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Online Editor: Laura Garrison

Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown

Associate Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Readers: Rebecca Vaccaro, Amanda Chiado

Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

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Editor's Note

We don't typically go out of our way to fit pieces into a particular theme, but sometimes one emerges despite that. The theme for our seventy-sixth issue is . . . well, when you read thousands of submissions, you inevitably develop some biases over time. There's a list of things we aren't interested in publishing in our guidelines that was put together by our founding editors, Eirik and Monica, and I have my own list of things I prefer to avoid. The funny thing is, *every single piece* in this issue falls into a category I usually find problematic: stories told from multiple points of view, poems more than a page long, imagined encounters between actual historical figures, fictionalized portrayals of mental illness, rhyming couplets, dudes playing pool. When these things are done badly, as they often are, they make me cringe. But as it turns out, when they are done exceptionally well, they are a pleasure to read. So thank you, March contributors—I've never been so delighted to have been proven so thoroughly wrong.

— Laura Garrison

The Pendulum

Michelle Meyers

"The pendulum of the mind alternates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong."

—Carl Jung

Tick Tock, Six O'Clock

Billy and Biff decide to go on a walk after their mother tells them to get some fresh air. They are being rowdy, they are being bad boys, shoving chunks of hamburger meat into each other's hair, spilling streaks of warm milk across the kitchen floor, warm milk that was meant for the baby. Mrs. Henderson flounces in on high heels, pearls sifting around her neck, grabbing each boy by the scruff and tossing the both of them into the front yard.

"Be back here before the sun goes down," she calls. "Remember, bad things can happen to little boys after the sun goes down. I'm going out with your father, so the babysitter will put you to bed, okay? Harry? Harry, hon, have you seen my purse?"

They're the ones with the girl who died, aren't they? Drowned in Lake Arrowhead, came out all blue and gray, and now he has to make small talk with them for an entire evening, gab gab gab, Harry this and Harry that, because Martha says they don't get out enough and that proper couples must socialize. The girl was so beautiful, too, not the brightest student he'd ever had in his class, she was no scholar on Dickens, that's for sure, but the way those soft blond curls looped around one another, her lips like the ripest

of ripe red cherries—oh yes, he was being clichéd, he knew—her dark eyelashes fluttering as if she were trying to fly away.

He hikes the winding dirt path back up to the Observatory, repeats it in his head, again and again. “It’s James, not Jimmy, not Jim, not Jimbo, not Jamie, but James, okay? James.” Not that anybody cares now. He doesn’t speak to people. He just watches them, waits for them to toss out a half-eaten sub, an extra slice of pizza, some French fries, and then he’ll swoop in, and that’ll be dinner, a mighty fine dinner, yum yum. Afterwards he’ll go back on in to the Observatory and tuck himself away in the bathroom for awhile, feet up on the toilet seat, wait for the staff to lock up the doors until it’s just him, all alone in there.

She wants to run away with the baby. Sometimes she imagines getting into the car, the baby by her side, the two of them speeding down the 5, vroom vroom, until they are far away from everybody else. She loves the baby girl so much more than she has ever loved the boys. There are some things a mother cannot say but she can think them as much as she wants. There is something special about the baby. There is something different.

“Come on, Martha, finish up in there. We’ve got to get a move on or else we’ll be late!” Harry’s voice ripples across the tepid bathwater still left in the tub.

Tick Tock, Seven O'Clock

A hike, that's all, a short hike before the sun goes down. They always choose the same one, the one that goes up to the old zoo. The city closed the old zoo a few years ago, claiming it was inadequate, ugly, poorly designed and under-financed. So they said. But as far as Billy and Biff are concerned, it was haunted, that's what the problem was, why the city had to move all the animals to the Los Angeles Zoo instead. That's why the animals kept disappearing and dying. The old zoo was haunted. The old zoo is haunted.

"Hurry up, Billy, last one there's a rotten egg!"

Billy runs, he runs ahead, he punishes the gravel dirt under the soles of his sneakers. He pushes ahead of Biff.

A rustling in the bushes. Somebody is watching.

They drive by the park with all those green trees cascading down the sides of the hills and the sun beginning its purple descent into night and he thinks about asking Martha, about suggesting it to her, just pulling into that lot by the merry-go-round and traipsing behind the trees for a little, you know, fun in the dirt, in the leaves, in the twigs, rolling around, a bit of an appetizer before the dinner party, right? Why not be naughty? He can feel himself, well, he adjusts his bowtie, tightening, constricting around his neck like a hand threatening to choke—

"Harry!"

Screech to a halt, just in time. A cat in the road, a dumb old orange cat that has some kind of death wish.

Her heart ricochets back and forth inside of her rib cage, the cat slinking away, a specter into the dark. Maybe she would leave the baby behind. It would be easier that way, to just slip away,

disappear. No diaper changing, no formula, no caterwauling in the middle of the night. She could go down to Palm Springs, hide away in the desert, or maybe up to Cambria. She's always loved Cambria, those sheer cliffs above the ocean, the smell of pine needles like some mountain town. She smiles. The baby has colic but tonight she doesn't care. The babysitter will deal with it. Maybe the babysitter will take the baby. Maybe Martha doesn't actually love the baby all that much. There is something different about the baby. Something off.

Tick Tock, Eight O'Clock

James climbs down from the toilet seat, takes his usual couple of laps around the building to stretch his legs. He passes beneath the mural spreading across the ceiling of the Observatory's main dome. In ancient times, people used myths to understand what they saw in the skies. Atlas holds the zodiac signs, Jupiter carrying his thunderbolts. Venus, Saturn, and Mercury chase Argos, the god of war. A woman clutches the Star of Bethlehem. Beneath the mural is James's favorite exhibit, the Foucault Pendulum, a 240-pound bronze ball suspended on a 40-foot cable, in constant motion as the Earth turns beneath it, proof of gravity, proof of rules. He also enjoys the Hall of the Sky, where they have giant telescopes that let you look out over all of the solar system. James likes to imagine that maybe someday he could go out there, swerve through the stars, far, far away from this place.

Today would have been James' high school graduation. He thinks of all of his classmates in their black gowns, tassels hanging down over their eyes, the principal droning names, parents dripping tears. He likes it better this way. He's been gone exactly

two months now. He's surprised they haven't found him. Could it be that nobody's looking?

"Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"That sound!"

"Probably a tiger they accidentally left behind."

"Not funny, Biff. I think somebody's here."

"It's just the wind."

"Maybe we should head back. It's gonna get dark soon."

"We've still got at least a half hour. What are you, chicken?"

Snap. Snap. SNAP!

"There it is again!"

Harry is performing just as he is supposed to, shake the hands, smiles and nods, oh yes, that pot roast does smell so lovely, and yes, I did hear about your daughter, so sad, so sorry, a young mind lost, a boating accident, the worst, and no way, no how do I touch myself at night thinking of her limp, bloated body reborn from the depths of the lake. No, not that part, he doesn't say that part, he didn't even think it, not really, a joke, imagining their faces curdling in response. No more dinners at the Mulligans, nope nope! No more dinners ever again.

"Harry, Martha, come in! Come in! Let me take your coats," Mrs. Mulligan insists. Harry slides off his sleeves, glances out through the glass sliding doors into the backyard. A coyote streaks past, crooked legs loping, a prize in its mouth. Its lips curl back in a smile to reveal the sinewy chunked tendons of the family's Maltese.

What if the babysitter decides to leave early? What if the babysitter scalds the baby's mouth with too hot milk? What if the babysitter

accidentally suffocates the baby as she hugs the baby against her globular double-D breasts? Martha closes her eyes and the baby is blue, the baby is bloody, the baby is decapitated, head rolling down the cul de sac. She should have never let Harry convince her to see *Rosemary's Baby* at the Cinerama Dome. People have always told Martha she looks just like Mia Farrow. No, actually, nobody has ever told her that.

Tick Tock, Nine O'Clock

The baby figures out how to escape the crib. She figures out how to climb onto the countertops, how to unbolt the deadlock on the back door. She soldiers on through the wet grass, barely toddling at this point. She has a mission to fulfill, a mission that only she can understand.

The babysitter never came. There is no babysitter. Maybe there never was.

Biff beats his fists against the bars, a warbling echo in the descending darkness. Billy sits on the twiggy floor, rocks back and forth on his heels, arms wrapped around his knees. He did not remember to bring a sweater.

"That wasn't funny, Billy. That wasn't funny at all. Now we're locked in here and it's practically dark!"

"I told you, I didn't lock us in here! It just locked on its own."

"Cages don't lock on their own."

"Well I didn't do it!"

Billy's eyes well up with briny tears. Biff sits down next to him. "It's gonna be all right. Somebody will find us."

“What do you think used to live in here?”

Just then they hear a throaty growl, a slashing of damp orangey-beige fur against their vision, the thump of leathery paws against the packed soil.

It takes only moments before all of their clothes are off, the four of them rolling around on the living room carpet, streams of saliva hanging in loose, waving webs between their mouths, Lydia Mulligan’s pink nipples erect as Harry touches between her legs, Martha moaning as Arnold Mulligan slides his tongue around the edge of her left ear. This is what it should all be about, sharing and loving and freedom and all that. The kids have it right. The kids know what they’re doing.

“Harry, can you pass the roast?” Harry blinks. He is not paying attention. Harry is staring at a spot on the ceiling. Martha often has to ask Harry to pass things across the dinner table two or three times before he hears her. The Mulligans, though, they know how to pass. Martha already has heaping piles of green beans and mashed potatoes on her plate.

Martha wonders if Harry is thinking about the Mulligans’ girl. She knows he was there, up at that lake cabin, the two of them together, the weekend that she croaked, kicked the bucket, swam with the fishes. She enjoys a bit of dinner theater, waiting to see if Harry will say anything, if the Mulligans will guess. The school will know soon enough, an anonymous note from a concerned parent, and then it will be bye-bye Harry, see ya later! It’s not as if they’ll miss him. He never has been a particularly good teacher.

Harry finally looks up, realizes his faux pas. The roast swings its way around the table. For just a moment, Martha considers that its snout looks vaguely dog-like. Whatever did happen to the Mulligans’ Maltese?

They filmed *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* here at Griffith Park. That's one of the reasons James came. Alien plant spores fallen from space, loved ones' bodies mysteriously disappearing, but nobody will believe them, nobody will believe! Until it's too late, that is.

James lets himself out the back of the Observatory, sits down on one of the white concrete ledges bordering the edge, gazes out into the violent sunset against the hills overlooking Downtown to the south and Glendale and Burbank to the north, the transition into darkness combatted by the constant orange haze of city lights. He has never liked the city, has never felt at home. He is quite sure he is supposed to be elsewhere.

James looks up into the grit of stars just beginning to appear in the night sky. He squints his eyes, waiting for a sign. He'll keep waiting, for as long as it takes, until they forgive him for whatever he did wrong and let him come back to his home planet.

James traces lines between the stars with his index finger. A home far, far away.

Tick Tock, Ten O'Clock

Billy and Biff are stuck in a cage. Billy and Biff may not escape. They are too frightened to yell or scream. Urine dribbles down the inner leg of Billy's pants. They are sweltering hot even though it is only 50 degrees out.

A tiger, a tiger in the cage with them. The boys cannot see the tiger but they can smell its sour musk, hear its deep chest rumbling breaths, its paws padding around in the dirt, licking its teeth.

The tiger approaches.

“What if one of us dies tonight?”

The tiger growls.

“Maybe we should make a run for it?”

The tiger pounces.

“Billy!”

The tiger eats, the stench of blood ripe in the air.

The baby is not particularly good at hiking, but she figures now is as good a time as any to practice. Her baby Ked sneakers kick up bits of dirt and rocks. She craves milk, breast milk. She must go on without it, though. She has never been awake this late before. It is past her bedtime. This makes her smile. She follows the winding path up the hill until the Observatory comes into view.

Harry cannot stay at the dinner party. He has to get out. He is feeling ill. He can see it in Martha’s eyes. She knows. She knows everything. Harry excuses himself to go to the bathroom as the others lean back around the dinner table, waiting for the coffee to brew before digging into their dessert. He remembers that the Mulligans’ guest bathroom has a window, a large window just wide enough for a man his size.

He leaves the car behind. He is not that cruel of a husband, to make Martha walk home alone in those high heels, and plus he does not know how long he’ll be, if he’ll ever return home. He heads toward the park. He likes the idea of the anonymity of the trees, the hills. Oh, what a mess he’s made. What a mess.

Tick Tock, Eleven O'Clock

"And then, you know, I said to Lydia, I said why wait? Let's go to Europe now!" Martha hates the Mulligans, Mr. and Mrs. Fakey Fakerson, fake grins and fake stories and even a fake, fake house built out of nothing more than cardboard and Elmer's Glue, ready to keel over with the next gust of wind. She imagines what she would do if she had a gun, if she could prevent herself from shooting it through the rest of dessert, Arnold's mouth a septic mess of brownies and cognac. At least she and Harry are self-aware. They know who they are. They know they are performing.

Maybe the Mulligans' girl didn't even die. Maybe the Mulligans just made it up. Maybe the Mulligans just sent her away to boarding school because she wouldn't stop fucking all the boys on the football team.

Harry hears the crying from half a mile away. He decides whoever it is, he will help. He will prove himself a respectable man, a good Samaritan of the highest order. He walks faster. He runs. He will be the first to arrive. He trips and falls over a python branch. He scrapes his left knee and knocks out a tooth. Blood seeps down into his tie, but still he will not stop. He stands, sees him. His stomach turns.

"Biff? What are you doing here?"

"Dad? Are you okay? You're bleeding. You're hurt."

Harry stumbles forward. Perhaps he shouldn't have had so much wine at dinner. He holds the tooth he knocked out in his palm. "Where's Billy?"

"Oh, he's home, I think?"

"You know, a boy your age shouldn't be out in the park this late. You should be in bed."

"Sorry, I got lost."

“Well, come here and I’ll walk you home, all right?”

Biff pushes open the door to the cage, the hinges creaking in the still night air, not a single paw print in sight. There is blood stained down his chin and the front of his navy shirt, fragments of skin and dirt under his fingernails.

His mother was right. Bad things do happen to little boys after dark.

The baby locks eyes with James, the baby who is perhaps not a baby at all. Her eyes are so blue, like a depthless lake. They stand on the concrete steps leading up to the Observatory.

The baby points a finger up at the sky, at a crackling star moving closer and closer against the black tar of the night. James picks up the baby, cradles her in his arms as she coos. She has come for him. She’ll know what to do next.

Together they’ll escape into a universe far beyond. Together, they will go home. They are not of this Earth. They were never meant to be here.

For a moment, James’s mind flashes to his mother, sitting alone on his bed, smoothing out a wrinkle in the covers, using her blouse to wipe a smudge off his prized photograph of the Apollo 11 launch. He tries to push the image out of his head, but he can’t.

Tick Tock, Tick Tock, Tick Tock, Tick Tock, Tick Tock, Tick Tock, Tick Tock, Tick Tock . . .

Martha bids farewell to the Mulligans, slipping on her coat, the furry fringes along the collar soft and comforting against her neck. Lydia and Arnold teeter in the entryway. They sway back and forth, too many bottles of red wine. Martha is still a little drunk too,

but her house is close, and she's driven this route many times. She has no idea where Harry is, and suddenly she misses him. She misses him and Billy and Biff and the baby.

Martha takes a step onto the brick porch out front, her heel landing in a small divot in the mortar. The world is off-kilter, as if everything has shifted a few degrees to the left. Martha feels the urge to turn around. She feels sick, though not from the wine and not from the food.

"Again, I'm sorry about your daughter. I can only imagine . . ."

Lydia blinks several times, as if she had just again remembered her daughter was dead. She looks down at her feet. "It wouldn't be so bad, you know, if it weren't for the news. Everything has to be so sensational, so titillating. But death isn't like that. Death, violence, they're not exciting like in the media and the movies. They're exhausting and ugly in the most mundane way."

Martha nods. She doesn't know what to say. She tucks a strand of hair back behind her ear, her cheeks flushing pink.

"You know, Harry was up there, the weekend that—"

Lydia pats Martha's shoulder. "Harry was here, Martha. We all had dinner together. Don't you remember?"

Just then, the Mulligans' Maltese springs out from the bushes, trotting inside. Its little white tail propellers back and forth as Arnold scoops the dog up into his arms.

MICHELLE MEYERS is a fiction writer and playwright originally from Los Angeles, CA. Her writing has been published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *DOGZPLOT*, *jmww*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Juked*, and *decomp*, and she has received awards and honors from *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Wigleaf*. She was a 2015 PEN Center Emerging Voices Fellow in Fiction and is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama's Creative Writing program. Her debut novel, *Glass Shatters*, will be published in April 2016.

Imperfect, Appalachian She in Acrylic

Danielle Nicole Byington

I model for the artist, my hair unwashed,
His brush massaging it with exaggerated grime,
An anxious texture to intimidate gallery gaze.
The hours slowly falling behind the scene
Begin to bear streams of cluttered-sunset hues that
The portrait cradles behind my body.
I pose in a corn stalk row,
The background going on forever
Like a hotel hallway.
Worms fumbling for their key
Mate on the dangling silk,
Leaving larvae that browns the artist's canvas.
His paintbrush phantomizes a Native American
Sprawled on her stomach,
Elbows perching her interested head
Above a Shakespeare text, her Anglo-painted eyes
Looking at me as if I know what I'm doing.
My arm falls asleep leaning on the hoe,
My fingers shaking from clutching the corncob pipe,
And in his intermissions I smoke it,
Chasing the tobacco with
Bourbon I stashed in the set;
I pass the flask to Anoki.
She squints when she swallows,
And drops of the power
Spill from her lips,
Blurring orbs of words in *Hamlet*—
As if she needed those anyways.
His strokes dress me in an American flag

Cinched on one shoulder like a toga,
Compounding intellect and freedom,
Assuming I can cook and reproduce.
He chooses chosen colors for my pallor,
And lightens my hair to imply tradition.
Standing so long, I burrow my toes in the soil,
Kicking back at a sharpness.
He instructs me to be still,
And my toes gently bleed on something beneath the canvas.
He waves his hand and paintbrush in shock,
Cursing the corn as if it has ears.
I look back;
Crimson runs up the stalks to the tips of their limp leaves,
Dripping on the ground with a tribal patter.
Anoki shuts her Shakespeare book,
Standing to approach me, relieving my arm of the hoe,
Placing a hand on my shoulder,
Untying the toga.
She swings the hoe with a broad stroke,
Brushing my neck and chest with the tool,
Its heavy, metallic head collapsing into the dirt.
I want to clutch the wound, but she reaches first,
Her warm, brown hands catching my blood,
Her eyes looking for something inside me.
Disabling my portraiture, she finds it;
I know because her lips part,
The reward of critical gaze painted on her face,
And she says, . . . *that is the question.*

DANIELLE NICOLE BYINGTON's work can be seen in *The Camel Saloon*, *Black Mirror Magazine*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and *Rust + Moth*. In pursuing her English-MA, Danielle's academic work focuses on the boundary between creative writing and literature, such as appropriation and ekphrasis. Danielle enjoys life with her three cats and Shakespearean better half.

Dinah Shore Visits CBGB in Preparation for Her Interview with Iggy Pop, 1977

Daniel M. Shapiro

She had wanted to see his environment, the stage that holds its breath before the dive. Only the owner was supposed to know she was coming, to look for a woman in head scarf and mirrored glasses, deep blue Gloria Vanderbilts masking a limp. But Hilly Kristal hadn't kept a secret since he sneaked Miles Davis in to scout the backbeat of Blondie.

Walking through an unhinged doorway, she grabbed a notepad from her sunflower satchel, wrote the words she saw on the wall: *gabba gabba hey*. She didn't want to forget to ask about that later. She shook hands with Hilly but didn't know what to say to the men setting up on stage, the men who weren't supposed to be there. She was especially curious about the spiky-haired ginger in animal-print spandex. Tongue-tied, he introduced himself as her "biggest fan: Cheetah from Ohio."

"Let's use our real names," she said. "I'm Frances from Tennessee."

"I'm Eugene," he whispered.

As if continuing an ongoing conversation, they started talking bands. She described what it felt like to sing a Cole Porter tune with Cole Porter in the front row, asked Eugene why his group was called The Dead Boys, if nihilism was a marketing tool for punk rock or something authentically dangerous. She wanted to know if she could help him.

"We're about to tune up for tonight," Eugene said. "Will you play my favorite song with us?"

"I would like that very much," Frances said.

Eugene and Steve, who typically was called Stiv, ground out two bars of D minor chords, followed by a measure of A7. Johnny

the drummer pounded a syncopated fill as Jeff plucked eighth notes on a bass adorned with unidentified red splatter. Frances recognized the chords despite the distortion and elevated tempo. Her hit from 1940 always remained backstage to her, ready to step out for an encore. This time, she would have to shout the lyrics into the microphone to hear herself.

I've gotta be good or mama will scold me emerged in a voice that lacked the usual Doris Day polish. For the next 2 minutes, 10 seconds, she would keep looking over at Eugene, who would continue to nod like a dashboard ornament, who grinned like Big Boy when she spat out the line, *What if he'll persist, mama darling, doing things he hadn't oughta.*

Throughout the jam, she had deviated from her typical mindset when taking the stage. She would picture herself in a velvet-trimmed ballroom, far cry from the girl who had sung for customers at the family store, the girl with the deformed foot, the girl who always asked too many questions. She had always imagined what turns a freak into a star. Here she stood under a ceiling with exposed rot, surrounded by graffiti, walls and floors decorated with unknown fluids that might not have dried properly. Here she sang in the smoke, aware her hairdo and makeup would not survive the sweat, the near unhinging.

As she left, she resisted the urge to reach for the notepad again. She no longer needed to write down questions about rolling in broken glass, arching a back effortlessly, being the loneliest person in a crowded room. She had discovered why an exclamation point belonged on the title of her TV show, why *gabba gabba hey* required no explanation, why Iggy is called Jimmy when he sinks into a couch.

Italicized lyrics sung by Shore are from “Yes, My Darling Daughter” by Jack Lawrence.

“Gabba gabba hey” is a phrase from “Pinhead” by the Ramones.

DANIEL M. SHAPIRO is the author of *How the Potato Chip Was Invented* (sunnyoutside press, 2013), a collection of celebrity-centered poems, and has written series about KISS’ worst album, disagreeable ventriloquist dummies, etc. He is a special education teacher who lives in Pittsburgh.

Life on Mars?

Dana Mele

Keane awoke with the oddest feeling, as if she were suspended above the ground in an enormous block of jell-o. The air was breathable but oppressively warm in her throat; it scalded her lungs. She pushed through the thick atmosphere to her feet, her blankets falling heavily to the ground. The air went through her lips and down her throat like white hot blades. Nothing looked different. Her room was exactly the same as it was before she fell asleep last night, down to the spidery cracks in the ceiling.

It was perfectly silent, that was the next thing that struck her. She pushed through the air, down the stairs and across the hall to the front door. The hardwood floor felt tacky under her feet, like putty that sucked at her soles and left a filmy residue. But it looked just as it always did. Solid, unchanged. Outside, crowds of birds congregated on the pavement, and cats and raccoons picked their way between them, as if too confused to make trouble. She was glad of that, at least. Cats unnerved her. Her mother put it this way: they looked at you as if they knew what you were thinking. That was what it was.

Between the doorstep and the street was dirt. Every weed, every flower, every blade of grass was gone. The garden was a graveyard of little plastic tags that noted what should have been growing there. *Daffodil. Eggplant. Strawberry.* All absent. Just yesterday morning Keane had noted with satisfaction the little berries of tomatoes beginning to form on the vines. Now there was nothing. Plain, thin stakes of wood, with nothing wound around them, nothing growing.

The neighborhood looked naked without trees. Unsightly features of the assortment of modest Cape Cods were exposed. A dark tangle of wires here, an aging air conditioning unit there.

Missing hedges revealed a litter of toys and gardening tools, dog bowls and coils of hose. Everything was where it had been left, everything was exactly as it should be, except for plant life.

Keane made her way across the soil to the street, where dozens of eyes looked up at her quietly. Bird eyes. Cat eyes. The birds were questioning; the cats were accusing. *Where is my nest?* The birds wondered. *You should know*, the cats thought at her. A hungry sparrow fluttered up and landed on her bony shoulder, pecking irritatingly. *Is there anything left? Anything at all? We're starving here. Anything? Anything?*

She brushed it off, startled at its touch. Her head throbbed and it was exhausting to move through this thick air. The more she stood still, though, the more the silence frightened her, so she began to jog against the stubborn air, down toward town. It was an unsettlingly bright morning. The sun burned hot and orange above, and the sky was colorless. She could see the reaches of space through the cloudless atmosphere, still and serene. Some of her neighbors were out on their front lawns, staring up, unmoving. She didn't call to them. The way they stood there, so impeccably still, sent chills rippling over her skin. Lifeless. They looked lifeless, even as they stood, chins to the sky, eyes open wide. She couldn't bear it if she were to call to them and they just stood there like scarecrows, like marble statues. The loneliness was palpable, but she was used to that. Loneliness she knew how to digest. Death, though . . .

She stopped to wipe the sweat from her forehead and catch her breath. Her throat stung from that awful air. Jogging into it was like trying to run into a hair dryer on full blast. An unexpected breeze lifted her hair from her scalp and she closed her eyes for a moment, remembering her mother's fingers, lifting, snipping. "You spend too much time alone," she would chatter as she worked, spraying the ends of Keane's hair, trimming. Snip, snip, snip. "Eddie Meisner's son is getting a divorce. Remember Jacob? He was in your class."

"He picked his nose."

"Well, every third grader picks their nose. You picked your nose too, sweetie. You think your shit smells like roses?"

She didn't. But she had no interest in Jacob Meisner. How could she? He would be a waste of time, and even when she promised herself not to get her hopes up, it always stung when they didn't call anymore. One voicemail and the panic began to grow. Two and her heart thumped angrily at her, off rhythm, *I told you so. I told you so. I told you so.* She had a normal life. She had a job and a routine. She was even a homeowner. She'd done well for herself, studying intently for her M.B.A. and working diligently at her torturously boring desk job at the bank. She was a good listener and a caring friend. It didn't matter, though. People couldn't get past that word. *Schizophrenia*. "It barely affects my life at all," she'd explain. "I take my meds, I see a psychiatrist, I know my mind very well. If something starts to go a little off kilter, I know it. I take care of it. I know my mind very well."

They'd stare at her over the table and stop chewing their food, and her heart would begin to sink.

"Do you hear voices?"

"Rarely. If I do, I tell my doctor right away and she adjusts my meds. Really, I've been living this for nearly half of my life. I've got it."

"Do you hallucinate?"

"Do you?" Keane would usually snap at this point. They stopped listening and there was nothing that could bring them back.

A slow doubt began to creep up her spine. No, this wasn't a hallucination. It didn't work that way. The whole world didn't suddenly change. The sky didn't fall. This was well beyond any strange thought she'd ever had, any unbelievable hunch, any voice that wasn't there at all. She knew her mind very well. This was outside of her. This was something else. It was as if thousands of

hands had descended from the sky and begun to harvest, and now nothing was left.

Well, not nothing. She was left. The birds and cats and raccoons. The neighbors frozen on their lawns, gaping up. Did they see the hands? Maybe they did. All Keane could see was the sun. The stars. Bright light that was almost blinding. She stood a moment longer, looking around, feeling exposed in the t-shirt and boxers she'd slept in. Mitch's t-shirt, Mitch's boxers. Mitch, the first and last one to stay after she disclosed her diagnosis.

"Do you hear voices?" He'd asked, like everyone always did.

"Rarely." Before she could continue her speech, he interrupted her.

"What's it like?"

She eyed his fork as it stabbed leaves of lettuce and shuddered as he ate them.

"Like this. If I didn't exist. Like I didn't exist but I'm still right here, talking to you. Eating linguine."

"Sold."

They married too soon, after a lot of sex and talking and alcohol, but they made it work for a little while. Keane was embarrassingly happy. "What have you done with my daughter?" Her mother said. Mitch called her his changeling. "Do you still love me?" She would ask him every morning, when he woke. Doubts would take root overnight, but she always waited until morning, until he was rested, to ask. "Is there life on Mars?" he would reply, and wrap her in his furry arms. She'd taken that to mean "of course."

It ended one night without warning, after that incident with the cat. She'd called him over and over, sobbing with her whole body, crying like a baby cries, with her stomach, with her shoulders, with her hands. Straight to voicemail. Straight to voicemail. Straight to voicemail. She'd seen him at a Starbucks a month and a half later, sitting with a pretty redhead in a puffy coat. He didn't look up at her. She had wanted so bad to just march up to them and introduce herself to the girl, to say, "I'm Mitch's wife, I've heard nothing about

you." Or at least to snatch the cup out of his hands and pour coffee all over him. But she didn't. You had to hold yourself to higher standards when you had a diagnosis. You had to be extra, extra sane, or people would write you off as a crazy bitch. Sane people had the privilege of acting crazy now and then. Crazy people had to behave.

She took her time, slowed her pace as she grew closer to town. What if there was no one moving down there either? What if Keane was the last person left alive in the entire world? Could she survive completely on her own? Surely not for long. For one thing, she'd need her meds, or what kind of life would she have? When she had her first and only true psychotic break, back in college, she'd gone way off the deep end. She had no reason to believe she might be schizophrenic at the time because she'd never been schizophrenic. There was no reason to believe anything she was thinking or seeing was not 100% reality, because until that point, everything she'd ever thought or seen *was* 100% reality.

So why were people suddenly always talking about her behind her back? She realized it as soon as she entered a room. Suddenly the atmosphere would shift, everyone would change the subject quickly. They had to have been talking about her, she realized. These were people she barely knew from class, along with her best friends and her professors. Everyone, everyone was discussing her, some horrible rumor she couldn't even guess. It was because she'd slept with that gross MIT frat boy after the Cristal Ball. That's what she thought at first. Then she thought it was because she'd worn the same underwear three days in a row when she was pulling triple all nighters during finals. Someone knew, someone told, and now they were all laughing at how disgusting she was.

And why couldn't anyone understand her anymore? Keane had always been a very outspoken person, and she loved to engage in a good debate (Mitch called her argumentative but could she help it if he was always wrong?) but suddenly, people couldn't keep up.

They couldn't follow her train of thought. It annoyed her because she couldn't explain things any simpler: Einstein's theory of relativity was wrong. Imagine if you lived in an infinite number of universes at the same time. How can mass be expressed in terms of speed? Since everything *could* exist, everything does, in one of those infinite universes. We are being born and dying and living on Mars, all right this instant.

People didn't get it. They were growing stupider every day. Everyone. All of them.

And then there were the ghosts. Everyone knew the dorm was haunted, by some student in the 50s who'd committed suicide there. And there were plenty of stories of people who'd seen the ghost of the dead girl. So why was everyone suddenly so weirded out that Keane could see her? Maybe she was a little psychic, because the ghost would talk to her too. And then a few other ghosts appeared and told her their stories, the janitor who'd been killed after a wall collapsed on him, the girl who'd died of food poisoning and warned her not to eat anything green.

She finally understood that she was living in a movie, that people all over the world were watching her life, taking notes, reviewing it in magazines. *Keane's performance is moving, but even she can't pull the film out of a sea of tropes and into relevance.*

After she'd spent a week in the hospital, after the meds seeped into her system, she could see where all of that had been imagined, and she was humiliated when she returned the next semester. But people seemed genuinely glad to see her again. No more dates though. Not one until after graduation.

There were a few people outside the police station, standing still in the dirt and looking up at the sky with their mouths open. It was the creepiest sight. Two were uniformed officers, and then there was a woman in a bathrobe holding the hand of a little boy in footie pajamas. They all stared up. Outside the general store, Mr. Meisner stood with his wife, broom in hand, apron smeared with what

looked like blood, probably from the meat locker. Maybe she would ask Jacob out, Keane thought. If he was still around.

There was no one in the store, no one in the police station, no one in any of the buildings. There were just people, standing on the grassless lawns, unshaded under telephone poles instead of trees. And so many birds, shuffling around the street, mice darting around, cats milling. One of them looked into her eyes and mewed, and she stiffened.

They looked at you like they knew what you were thinking. *Can you hear me think, little brat?* Keane never had anything against cats in the past. It wasn't until the incident that caused her divorce that she realized how disgusting they were, how smug and shitty and stuck up. That wild, feral thing Mitch had "rescued" from the forest behind the house. The forest that wasn't there anymore, only fields of dirt. Keane had taken pity on the cat because Mitch wanted her to. She bathed it and fed it and sat stroking it for hours. He had been tense lately, but that cat seemed to fix things, so she loved it. She kissed its paws and played games with yarn to amuse it. She fixed delicious, healthy meals for it from scratch, from recipes she found online for pampered cats. Nothing green of course. She knew better than that. But plenty of other vegetables, carrots and potatoes and peppers. Part of her knew the cat was an experiment. If she could take good care of the cat, Mitch would see how wonderful a mother she would be, and would change his mind. "You know why," he'd say any time she broached the subject. "It could be like you. It could be sick. How could you want that?" *Because I like being alive, you shit*, Keane would think. God forbid a *sick* person should mar his perfect little world. God forbid another Keane should walk the earth.

But then things started to look up. She could see it flash in his eyes now and then while she fussed over the cat. *Maybe?* He'd think. It was always followed by a question mark. *Maybe?* But at least he was considering. Before he'd been intractable.

She and the cat had an understanding. She took care of it, and it loved her and praised her with purrs, showing Mitch what a responsible, caring mother she could be. Cats understood. Cats knew.

These cats weren't normal though, walking among the scores of birds and mice, not lifting one paw to harm them. They were evolved. They knew, too, but they weren't jerks about it. They understood compromise. They were compassionate. The birds couldn't flee to their trees; the mice couldn't retreat into the bushes. It would be in bad form to kill them under these circumstances. Unsportsmanlike. The cats understood this.

She finally got up the courage to speak to one of the staring people. "Excuse me," she said timidly to one of the police officers, a young woman with short sandy hair and blank eyes. But the officer didn't answer. None of them did. And they all wore the same blank expression.

She felt something curl around her ankle and she screamed into the gelatinous air. No one reacted. It was one of the cats. A black one with white spots and yellow eyes. It was circling her, urging her to stay.

Mitch's feral cat had been black with white spots, but its eyes were a deeper golden, almost red in the copper dusk. Those eyes were bright red when she caught it in the act. It had trapped a bird, one of the baby birds from the nest that had been sitting above the door all spring. It was batting it back and forth between its paws, growling, aggressive, cruel. Hateful. And as Keane stared, frozen in horror, it looked up at her and grinned horribly. She had loved those birds. She and Mitch had watched the nest as the mother and father bird had built it, laid eggs, as the eggs had hatched. Those eggs held all the hope she had for her own babies, for her motherhood. All her hope that she and Mitch could have their own family, fill their own nest with chirping children. And this cat, this evil thing, had murdered. In cold blood. The nest lay on the ground a few feet away in the garden, and two more baby birds lie still and

lifeless on the sidewalk. She screamed at the cat to leave that last baby bird alone, but it ignored her. She looked around helplessly, and screamed again, and when it didn't listen, she grabbed the snow shovel that had been sitting on the porch since winter and beat it away.

She didn't kill it. She didn't want to kill it. She just wanted to get it away from the bird, to do whatever was necessary. That baby bird was still alive. It was moving its wings. She had to hit the cat. There was no other way. But Mitch had come home, and seen her standing over it with the shovel, and he had gone into the house and emerged with a packed suitcase, one that he must have packed some time ago, and a cardboard box. Without a word, without even looking at her, he'd picked up the injured cat and placed it in the box, gotten back into his car, and driven away. He came home much later, but he didn't speak to her. They ate together at the kitchen table, meatloaf and baked potatoes and a salad of beets, nothing green. Then he'd climbed into bed next to her and he'd turned out the light. And in the morning, he was gone.

Keane reached down and picked up the cat, the gentle cat. It purred in her arms. "You see," she said out loud. "I would be a wonderful mother. I would protect all of my babies, no matter what it took. You would too." The cat looked at her with inquisitive eyes. *And my brothers, and my sisters?*

She placed the cat down carefully and looked around again. No grass, no trees. Dirt everywhere, and people just standing there stiffly, looking up at the sky. The air was so thick. So painfully thick. It was difficult to breathe. It was difficult to walk. It felt nice to just stand there, with the police officers and the mother and child. It was a new world and this was her new family. As she stood, she lifted her eyes and connected with the sun. She felt an odd sensation creep over her skin, like a cool caress of wind, and then her skin began to harden like a shell. Her mouth stretched

open and her eyes gaped. The cat wound itself around her ankle, mewling anxiously. *Will you protect us? Will you stay?*

Her arms grew arms and her fingers grew fingers. Those fingers grew fingers, and waxy nails bloomed out from the ends. Her feet stretched down, down into the cool damp soil and her toes explored the depths, growing toes, growing more toes. Her legs sprouted legs and twisted comfortably, settling her deeply in the ground, stabilizing her. As her many fingers fluttered and waved at impossible heights, she felt an enormous burst of energy surge through her. Her cells vibrated with life and her soul trembled with possibility. Oxygen flowed forth from her body and she kissed the air with her skin. *Yes*, she thought, from the core of her thick torso, as the birds settled into her hair, nuzzling her cheeks. *Yes*.

DANA MELE is an attorney and writer based in the Catskills. Her short fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and *Mad Scientist Journal*, among others. She doesn't hate cats.

The Prisoner

Matthew Chamberlin

The prisoner behind the door cries softly: I am free
and undulates upon the sands beside a distant sea.

I hasten up the attic stair and fumble at the lock
fall in upon the empty room where sits a quiet clock.

Long seconds pass incredulous—the pendulous design—
the innerworks of brass and spring encased in lustrous pine—

how came it here, whose shameful need to measure out the day
in dying rooms where darkened suns and seasons, shunned, decay?

Beetle-footed, apprehension chitters to me, rolling dung-balls
down the dim-lit halls, a tiny voice extolling

mutely, as I drift—its dark regard attends to farther lands
than I know of, wide ancient wastes of winds and endless sands—

but come to think, did she who came so long ago collect
these things, insisting they were gods—in madness I suspect.

those paroxysmic times aroused demented fantasies
but hers—hers pulsed somehow, her talk of singularities

within each clock. Insanity! Conceive of this: a boll
of seedling worms that swallow time at every hour's toll!

The holy men who, pillar-braced, expounded on eternal grace
grew dark to hear of gods so near, and so infernal.

Crucifixions failed, though. Vast incurable flocks amassed,
a singing congeries swinging thurible clocks.

All as one they trill the worm-song! Convolving through the halls.
He comes, he comes, they hum, and crack their clocks against the
walls.

We prisoned her within these rooms—long years I held the key—
through the floors her susurrations filtered down to me.

The songs she sang so soft and low and ever slowing—from
below my own rough singing rose to join her gentle sough—

And none must ever know! I turn, intent to disappear—
but cannot go, for something pulls my limbs and holds me here.

I shout aloud—but cannot hear—I fling me out the door—
and slam it shut—then look around—the clock stands on the floor.

and wakens, wheels softly ticking! Whereon I gape agog,
as coiled chain-weights shudder, leaping swiftly cog to cog

Visions birthed of meshing teeth commence, of marbled bones
that spill immense from ruined graves beneath a hill of stones.

I grip it up and peevish peer beyond the clouded glass
where through a tiny aperture the stony planets pass.

Vast surfaces wheel into view across the boundless cold
and tumble out of mind once more immeasurably old.

There ships as great as cities wait, aslump in hasty weft
of scaffolding, which crumbles slow into the ashy drift.

What am I witness to, what end? Could in a clock expire
as well as misbegotten hours whole galaxies entire?

Beauty throngs within me! Welling quickly from me spilling
comes my lonely ululation, swelling to a trilling—

I crouch and caper by the stair! Then pluck up wheel and spring
and leaping naked in the air I swallow every thing.

The clock's cold entrails move through mine as joyfully I jape
then void upon the bloody steps an earthy clicking shape.

With time adrift as blue as babes abandoned on the floe
I belch a noxious gnomon breath to measure ebb and flow.

While this upon the floor, new thing, gives birth to swelling song,
I raise it high for all to see and gambol through the throng,

whose eyeless faces weep in joy as pendulous they sway
I dance above their humming heads and frolic in the fray.

In rhythm to my noisome dance She whistles from the dune
and calms the restless ice-wolves gathered underneath the moon.

MATTHEW CHAMBERLIN teaches at James Madison University in Virginia, where he also writes. He has work forthcoming in *Strangelet*, *Apex* and *Star*line* and a published poem in *Mirror Dance*.

8 Ball

Timothy Day

One small detail about me is that I leave my fan on at night whether or not it is warm because the sound of it helps me sleep. Normally it produces a gentle humming only, but recently I started to hear more within. First there was faint laughter, then faint voices, their words inaudible through the buffer of the fan. This was followed by the sharper sound of pool balls clacking together, rolling down a table and falling into pockets. I owned no pool table, and it sounded too close to be coming through the walls, but in the morning I asked my neighbors just to be sure. Both shook their heads and said it'd been a while. I myself hadn't played since high school, after finding a weedy old pool table in the meadow behind campus, two cues and an 8 ball lying beneath. I'd gone back to it a final time the day after graduation, knocking in the 8 ball as a symbolic murdering of my first eighteen years and leaving it inside. I wondered if the table was still there, if anyone else had drifted to it on days of hooky or nights of getting away.

At work my partner and I were assigned two new cases: a missing teenager and a day-spa with a hot tub full of toxic chemicals. We started with the missing teenager and spent the day interviewing her weepy parents and looking through her things. There weren't any secret notes stuck behind her desk or hidden in the pocket of the sweater at the back of her closet. What was more telling was the blankness: the empty trash and barren diary, the overwhelming cleanliness. It was the room of a ghost seeking defibrillation, a girl gone away until she had things to stick behind her desk and hide in the sweater at the back of her closet. My partner said I seemed preoccupied and I denied it; her sister was in the hospital and she had more right to be preoccupied than me. My partner shrugged and said okay but one thing about her is that her

ears quiver when she knows something of you that you won't admit.

That night I got close to the fan and put my ear up next to it. *Click. Clack. Dunk.* I even thought I could hear the cues being chalked. There were no voices this time, no sounds of the participants at all. It made me want to scream.

In the morning I went to the store where I'd purchased the fan and reported my hearings to an employee with a nametag designating him *Fanboy Seth*. He nodded, unsurprised, and told me to follow him into the back. We stopped at a door with no knob that read *usually no customers beyond this point*. Fanboy Seth explained that his boss didn't trust doorknobs ever since his office had been broken into last month, kneeling down and taking out an axe from underneath the rug. He told me to give him some space and I watched along with the other alarmed customers as he swung away at the door, splintered wood pooling on the carpet until he'd made a hole large enough for us to step through.

The room we entered was littered with whirring fans from all throughout history, an old woman sitting meditative before a bronze one in the corner. On the surface of each fan was a post-it note listing its date of origin and the sounds it contained. Fanboy Seth tapped one with blue plastic propellers that was labeled:

1982—gun range

"This one's mine," he said.

The two of us stood and looked at it, listening to the muffled booming of guns firing off within. I shook my head.

"I don't get it."

Fanboy Seth flicked a wood chip off his shirt.

"Sometimes things get trapped," he said. "Behind moving blades, for example."

"What about when they stop?"

He tipped his head to the side and looked at me.

"Hard to move when you're asleep."

I nodded like I understood. At the doorway two employees were already on repair duty and Fanboy Seth shouted at them to wait.

“So there are people stuck playing pool inside my fan?” I asked.

“Ehhgh,” Fanboy Seth pinched his chin. “People is a strong word for them.”

At work I finally told my partner about my fan sounds and she insisted we approach the phenomenon directly; it was the logical next step and would give us a break from missing teenagers and spas with toxic chemicals. We went to my apartment and dismantled the fan, laying it out in pieces on the floor. We found no balls, no cues, no players. My partner stood and pocketed her microscope, wiping her hands together.

“Another people-inside-fan case debunked,” she said, grinning at me.

That night I lay awake in bed, unable to sleep without the fan’s humming. It wasn’t until well after midnight that I heard clacking sounds coming from the living room. I rose and pressed my ear against the door, hearing indistinct voices with an electronic edge, as if they were coming from a television with bad speakers. I pulled the door open slowly, three pairs of eyes locking onto me like magnets. The lamp in the corner glowed white and dim. I examined their faces, recognizing certain features on each of them, but not in any case the whole package. I could see what Fanboy Seth had meant; they all appeared nearly-human, like clay sculptures abandoned in the final stage of their creation. Their clothes mirrored this, all of their outfits not quite complete; a missing sleeve here, a sockless foot there. One wearing a baseball cap without the bill.

“Hi,” I said.

“Didn’t think you’d . . .” one of them started, then trailed off.

“Show,” another finished.

I approached the pool table and they told me I was stripes, which I had somehow anticipated, already setting up my shot accordingly. They took swigs of beer and clapped chalky hands.

"Do you remember . . ." said one of them.

"When we brought Leah . . ."

"To this table?"

I paused and examined the worn felt of the table, the moss growing up the legs and encompassing the pockets, the scuff marks and etchings running down the sides.

"This is it!" I said, feeling up the surface. "The table behind the school."

"She didn't get . . ." one of them continued.

"Why it was special," another added, nodding its head.

"I know," I said. "Like when I suggested we carve out initials into the leg, she said—"

"But nobody will see it," the half-sockless one finished.

"Yeah," I muttered. "And—"

"Stop hiding yourself."

"Right."

I stared at them. The half-sleeved one pointed to the table.

"Your shot," it said.

The game went on until the half-capped one knocked the 8 ball into the side pocket and all three of them collapsed, twitching on the floor for a moment before going completely still. I didn't know the protocol for reporting the deaths of almost-humans and I had this strange feeling that if I touched one it would shock me, so I went into my room and crawled back into bed as if I'd just been dreaming the whole time.

In the morning, the pool table was gone from the living room, and there were three mounds of beige-colored substance on the rug. I got a spatula from the kitchen and prodded at one hesitantly, the texture thick and goopy.

At work there was a break in the case of the toxic hot tub; the janitor had confessed to doing it. The whole thing was worth it, he said, to see those pampered snobs turn blue. The rest was short work and when it was over my partner told me she was going to see her sister in the hospital. I said that I was coming with and I said don't ask me why. My partner's sister was a twin sister and when we got there I was startled by the image of my partner in a hospital bed and the pang in my chest that came along with it.

On the drive back to the station we got a call about a girl holed up in a treehouse who'd been spotted by the park groundskeeper. The description matched our missing teen and we went to inspect the place right away, finding the treehouse perched high in the branches of an old douglas fir. I said it was important that I go first and I said don't ask me why. My partner said okay and then shoved me aside and made her way up. When I got to the top and entered the treehouse she was looking at me wearily, no missing girl within the small premises. No bags, no food, no signs of an inhabitant. The only thing there was an 8 ball, sitting black and shiny on the floor, its number upturned. I slipped my latex gloves on and knelt before it, picking it up and holding it against the pale sunshine coming through the window. No prints were visible, no scuffs or dust or marks of earthly contact.

"She's gone," I said.

My partner nodded.

"Looks like it."

I took a deep breath and pocketed the 8 ball as my partner joined me at the window. We stood in silence and looked out at the trees, the leaves rustling in the wind like a chorus of quivering green ears.

TIMOTHY DAY loves old jazz, bad puns, and blanket forts, preferably at the same time. His fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Jersey Devil Press*; *Menacing Hedge*; *Cease, Cows*; *WhiskeyPaper* and others. He lives in Wenatchee, WA.

On the cover:

"Want"
Don Dougan

Originally from the Pacific Northwest, **DON DOUGAN** lives and works in his studio just outside of Atlanta Georgia, interspersed with a number of visits to the Tuscan hill town of Cortona. There, on the side of the hill overlooking the Val de Chiana, he has taught stonecarving and bronze casting sculpture to American students.

