he seemed at home and content. We took back the blankets, washed them, and stored them for the next year, should he need them. When he'd been with us almost a year, we organized a parade in his honor and, on the anniversary of his arrival, marched down the main drag, right past his house. Chief's tail wagged excitedly for the entire procession, but he was otherwise still as usual.

On his second anniversary, we organized another parade, and it became a Megargel tradition after that. We felt we owed it to him, though we weren't entirely sure why.

A few days before his tenth anniversary, he wasn't out of his house when the paper boy rode by. And even later, when we took our children to school and went to work, Chief still wasn't out. We got worried when we went outside to eat lunch and he still hadn't appeared. The porch looked wrong without him.

Late that afternoon, the mayor took it upon himself to investigate. We gathered outside the farmhouse. He returned to us carrying a tragedy. Chief was dead in his arms, and one of his hind legs was rotting faster than the rest of his body; the fur had fallen

away, and his flesh was black. We found two puncture marks on his right thigh and figured that a rattlesnake had bitten him but had no way of knowing for sure. We found no snakes.

We didn't want to believe it. Some wanted to call for the vet in the next town over, but Chief was gone. But still, we prayed. We held a candlelight vigil that night and promised God we'd be better people if He'd just give Chief back to us. We swore to love our neighbors and never to miss church.

The next day, when Chief still lay dead on his porch, reason abandoned us. We'd left his body there, too caught up in our denial. Unable to avoid reality any longer, anger took us. The mayor declared we had an infestation of snakes, the devil's tools, so we went hunting. We killed every snake we could find—harmless or no. They were all the enemy.

The town council banned snakes as pets next, though most owners had already killed their pet snakes. The Pentecostal church also killed their snakes—something the council had been trying to get them to do for years. All the churches in town drove the snake massacre. Snakes were Satan incarnate. Our bloodlust was insatiable. Armed with shovels and shotguns, we spent full days combing the fields outside of town. We forgot about our jobs and other responsibilities.

After a few days, we couldn't find any more. We'd succeeded in purifying our town. We convened for a town hall meeting that night to discuss ceasing the hunt. Someone mentioned Chief's parade would have been the following day. We cried and congratulated ourselves that we'd obliterated the vile reptiles before his anniversary. We felt he would have been proud of us—perhaps was proud of us, wherever he was.

Chief's farmhouse was declared a historical monument, and we passed a motion to erect a sign out front to preserve Chief's memory. We also decided to hold a midnight vigil instead of a parade on the eve of his anniversary every year.

We brought tents and set up camp in what used to be Chief's yard. This first vigil needed to be more than just a few people standing around holding candles, we felt. So at midnight we lit our candles and sang songs and prayed and cried some more. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, we retired to our tents and slept.

When we emerged in the morning, the sun just clearing the horizon, we noticed something walking down the road towards us. It was on the edge of town, so it took a while before we could see that it was a puppy—a yellow Labrador puppy. As it neared our camp, it began trotting and hopping a bit. It walked right past us, up the porch steps, and sat right where Chief had always sat. It was calm, and its eyes seemed familiar and old.

"It's Chief!" one of our kids said.

"Nuh-uh," another said. "This one's yellow."

"Is so." There was no denying his eyes.

Some of us fainted; others cried even more. The roughest of our men had long since given up any pretext of resisting tears. We'd become a very weepy town in just a few days.

The puppy remained still as we all crowded around to examine him. We decided he was Chief and proceeded to shower him with affection, which he accepted without losing his poise.

Chief as a puppy seemed appropriate. Our faith was young. We'd known he was special but hadn't understood to what extent. We wondered at his return, probably more dumbstruck even than

our children. It seemed silly and clichéd, but everything seemed brighter and—more possible. Like amazing things really could happen if we just wanted them bad enough. Rules had been broken, and we thirsted to understand.

When we recovered from the shock of this second miracle, we realized we still had time to put on our annual parade, so we scrambled to throw it together. New Chief oversaw the parade with grace and what looked like approval. The mayor declared the next week to be set aside for celebration. We hadn't been to work in as long, but our jobs would have to wait. We continued our campout for the duration of the festivities.

Then things went back to normal, for the most part. We left gifts for New Chief when we could and reinstated the annual parade. Eventually, we stopped calling him New Chief, and when he was full grown, we forgot he wasn't the original Chief, forgot Chief had originally been black. In our minds, we'd only ever had one dog.

But some things had changed. In the days following his return, the town council proposed plans to promote education: grants for school supplies and increases in teacher benefits, programs to involve the whole community, outreach to families who struggled and were unable to sufficiently support their children's education. All measures passed, and no one protested them. We had a responsibility to provide our children with futures even better than our present. The town council also helped found organizations to assist families who had elderly and mentally ill members whose care was a burden.

When harvest season came, the farmers whose crops had failed weren't left empty handed. Those who had shared with those who had not. Instead of hoarding excess, we made sure everyone had

enough. We held ourselves to a higher standard than we had before. We thought, maybe if we did enough good, we could keep him forever this time.

Somewhere in our enthusiasm to earn Chief and to prove ourselves worthy of him, though, we took advantage of what we'd been given. Chief was the face of everything. The town council needed public support for some proposal? Then they said it was Chief approved. The schools needed to motivate kids to do their homework? Chief specifically requested they do their part; the teachers read letters he'd written to their classes. Blood drive? Food drive? Chief wanted us to give. He endorsed political campaigns and local businesses. His image appeared on posters all over town. And everyone in town wanted a picture with him—the young, aspiring photographer who'd offered his services for such a task made a small fortune within just a few weeks.

In 1975, we lost Chief again to another snake bite, and we remembered the tragedy that struck us in 1959, something we'd quickly forgotten. But we knew what to do this time. Again, we rid the area of snakes and told God we were sorry we'd gotten lazy and let them back into our town. We swore never to slack in this again if He would just grant us another miracle.

We didn't cancel the parade because we believed, but we did dig our tents out of storage and hold another vigil. This time, our children were grown and had their own children. They begged us to stay home, said we were too old to camp this time, said they would stand in our places. We refused. We couldn't be anywhere but Chief's yard that night.

We were all up before sunrise the next morning, each of us eager to spot Chief first. We wondered what color he'd be this time. One of our grandchildren saw him first, but as he neared, our faith faltered. This dog wasn't the right shade of any color we expected—more of a rusty grey. His nose was too narrow, his tail too bushy, and his ears stood up. Our children clutched their children and began to flee, but we waited. We wanted to see his eyes.

This was a young coyote, but his eyes were dark and old—Chief's eyes again. Our children watched from a distance, but we stayed to greet him as he approached. He walked past us to the porch, ignoring the food still out from breakfast. When he sat, our children recognized him and returned, though hesitantly.

We wondered at his transformation but quickly accepted it. We didn't care that he looked different, so long as we had him again.

There was talk every few years about erecting a statue in Chief's honor, but no one could agree on what it should look like. Some of us were for making it in the likeness of the original, especially since that statue would also look like the second version. Others liked the current version of him better for a statue, said this version of Chief was more Texan, local. Still others argued for every version of him, envisioning the yard full of statues of different breeds in the future. Instead, we settled on portraits, one for every incarnation.

We watched Chief die again in 1983. As before, we found him with flesh quickly rotting around the bite and again found no snake in or

around the house. We'd been careful about keeping them out of town this time, hoping we could avoid Chief's death altogether, but we went hunting anyway and found nothing.

We thought maybe a scorpion, but the Olney vet confirmed snake. We swept the town again. We raided the Pentecostal church. We searched the rooms of our grandchildren who had taken to wearing black clothes and makeup and hair. Surely they were harboring Satan's servants.

Yet no snakes were found. Chief's anniversary approached, and this time, we had nothing to show for ourselves. Would he return? Would he know we'd tried to avenge him? Would God? Would He accept our failed attempts? We called a town meeting to discuss it.

"Is there anything else we can do?" some of us asked.

"How can we prove ourselves if we can't kill his killers?" others asked.

"Have we failed?" still others asked.

We were frantic and confused, and the new, younger mayor was unsure of how to calm us. He'd been born after the first Chief arrived in town. Like his peers, he didn't know life without Chief, and he was afraid. How would we explain to our grandchildren that the now legendary dog would no longer oversee or join their play? What else would bring the town together like he had?

We threw all of our hope and effort into the vigil. We began a full day before the anniversary. Pastors gave sermons on God's faithfulness to provide. Musicians sang songs—hymns for God and ballads about Chief. We set up a shrine on his porch: the portraits, photos of us sitting or playing with him, his favorite blanket, and a stuffed bear our second graders had given him when he first showed up. The bear was in sad condition from years of use:

eyeless and missing an ear and covered in as much fur as the blanket.

This time we were too old to camp all night. We joined our children and grandchildren at dawn to welcome Chief once more. We found more people than we'd left the night before. Visitors from nearby towns who had heard stories had come to wait with us.

This time, when an old sheepdog entered town, head held high, no one questioned or retreated. We knew before we could see his eyes that it was Chief. The crowd parted when he reached us, but he didn't immediately go to the porch this time. Instead, he sat in front of the old mayor's wheelchair, looked him in the eye, and licked the old man's hand before taking his historical spot once again.

That was the last incarnation of Chief we saw. On our death beds, we made our children swear to continue to care for Chief and to teach their children to do the same. And they did, for the most part, because they had been there when Chief first arrived. Their kids loved Chief but didn't understand why their parents made such a big deal about it every year, why they got so upset when he died. They knew he was coming back, so why cry over his dead body? And was a parade really necessary? For a dog? But they still continued our traditions without fail, moved by the stories they'd heard from us.

They passed these stories on to their children who cared even less for all the pomp required to honor a scrappy-looking dog who did nothing but sit on an old porch and watch people all day. They

liked to play with him when they were young, but when they grew up, they tired of caring for him. They wanted dogs of their own, ones that slept in their beds and loved only them. And some of them thought they should be allowed to have pet snakes because snakes in terrariums didn't actually hurt anyone. They didn't like having to check on Chief every morning during the winter to make sure his space heater hadn't tipped over and shut off the night before. They argued over whose turn it was to fill his water bucket each week and who needed to wash his blankets. They got greedy and stopped bringing him food from their homes, instead opting to buy cheap dog food in bulk and have it shipped in with other supplies for the local farms.

Worse, they quit taking care of each other. They built an old folks' home where they could send their elderly, where someone else would care for them. The state cut funding for schools, and instead of finding a way to keep our programs going, instead of finding a way to keep our schools better than the rest, they fired teachers and increased class sizes. They shipped their mentally ill off to institutions in Dallas and rarely visited. Successful farmers sold everything they didn't need for their families, leaving nothing for the community, nothing to share with those whose crops had failed that year. And when the less fortunate complained about being abandoned, the fortunate called them lazy, entitled, said it wasn't the job of those who succeeded to feed the rest.

After their parents had passed on—yes, surrounded by their children, but after long sicknesses in lonely hospitals with infrequent visits—the descendants canceled the parade indefinitely, and when Chief died, only a few people showed up for the vigil. The next morning, he—this time a scraggly little mutt—arrived

well after sunrise and already looked old, older than we'd ever seen him. He sat for as long as he could each day on the porch, but by the time everyone got off work, he had lain down.

When that Chief died only a year later, no one noticed his absence for a few days, and no one could find time or motivation to spend the night outside his house once they did figure out he was gone. No one got up in the morning to greet the next Chief, which was just as well because no dogs came up the main drag that whole day, or the next. No dog ever returned to the old farmhouse, and no one noticed.

Eventually, they wanted to tear the house down because the new mayor wanted to build a big, new house on the property. The town council had to vote on removing the historical marker status from the house, and they passed the motion unanimously. No trace of Chief remained where he had once lived.

They put his portraits into storage when they renovated the town hall and never brought them back out once renovations were finished. Their children didn't care for stories about a dog that supposedly never really died because he had died and hadn't come back. To them, Chief was only a myth, a local tall tale. They all knew that dogs couldn't really be reincarnated, that one dog could not have possibly watched over the town for more than half a century. Once something died, it was just dead. Period. And because they believed it, it was true.

ELISE MATTHEWS lives in Denton, TX, where she studies fiction and teaches freshman composition at the University of North Texas. She serves on staff for *American Literary Review* and *North Texas Review*. This is her first publication.

How to Wash a Magic Carpet

Lauren O'Donnell

The secret was in the pattern of the rug itself, in its vibrant geometry of reds and blues and greens and lines and triangles and flourishes. The rug's soft fibers stood erect but were pressed and angled subtly by her bare toes and the vacuum, creating highlights and shadows when sunlight hit. Often she lay on it, stretching. She never suspected a thing, not since her mother gave her the rug twenty years ago. If she wondered at all, it was only to question if the rug was actually supposed to be a wall-hanging. It was so light and fragile and soft.

She washed it for the first time just recently, when her mother told her, horrified, that she should have cleaned the rug yearly. (If not oftener.)

She plunged the rug into the bathtub, splashing it, swirling it, warm soapy water wrinkling her fingers. Brown tendrils began to diffuse outward, curling smokily through the water, and she pulled her hands away and left the rug alone to soak a while. When she drained the rug, as the last dark drips trickled down the white porcelain, her last few weeks were sucked imperceptibly down the drain.

She washed and rinsed the rug again. It needed it. The drain clogged itself with her brown and gray hairs, with escaped blue and green triangles, with memories of years past. She cleaned out the riotous clumps matter-of-factly. It took several paper towels.

The third and most vigorous wash was her downfall. The rug's geometrical designs swirled edgily, loose in the tub. Octagons and fleurs-de-lis fought each other as they submerged her subtle recollections and deepest memories beneath the dusty water, everything twirling together in a dance down the drain.

The rug was left clean, wet, and solid red.

Later, leaning lightheadedly against the sink, she waited for the rug to dry, listening to the splatter of its drips. Its still red form was folded double over the drying rack she had tilted and wedged into the bathtub. Hoping that a touch would help her remember something, anything, she reached toward the damp red. She traced one faintly visible flourish with her fingertip. The rug's fibers reacted, greening themselves where there was only red, patterning wildly under her milky hand. She drew back abruptly. As the pattern faded, she tried to recall why she had washed the rug.

She tried to recall who she was.

Clearly, she was the woman who owned the rug.

Bemused, she spread the dry rug out flat onto the cool wood floor at a haphazard angle not parallel to any wall. The red fibers began to rise, freed, no longer crushed together or splayed apart. She ran her hand down the rug's length, aligning the fibers, wonderingly, as it moved under her touch and the patterns grew on it in small riots of color and form. Then she lay on it, naked, smooth and unwrinkled, glossily dark-haired, pale. The geometrical patterns

poured outward from her in blue and green waves upon a sea of red.

And she remembered. The day she got the rug, how she packed it and carried it, heavy, through an airport, leaving her family for the dubious comforts of the north. Its dusty colors under her desk, its folds as it caught in the wheels of her chair, how she stood on its corners to prevent the vacuum from eating it, its comforting presence in a succession of apartments. The rug's pattern brightened, darkened, intensified, stabilized. Her hair grayed, but just in a few places. Her knee swelled just a little and the laugh line to the left of her mouth deepened. The rug's colors faded a bit in the sun. She remembered she had an appointment the next morning to dye her hair.

Renewed, she lazed in the sunlight on the rug.

Perhaps she should wash it again.

But her mom said once a year was enough.

LAUREN O'DONNELL is a scientist and flamenco dancer who has recently decided she wants to write too. This is her first published story.

With Spider

Kelly Magee and Carol Guess

Sometimes she wished she were the mother of a normal child. Cleaning sticky off the counters at night or walking into a web on her way to the bathroom, Ella wished for a cooing, burping ball of human hair and teeth. She eyed other mothers in the grocery store, wondering if they knew. Their fat babies lolled in slings and baskets; their toddlers kicked shopping carts and screamed; their tweens and teens pretended not to know them. The other parents in her support group said they felt the same way, but in the grocery store she felt truly alone.

First grade had been the most difficult year. Ella was terrified that Spidie would vanish. Her therapist explained that anxiety was the body's warning sign, like a beeper going off; that she should pay attention to how she was feeling. Her therapist made her close her eyes and feel her heart beating: reckless, unread.

When Spidie came home from school, climbing delicately down the steps of the school bus, Ella smiled and asked her how her day went. But Spidie never confided secret crushes or what she'd eaten for lunch. Ella wondered if Spidie was popular, if the other kids bullied, if her teachers took care.

Sometimes (although she knew it was crazy) Ella still talked to Iris. She'd tell Iris silly things about her day, like which burrito she'd ordered for lunch or which songs she'd downloaded illegally at work. She imagined Iris laughing, making fun of her terrible

taste in music. "Mom," Iris would say, "those bands aren't cool. Let me make you a playlist so you don't sound like a dork."

It had been two years, three months, and six days since the accident. Ella refused to talk about it or visit the corner where it had happened. Refused to talk to her ex-husband or the parents who visited from Iris's school. She knew what had happened; she was just wishing. Talking to Iris was like controlling a dream. And she dreamed, too, but her dreams weren't for Iris. In dreams she held tighter, so her dreams were for her.

Ella knew it was early to adopt another child, but Spidie reached out to her. At first she was afraid she was unfit. If she couldn't keep a human child alive, how could she protect a spider? But Spidie was alone, and so was she. They stared at each other from across the room until finally Ella held out her sleeve. Spidie crawled onto it. They watched each other silently for a while, arachnid to person. They could be alone together, Ella thought. It was a perfect fit.

Their quiet, separate sounds—spinning, turning pages in a book—complimented each other.

How her day went: to be stuck in a desk was painful. She studied corners and branches. The threads build up inside her, made her spinnerets ache. Her legs shook. Her teeth were dry. At recess she climbed as high as the wall surrounding the playground and looked down at the normal children chucking their bodies across the monkey bars, sliding down slides on their backs. She didn't like to be on her back. For a spider, that was death. She'd tried to slide once but had accidentally thrown out a drop line. The next kid got

tangled in her sticky and ran around swiping at his face and calling her bad names. She didn't go on the slide anymore, or the swings. She climbed as high as the wall but no higher because if she went higher she was afraid she wouldn't come back. And she couldn't do that to her mother. Her mother who loved her, in spite of it all.

Her secret crushes: in first through third grade, Spider Man because it was expected. In fifth, a boy who complimented her science project, a funnel-shaped web. In high school, the only other spider in her district, a badass older girl who refused to sit in desks or eat school lunches or *capitulate*, she said, *to the primate majority*. The school offered Spidie the same private lunchroom, where the older girl was already fang-deep in some anonymous bug. "Spidie," she said, licking blood. "That's cute. Your mommy name you that?"

What she ate for lunch: as she grew, so did her nutritional demands. She tried small mammals. Wrapped up rats. Drained birds. There was a door in the wall of the private lunchroom where she and the older girl set their refuse on a tray, wings and tails and eyeballs neatly packaged. She emerged from lunch feeling strong. And sometimes ashamed. The other kids didn't know for sure what went on behind the door of the private lunchroom, but they guessed. They edged away from her in the halls. No one asked her to prom.

Ella told Iris, "Today I ordered the spicy salsa. I don't know what came over me."

She told her therapist, "Sometimes I still hear her footsteps."

She told her support group, "Mine has been breaking curfew. I don't know what to do with her anymore."

When Spidie was home, Ella could think of nothing to say. *How was your day?* she asked over and over, as if repetition alone would change the outcome of the conversation.

Ella knew that adopting again was risky. Her support group warned her: jealousy, rage, acting out. Competition among species. But Ella was determined. A sibling would bring out Spidie's soft side. She was glad Spidie had found a friend, finally, but this other spider was wild. Her mother came to Ella's support group, sat in the back with her hands folded, nodded vigorously when people complained about their spider kids but never said much. Just the once, when she'd come in smelling of booze and blurted, "She gives me this *look*, and I'm like, what the hell, I'm not your *prey*. But they're hunters, right? Blood-suckers. That's what they are, and that's what they'll always be."

Nobody said anything, and the woman had slumped back in her seat. In the support group, it was considered rude to talk about feeding. Everybody knew what spiders did. It wasn't necessary to dwell on it.

How her day was: she ate them still alive. In the park, after dark. She found them in the bathroom. She found them in the bushes. She snuck home with the taste of them still in her mouth.

Ella would go overseas to pick up her new daughter. She would name her Rose.

The night before her flight, she waited up for Spidie, heard her come in through the window. Spidie froze when Ella switched on the bedroom light.

“Are we okay, me and you?” Ella said.

Spidie wiped something from her mouth.

“This baby is for both of us,” Ella said. “I want you to remember that. She’s not a replacement.”

Spidie nodded. It was as much acknowledgement as Ella had yet to receive from her. Spidie was too big for Ella’s sleeve now, so Ella blew her a kiss. “I’ll miss you,” she said. “No parties while I’m gone.”

In bed, trying to sleep, Ella dreamed of mixing formula and warming bottles. Of fat baby lips and tiny toes. All the things she’d missed, raising Spidie.

Spidie would be okay, she thought.

No, better. Spidie would be even better.

What she dreamed: fat baby lips and tiny toes. The things her mother wanted. “You going to eat it?” her friends said.

What she didn’t tell her mother: she wasn’t going to eat it. She was going to kiss its fat lips. And then she was going to leave her mother to her normal baby. She was going to be full and happy all the time.

KELLY MAGEE's first book, *Body Language*, won the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Short Fiction. Her writing has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Passages North*, *Literary Mama*, and others. She teaches Creative Writing at Western Washington University. You can find links to her writing at kellyelizabethmagee.com.

CAROL GUESS is the author of thirteen books of poetry and prose, including *Tinderbox Lawn*, *Darling Endangered*, and *Doll Studies: Forensics*. She teaches Creative Writing and Queer Studies at Western Washington University, where she is Professor of English.

Relics

Valya Dudycz Lupescu

“A dead dad isn’t an excuse to fail,” my mother said in a moment of Champagne wisdom. “Dig deep enough, and everybody’s sleeping on bones.”

As if that explained away my misdemeanors. I wasn’t in a hurry to die, but neither was I afraid of death. I grew up with death. He tucked me in at night, dared me to pocket sweets from the Superette, and poured my mom cocktails. Since my teenage years, I had been looking for death on every thrill ride and in every risky decision, waiting to find death on the face of each anonymous lover. I knew the more we risked losing, the more we had to gain. My mother didn’t understand that death wasn’t an excuse; death made the chances worth taking. I think that’s why the oracle woman with her proclamations didn’t scare me.

The first time I saw her, she sat down next to a man in a wrinkled blue suit and told him, “You’re going to die.”

Most people on the bus didn’t notice. Even in the days before mobile phones, we found ways to ignore one another: Walkman stereos, doodling on sketchpads, fumbling with paperbacks. I had spotted the man earlier as we waited to board the #74. Too young to stink of that much Old Spice, he tapped his teeth with a gnarled Bic pen and eventually sat down in front of me.

“The world is divided into people who live in disarray and those who choose the neat path,” my mother always said. She would tsk-tsk her disapproval at my rumpled shirts, then head to

work with a Virginia Slim in the silver cigarette holder between her fingers.

Mom would have liked the oracle woman with her well-pressed slacks and Aqua Net bun. She would have disapproved of the lipstick on the side of the Old Spice man's unpressed collar, but it fascinated me. I imagined they must have been unforgettable lips, and I understood wanting to hold onto something.

The next day, Old Spice man was not in line, but the oracle woman got on at Western and walked up to a Goth in a purple fishnet shirt. The Goth was never seen again. I liked to think she didn't mind, that maybe she found comfort in it. By the time the oracle woman spoke to Maria, an elderly waitress with an embroidered nametag, most people had begun to pay attention. A regular, Maria was missed.

Passengers started leaving the bus whenever they spotted the oracle woman, and some stopped riding the route altogether. On the contrary, I found her appearance exciting. I caught my breath each time she boarded. It reminded me of watching Lotto with my mother. Mom religiously played the same numbers: my dad's birthday, their first kiss, their wedding, the day he died in Vietnam. All I knew about my father were those numbers—more real than the dog tags hidden in Mom's underwear drawer beside the brown braid of his hair.

In truth, I kept waiting for the oracle woman to take the empty seat beside me. I hoped she would. I often thought about following her and imagined the house she lived in and the frozen dinners she ate sitting in front of the television watching *Twilight Zone* reruns. Did she have pets or plants or shelves of books? I wondered if she

brought death or just forecast what she saw. I wondered if she was haunted.

Then one day, I asked. The oracle woman was alone after the middle-aged man in a dusty motorcycle jacket beside her got off. I sat down next to her, but she ignored me and kept staring out the window.

After we passed my usual stop at the university, I asked, “What about me?”

She said nothing, just stared ahead, her lips somewhere in between a grimace and a grin. Then she looked at me, her blue-grey eyes so pale they were almost white.

“In the end it’s your choice,” she said.

The oracle woman leaned over to give me a kiss on the cheek, her breath full of mint. When I pulled away, she slipped something into my hand, then slumped forward in her seat. I slid past her and got off the bus, trying to convince myself that she was only asleep. My head was throbbing, and it was only after I walked a few blocks that I looked to see what she had placed in my hand—a pair of silver sewing scissors.

The next morning, I went to see my mother for our Sunday morning coffee, scissors in my back pocket. Walking down the street, I saw threads of light that stretched out from the tops of everyone’s heads. Some were long and bright, others short and faded. The strange strands floated as if in water or in space, and I worried I was having an oracular migraine or a flashback.

When my mother answered the door, the truth hit me. Mom’s thread was tiny and frayed. I wanted to run home and hide, but instead put my arms around her in an unfamiliar gesture.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I said, “but I can’t stay for coffee.”

I left to walk alone along the lakeshore. I didn't want to know when death was coming. I didn't want to make those kinds of choices and declarations. I tossed the scissors into the lake. Then I reached down and picked up a piece of green beach glass from the sand. I carried it home in my hand, feeling the smooth shape of glass worn away by decades of waves.

Built on death, on ashes and swamp, Chicago became something out of nothing. I understood that impulse. After Mom's funeral, I moved to the Pacific Northwest. I kept her cigarette holder and my father's dog tags on a bookcase beside my diploma, sea glass beside them. They reminded me that relics were the secret cornerstones of skyscrapers; each one made us reach higher.

VALYA DUDYCZ LUPESCU is the author of Amazon bestselling novel, *The Silence of Trees*, and founding editor of *Conclave: A Journal of Character*. Since earning her MFA in Writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Valya has worked as a college professor, obituary writer, content manager, goth cocktail waitress, and co-producer of an independent feature film. Her comic book, *Sticks & Bones* was successfully crowdfunded via kickstarter. Valya has been published in *Danse Macabre*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Fickle Muses*, and other places; and she has work forthcoming in *Mythic Delirium* and *Scheherezade's Bequest*.

The Dog with the Rhinestone Eyes

Mary Renzi

An old woman sat along the banks of the river in the high cane. Her dog, Breaker, lay beside her, his belly caked with the nutrient-green mud. The moon was full and the woman stared at its fat reflection on the water. A gang of wild pigs sauntered to the banks for a nighttime drink. Breaker tensed, and the old woman laid her hand on him gently. He was old, and would never withstand a fight.

Many creatures came and went from the river, but they never saw the old woman unless she wanted them to. She could materialize her desire into stone, dirt and bone through a catastrophic alignment of will and inertia. The old woman was a sorceress, and understood invisibility.

She heard the hum of a motor and the screeching of belts. Headlights rocked up and down in the deep ruts above them and stopped just downstream of the pair. The pigs scampered at the vehicle's approach, and when the engine shut off, a young woman stepped out.

The witch knew the girl. She often stood on the river banks and stared out at the muscular peaks on the horizon. The girl was sad and intense, with dairy cream skin and grain-colored hair. Her eyes were the calm green wash of a lazy river. But her beautiful face was violently cleft, as if some jealous surgeon had destroyed it under the knife.

There was something constrained and electric about this one. She gave the old witch the feeling that she might explode out of her skin at any moment. The old woman—being wise—understood that the girl felt too much and too deeply, and could not make sense of the weather pattern that tore her apart.

Tonight, she had a young man with her. He was rangy, with a cruel face inflamed by acne. The old woman recognized this one as well. He liked to stand in the mud and clip sparrows with sharp rocks.

The cruel boy pointed up at the moon with his long simian finger.

He said, "That don't shine its own light, Katie. It ain't nothing but a reflection," and spat.

As if this knowledge was seduction enough, he began to undress and the girl huddled close to him to protect against the cold breeze coming off the water.

"Don't try to kiss me," he told her.

They lay down in the sand and the girl stared up at the sky as a parcel of birds flew in strict formation above them.

"Shit," the boy said. "I can't look at yer face."

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The old woman busied herself setting lines of bait from the trusses of a long stone bridge. Trout for dinner tonight, she thought. Breaker lumbered in the shoal, chomping at water-bugs. It had rained two days earlier and the river was a wide, quiet sheet of brown.

The girl had come back to the river alone. She wore a green shirt with an ironed-on clover and a leprechaun. She always picked giddy clothing, which contrasted with the tired circles beneath her

eyes. She stared at the brown horizon and skipped a rock across the bend of the water.

The old woman finished at the bridge and walked up on shore, calling Breaker who followed her. She stopped and watched the girl, who was used to people staring at her face and never liked it.

"What is it?" Katie asked. Her bottom lip trembled with some fine seizure of feeling. She had come here to be alone.

"I see into the blood of things," the old woman told her, "and you are caught between the fangs of the world."

The hag smelt of algae and pond scum and Thunderbird, and her eyes were milky with cataracts. She was old and wasted, and the girl felt sorry for her, and embarrassed by her condition.

"Well, I like your dog," Katie said. She bent down to pet Breaker. The salt in the dog's dreaded hair glistened like mica. The girl reached into her satchel and made an offering of roasted almonds, and Breaker took them from her palm with a gentle mouth. He licked the girl's face, his soft tongue threading the cleft in her lip, washing over her sunken nose and her soft eyelids. The girl laughed.

"Good Boy," she said.

She turned to the woman. "I've seen you on the river, trolling for fish. I've seen you weaving baskets from river cane, and cooking meat on your fire. Do you live here?"

The old woman nodded.

"Alone?" the girl asked.

The witch nodded again.

"Aren't you ever scared?"

"No one will hurt me," she said. "I am too old and poor."

"And is there shelter?"

The witch pointed. "Near those rocks," she said. "And it is time to eat. Join us. We have plenty."

The young woman followed her, and they wove through the high cane and arrived at a stockade. A grey squirrel was impaled near the entrance on a palisade. The girl's stomach turned at the sight of it.

At the center of the enclosure was a tamarisk tree surrounded by odd, discarded items. A single-speaker radio played a scratchy Streisand tune from somewhere among the heap.

"So much washes up on shore," the witch said. "I keep what glows."

Amid the rubble was a child's caned rocking chair. There was a gyroscope the size of a desk-globe. There was an eyeglass repair kit, a pink pocket mirror shaped like a trapezoid, so many odds and ends. And between the tailings, glazed pottery shards reflected the sun like jewels. Each item was strange and resonant, but, outside of an implied personal context, also alien and harsh. The girl felt as though civilization had collapsed, and these were the plastic ruins.

The witch rooted through her heap, muttering to herself as she searched, and when she came up, she clutched an old stuffed dog in one hand. Weather and time had faded its hide to a dull liver color, but it had green, rhinestone eyes that shone. She handed it to the girl.

"German?" Katie asked. "But how?"

Katie held the toy out in front of her and studied it. Small rips in the fabric had been repaired with joining stitches. The eyes were polished and clean. The toy had been cared for. Now it was hers again, and she hugged German close to her chest.

It was the alchemy the witch needed, and she went to work with heat, carving helixes in the dirt with a sharpened elk bone.

She drew the base pairs—the nucleotides connecting the graceful curves like ladder rungs. The witch pulled a small ink bottle from the embankment and pigmented the helixes—one red, one blue. The girl recognized the pattern that was emerging. It was the simple abstraction of a DNA molecule.

When the witch was done, a deep seismic shudder disrupted the ground beneath them. It was violent, threatening to bring down the stockade, and the young woman thought the earth was opening up to swallow her. She closed her eyes, and her terrified body contracted violently.

When it was calm again, Katie felt a hand grasp hers, and found herself staring into the face of a young child. The child had a cleft lip. Her nose was slightly collapsed, like Katie's own. And the beautiful child beamed at her—her entire condition was light. The recognition between them was instantaneous.

"Where should we go next?" the child asked.

She trusted Katie implicitly. It was because she could not conceive of a future, of her future, without goodness and joy and grand strokes. The child knew she was made from the stars.

Katie handed the dog to her younger self. They walked along the river bank as the child sieved dirt between her naked toes, singing and stomping with levity. "Do you have a cup?" she asked. "So we can carry the river with us?"

Katie knew that she would always protect and love the child.

They passed by the stone fisherman's bridge. An old woman was cooking trout over a small fire on the bank. A black dog rested

at her feet. The thick scent of menudo steamed up from a blue cook pot, and Katie was suddenly ravenous.

"Eat with us," the stranger invited. "We have plenty."

The pair walked over to the fire. Katie felt wonderful. Everything had such dimension.

"Thank you," she said to the woman. She felt the good hygiene of the fire's flames.

Katie stared out at the iron mountains on the horizon and pointed to the highest peak. "That's the one I'm going to climb," she said.

The child broad-jumped through the sand, then sprinted back to where Katie stood and looked out to where she pointed. "Okay," she agreed.

Naturally.

MARY RENZI's fiction has appeared in *Swamp Biscuits and Tea*, *Pantheon Magazine* and *Notes Magazine*. She enjoys writing stories in which the invisible and alienated are thrown into extreme situations.

On the cover:

"READING BETWEEN THE LINES"

Morgan Carver

MORGAN CARVER is a Pacific Northwest artist, born and raised in Portland, Oregon. This local artist enjoys printmaking, painting, photography, writing, film, and horses. Inspired by the world around her, she is constantly snapping pictures, sketching, or writing about her adventures and observations. She considers making art an excuse to "people watch," as learning about someone's story is what fuels her creativity most.

"Everyone has a story, and I love solving the mystery to unravel it. Through observation, I like to show people as they are. With a slight twist to the color palate, I can create different moods that appeal to the story I'm trying to tell." – Morgan Carver

