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Editor's Note

As one year shambles off into the sunset like zombie rhinoceros and another dawns as bright as fragrant as citrus dish detergent, we offer up this double handful of literary delights: Heather Lee Rogers' "Gonzo Feline Dream" (read it to your cat!); Emily Weber's "And a Time to Die" (read it while listening to The Byrds!); Martha McCollough's "Mary Worth" (read it to someone with white hair!); C. B. Auder's "The Bowls, the Buttons, and the Baskets" (read it to an inanimate object that actually isn't!); Josh Epperly's "Mutually Agreed Upon" (read it in your favorite restaurant!); and Isha Ro's "Georgie" (read it when you're feeling lonely!).

Hope this year is a good one for you and the world.

— Laura Garrison

Gonzo Feline Dream

Heather Lee Rogers

The cat will only
eat ballerinas now
I brought home
just one tutu
and her blood lust
laid it down
like sunsets in soup cans
our supply hits
hot rod tail spins
so we roar off
through all deserts
breaking cardinal laws
speeding records
principles of physics
she smokes and tells me
we should only eat
what we can catch
sets her iPhone GPS
to the nearest grand ballet
I let her drive, kick back
and drink a rootbeer float
as time drifts off
in melted desert skies.

HEATHER LEE ROGERS tells stories as a writer and an actor in NYC. Recent poetry publications have included *Harbinger Asylum* (online and in print), *Here Comes Everyone* (online and in print in the U.K.), *The Rat's Ass Review* (online), *S/Tick* (online and in print), *Waterways* (in print) and *Adanna Literary Journal* (in print). She has been a featured performer at the Art House open mic in Jersey City.

And a Time to Die

Emily Weber

The girl in the yellow bonnet followed me for days. She darted in and out of the shadows cast by the fading summer sun. She sat under the willow trees near the cabins, played Cat's Cradle with her bony fingers by the back shed, followed me with her heavy-lidded eyes as I walked up the front driveway after school. We did not speak. The shadows grew long and heavy, the wind sharp in the cotton plants freshly stripped by the spindle picker. There is always a ceremonial feeling to this time of year, when life and death mean the same thing.

Today I woke before my alarm after a night of fitful sleep in the empty house. Nana has been gone a year now, buried up on Vinegar Hill where she can survey the sweep of time: sowing, growing, reaping. Dying. Today, Mama woke in a hospital bed, veins full of the medicine they pump in after removing cancer and womanhood with it. The air was cool, but I dressed for the heat of the oven, wrapping myself in Nana's favorite apron, the one dotted with mustard stains, red sauces dried like blood, faint streaks where she wiped bacon grease from her fingers.

The meal was nearly done by noon. I surveyed the oven in one of those rare moments when food requires nothing but time. Corn casserole. Ham and dumplings, a side of succotash. Nana's favorites. I figured I would start the boiled custard when room opened on the stovetop.

The girl peered at me through the window on the back door. I wondered if her mama made her clean her plate like mine, lima

beans and all, if her nana made her birthday flapjacks, if she ever stood in this kitchen with kin and prepared this sort of meal: the food of the living consumed by the dead.

I know you're hungry, I said to her. Smells good, don't it?

This was the first we had spoken. There was never a particular date, nothing penciled on the calendar hanging on the refrigerator, but it comes around this time every year. Nana would rouse me early, set me to work fetching preserves and jars from the cellar, working the ancient can opener, watching bubbling sauces while she fried cod and boiled snap beans and spooned maple sauce over apple dumplings with the care of a monk sweeping monastery steps. She would point her wooden spoon at the embroidered Old Testament passage framed over the oven:

There is a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Waste of perfectly good food, Mama would mutter to our backs as we cooked. All this time and effort for your silly witchcraft.

We feed them, Nana would reply, so they don't go feedin' on something else.

Mama said that Nana spoiled me, filled my head with nonsense. Said I needed to get off this plantation and into a good college. Do something with my life, be somebody.

She is somebody, Marlene, Nana would say. She's got the gift, like me.

The phone rang, bringing me back to the kitchen: someone from the hospital, a soft-spoken woman named Beverly, looking for Marlene Jackson's daughter.

That's me, I said. My heart throbbed in my chest.

There were complications, Beverly said, followed by more words I couldn't fathom—something about a reaction to the anesthesia. Rare, one in ten thousand surgeries. *Your mother might not wake up.*

Lids collected steam, concealing the contents of the pots simmering on the stove. The orange light on the oven glowed like an eye, watching me try to decide whether to turn it off. *How much longer?* I asked.

Could be days, Beverly said slowly, *could be hours. We just don't know. You should be here.* (What she wants to say: *you should have been here.*)

An hour passed as I pulled everything out of the oven, off the stove, spooned it into Tupperware, packed it away in the pantry and the fridge. I sped to the hospital, praying the dead will grant me time for the dying. Women in badges led me to Mama's bedside, rested their hands on my shoulder. Their eyes were kind, their smiles grim. Pastor Tom came with a potbellied man from the funeral home. Everyone murmured condolences, but all I could think to say was don't bring me food, please, for God's sake, nobody bring me food. My fridge is full, my cup runneth over.

That night, I drove home from the hospital under south-flying birds and stood in the kitchen, reeling. In my short absence, the house had become cavernous and cramped at the same time, full of food smells, lingering oven heat. Two of them watched me through

the back door: the girl in the yellow bonnet, and beside her a tired-looking woman in a gingham dress with nicotine-stained fingers. Mother and daughter. They had led hard lives.

Was it because I made you wait? I asked. They did not answer.

I snapped a blanket on the front lawn like Nana used to and set out the cold containers of food, Styrofoam plates and bowls, plastic forks and spoons, a pile of cheap napkins. Serves them right. I lay on the empty part of the blanket and waited. The moon rose full and bright in a cloudless sky. I recited the names of stars without asking for them. I felt the life of every cricket around me singing love songs in the dark. After a while, they joined me. I closed my eyes and cried for the first time, listening to the snap of hungry jaws and the gnashing of teeth.

EMILY WEBER's work has been published in *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Glassworks*, *Soundings East*, and elsewhere. She lives in New Jersey and works in public relations.

Mary Worth

Martha McCollough

At poolside we enjoy the array of pastel rectangles and ellipses representing “picnic.” I sense your trouble and draw close. Later, in my kitchen, over plates of beige squares, our tiny forks wave in unison. You ask, When everyone I love has betrayed me, how can I go on? Well, dear, I can tell you how. And so I do. And while I am all kind concern, do not misunderstand—this universe bends for me, as when that poor Aldo, my stalker, careened off a bluff to his cautionary death (not shown). He wouldn’t learn. I feel you can learn. So it’s disappointing to see you at the next little get-together waving a wine bottle, shouting Save yourselves, don’t believe the lies! Advice is my department, dear. We are so nearly perfect. The sky matches my eyes so well there is no need for weather.

MARTHA MCCOLLOUGH is a writer and video artist living in Chelsea, Massachusetts. She has an MFA in painting from Pratt Institute. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Baffler*, *Cream City Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, and *Salamander*, among others. Her videopoems have appeared in *Triquarterly*, *Datableed*, and *Atticus Review*.

The Bowls, the Buttons, and the Baskets

C. B. Auder

Once upon a time, there was a golden bowl filled thick with noodles.

It sat on a work table, steaming into the night.

A man entered, surging with hunger. He cupped the bowl with well-worn hands, brought it to his lips and drank at the rim, until the noodles and broth became part of him and he of them—until he was rubbing his belly as though it were a sleepy cat.

"No time for thoughts of cats," the man grunted. "Too many buttons to mold."

As the basket spoke, its wicker quivered. "Oh dear," it said. "I will never be able to fit all of those buttons into my poor area that holds things."

"You can do anything you put your mind to," muttered the woman. "You're the Handbasket that Can."

"Can I really?" The basket crackled with astonishment as the woman carried it to the button table. "Goodness," it said. "That sounds wonderful—"

"It's not our job to wonder about goodness."

The basket pondered this. It didn't seem very wise. "But—"

"Can't you see I have a billion things to sew?" The woman filled the basket's mouth with buttons. "Not to mention a headache like you wouldn't believe."

* * *

The button felt ashamed. All night it had repeated a silent mantra: I will fling myself from this table and do something.

Instead, the button had watched a woman hunch and groan over her work. For hours and hours she had grabbed button after button and, with needle and thread, had poked them in all of their eyes.

Just as the button had decided to spring into action, the woman grabbed it with bony fingers and squeezed it tight.

The button squeaked and popped itself free.

As it sailed through the air, it grew worried. Would it be crushed beneath the wheel of a nearby cart? Would it disappear into that dark drain? Perhaps it would be gnawed to pieces by a starving rat.

No, the button lay beneath a table, dusty and neglected for nearly a week.

The man entered, hungrier than ever, but found his bowl only half-full.

He drank his soup, then studied the bowl in bewilderment. "Can this be the same bowl? The gold seems less shiny." He thundered to the woman in the other room, "Have you been fiddling with my dinner?"

One night, the woman smacked the button around with a broom. The button gathered up all of its momentum, then flew and skidded out the door. It bounced off of a streetlamp and ended up in a grumbling garbage jostler.

Then it journeyed beneath the stars on a bed of torn fabric.

At dawn the button slid into an ocean of new shoe buckles and shiny party balloons and plastic chandeliers and polyester jock straps and bald tires and used condoms and cracked sauce jars and stained pillowcases and unused twist ties and unwanted silverware and limp vegetables and empty wart medications and cheap toilet seats and gobs of cat fur and soggy cigarette butts and a raft of crunching water bottles filled with sparkling emerald slime.

The button was overwhelmed. It wept from all four of its eyes.

So many new friends, it thought. So much sunshine!

The man entered, late. He hurried to the work table.

The bowl that awaited him was empty—and white as the mask of a ghost.

The man blinked in confusion. "Where is my golden bowl?"

"Right in front of you," hollered the woman from the next room. "Where it always is."

"This is not the same bowl," the man huffed. "Surely this bowl has nothing whatsoever to do with me."

But it was the same bowl. The gold had flaked off and been swept away. It had become a bowl of perfect bone.

The clock struck eleven. The man cursed. He wished he had time to find his old bowl. He had grown very hungry indeed. But there were always new buttons to make and new clothes to sew and sell.

* * *

The woman winced. Poked. Winced. Poked.

"I understand!" cried the basket suddenly.

"Judas Prawn!" The woman startled.

"I am just like you!" said the basket.

The woman sucked her bleeding finger. "I fail to see how." She gave the basket a good thwack.

The man licked his cracked lips. He caressed the empty bone bowl as though rubbing an ivory lamp for answers.

The bowl tried to stay perfectly still, but in time it grew like magic to the man's insistent touch. It grew faster and faster. It grew until it nearly reached the ceiling—until it was big and dry enough to anger a starving god.

The man felt strangely dizzy. He wiped his forehead. The bowl seemed to have grown very hot. He wrenched his clothes free, flung them to the four corners of the room.

He stood beneath the harsh work light, panting like an animal. He had always felt so strong, but now he seemed scrawny and pale. He saw that he was molded of soft, wrinkled skin held aloft by blades of bone.

The man scratched his head, puzzled. "I look like a huge, hairy lizard."

The basket did not give up. It shook with revelation now. "I thought that I was me," it cried, "but I am clearly defined by my actions!"

"Listen, bub." The woman mashed a temple with a thimble thumb. "I'll make you a deal: if you can't shut your trap, I'll kick you right in the wicker."

The man sat, out of breath. He had followed in his elders' footsteps: he had made a lifetime's worth of wares.

"I can hear you resting," said the woman. "Hop to it. I'm almost out of buttons."

But the man's attention was on a broken window. Through the pane came the clumps and groans of creaky new bargains. The world was getting organized for another day of trade.

The man looked at his surroundings for the first time in ages. The room had always seemed mysterious when it was kept in the dark. He could see all four walls now. They weren't nearly as far away as he had been led to believe.

He shook his head, perplexed. "Where is the great room I thought I'd been working in, all my life?"

Just then, dawn peeked through a rafter window and lit the giant bowl.

The man sagged with awe. The bowl looked like a brittle ivory lantern. Or a glowing bone blowfish. He was too tired to decide anything anymore.

"Of course." He smacked his forehead. "The answers must be within."

* * *

Sunshine hit the button's face. The button opened three drowsy eyes.

Seagulls squawked and rummaged on the horizon. A cat approached, dinner wriggling in the clamp of its jaw. The button sighed. It was good to feel safe at home.

As the cat padded past, the plastic piles shifted and the button tipped forward in casual greeting. The cat leaped into a broken handbasket and disappeared.

The button leaned back. It dozed to the rhythmic crunch of a tiny skull.

The man heaved himself up. The table quaked and groaned as though to collapse. The inside of his bowl was empty and smooth and hard as an apology.

The man touched his forehead and palms to its cool surface, felt it quiver in response. His world had grown concave. It had turned entirely to cool bone. The man shivered.

A knock echoed around him, like the thud of heaven's broom handle on a castle door.

His mind fluttered with fatigue, fizzled with the sparks of wisdom that always arrive too late.

"I know you're in there," said the woman. "I need a new basket."

"Tomorrow," mumbled the man to himself alone. "Tomorrow...."

"Get a plastic one this time. I think I broke a toe."

The man lay down. The bowl cradled him in its ivory curve.

The man curled around his memories for warmth. He rubbed his belly with care, spoke to its grumbles in dreamy tones. His

words streamed out in an invisible whisper, as though he dared not wake a sleeping priest.

A million shining rains came and went.

The world was no longer a confusing place—the man and woman were long gone. But all of their toil had been transformed, into brightly colored oceans of plastic, scattered throughout the land.

The button and its many friends never had to work another day in their lives.

This story originally appeared in print in A cappella Zoo (January 2015).

To fulfill various Anthropocene initiation rites, **C. B. AUDER** once collected handbaskets, leg warmers, lotions, notions, unicorn pencils, Garfield posters, and decorative frog paraphernalia. Auder's work has been published in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Random Sample Review*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, and *Jersey Devil Press*. Follow Aud on Twitter at @cb_auder.

Mutually Agreed Upon

Josh Epperly

At midday, Main Street of Hubert, Texas (pop. 4,158) is a pale mimicry of its former self. When the town's share of the aquifer dried up and their fields of world-famous cantaloupes had been left fallow, so had the heart and soul of Hubert disappeared—or so goes the claim of the locals who now work thirty hours a week at Wal-Mart. Hubertians with more property and knowledge of the cattle industry contend that it was the mad cow scandal of '98 that had brought the town to its knees. Regardless, Main Street is hardly more than a casualty of changing times. The traffic lights of its three intersections flicker from green to yellow to red and back again for no one in particular. The only two cars parked in front of its tavern belong to the bartender and his drunken probation officer. Even the flowering dogwoods lining the sidewalks are wilted, for the Parks and Recreation employees now have better things to attend to, like their methamphetamine habits.

Yes, if it weren't for Gaia's Bounty, the last bastion of business on the strip, coroners could officially sign Main Street's death certificate. Here, in this successful anomaly of a diner run by one tattooed and trust-funded Owen Kelly, all vegans within a hundred mile radius congregate, finding respite from the prevailing beef culture. Here, young and beautiful people who liked each other's online profiles attempt their first face-to-face dates. It is here where the seeds of a more healthy and sane and ethical future have been planted, waiting in dormancy to be watered by someone, anyone.

Ralph Newman sits anxiously in a booth at Gaia's Bounty, wondering who this Gaia gal is and why he should give a hoot about her bounty in the first place. This is not the type of establishment that he is used to. He is a simple fellow with simple tastes. He doesn't understand why the man from Craigslist selected this hippie sanctuary as their meet-up spot, with Finger-Licker's BBQ just two blocks away and all.

He scans the lunchtime crowd with his mud-colored eyes. All those families and couples and twenty-somethings with oversized glasses and jangly Oriental jewelry are ripping into their vegetables with wolfish abandon. A man in a Smiths "Meat is Murder" t-shirt skewers an enormous spleen-shaped mushroom from his plate and eats it directly off the knife. One small child is popping handfuls of cherry tomatoes into her mouth; red juice dribbles down her chin and splatters onto the napkin atop her lap. On a stage in the far corner of the room, a pale dreadlocked performer strums a mandolin and yowls, "*Kale and turnips! Cover with dirt! Grow in the bosom of our mother earth!*"

The whole scene makes Ralph feel very alone. He is acutely aware of how much he must stand out in this crowd with his simple crew-cut, his ruddy rancher's face, his perfectly-ironed denim shirt and faded jeans. At the youthful age of forty-two, he is already an outcast. An outcast among these bohemians by default and an outcast among his own ilk by circumstance. For a minute he stares at the empty seat across from him and entertains the fantasy that he's on a date with some sexy cowgirl, who's presently fixing

her hair in the lady's room but should at any moment come strutting back into sight.

Quit it, you damned fool, Ralph rebukes himself. *Think about why you're here.*

Ding! The front door opens, and in steps the most bafflingly oddball man that has ever treaded upon the streets of this Texas town. Ralph tries not to stare but can't resist.

The man in question is vulture-like in all appearances, gawky yet rugged, sporting a three-piece hemp suit. His left hand swishes through the air—apparently conducting a symphony that only he can hear—while his right hand clutches a faux leather briefcase. Ralph can tell it is faux leather by the one sticker ("*I'm leather-free!*") that adorns its surface. His hair is straight and blonde and hangs halfway down to his waistline. A beaky nose juts out from his concave face. "Ah, Debussy!" the man exclaims as he removes his earbuds. Then, after a little chitchat with the hostess, he pivots on his feet by ninety degrees and stares directly at Ralph. His gaze is too much for Ralph; it is as if the man had stolen the Lord God's omniscience and boiled it down to fit inside his two eyeballs.

Ralph turns away and pretends to pore over the menu. This fails to produce the desired result. In his peripheral vision, he sees the man weaving amongst the tables, heading towards his booth. In his head Ralph begins to construct a polite rejection: *Real sorry, fella, but I have an important meeting here, so if you wouldn't mind . . .*

But the man is already hovering over him. "Namaste, Ralph," he bows smartly.

So this is the man from Craigslist, Ralph thinks. *Should've figured. Can't count on the internet to provide you with a real gentleman.*

"Uh, howdy."

"I'm *Donovan*. *Donovan Deacon*." The man pronounces his name like it's a word from a dead language. Contrasting his appearance, his voice is calming and silky smooth. He slides into the booth, sets his briefcase on the bamboo tabletop and offers his hand. They shake vigorously. "Thank you, thank you, *thank you* for coming out here today."

Ralph chuckles nervously. "Well, it was an opportunity I couldn't refuse."

"That's the spirit," Donovan says, smiling. "Out of the three applicants, I can already say you're my favorite. Granted, one is underage and the other is morbidly obese, which narrows things down, I suppose. But still, I like you the best."

"Thank ya. Do you have your, um . . . credentials?"

Donovan hands Ralph his résumé. With just a ten-second glance at it, Ralph is satisfied. Not only does he have a PhD from Ponce School of Medicine in Puerto Rico, but he also is an expert on important-sounding things like "epidemiology of carcinogenesis" and "commensal, pathogenic microbiota." How could Ralph argue with any of that?

A waitress materializes before them. A pretty redhead with bags under her eyes and a one-size-fits-all happy face, nametag reading "Harmony." One of those types who, no matter how much they fake it, can't hide the fact that they're not where they belong. Ralph can relate. He feels a strong urge to carry her off to the nearest park bench, sit her down and ask her questions about her life. Instead, he asks, "Have any meatloaf here?"

Harmony's artificial smile turns into a scowl. "No, sir. This is a cruelty-free, sustainably-sourced restaurant."

Now Ralph feels a strong urge to cut out his own tongue. He bites his lower lip and peruses the incomprehensible menu again. *Quinoa? Chanterelles? What the hell?*

"Well, have any *cow*, then? Or anything that tastes like cow?"

"No cow, Ralph," Donovan interrupts. "I won't allow it. Harmony, I'll have the house salad, with the walnuts served on the side. Light on the vinaigrette. And would you kindly recommend the black bean burger with sweet potato fries for my friend?"

"Out of everything here, our black bean burger tastes the most like cow," Harmony mumbles, hands at her hips.

That settles it. In his younger years, Ralph would have served Donovan a mean left hook for having the audacity to limit his beef intake. But he doesn't have the energy or willpower to do anything now, let alone brawl. Harmony scurries off to the kitchen, leaving Ralph with this fellow who he supposes he has to get comfortable with fast.

"So, Ralph, tell me about yourself."

Ralph takes a moment to mentally skim through the chapters of his life. "Well, not much to tell you, being plumb honest. Waddaya want to know?"

"Tell me why you responded to my posting. Tell me why you showed up today."

The posting. Ralph had found it while sifting through the casual encounters section of Craigslist (the only remaining activity in life that spurred him out of bed each morning). There had been the usual cornucopia of wonders, of course—the desperation, the cock pictures, the bafflingly specific fetishes never to be fulfilled. Then he saw Donovan's posting, buried thirty-five pages deep. It had spoken to Ralph's soul. After rereading it twice, then again, he

knew the path that his life must take: it was right there in front of him, glowing on the screen of the computer in his mother's basement.

"Ever since I was a boy," Ralph speaks to Donovan's left shoulder, "I've wanted to be a part of something greater than myself. I tried me a lot of occupations—cattle farming, meatpacking, you know—but none of 'em suited me. I'm at the end of my rope. You're a successful man, and I was just hoping I could be . . . well shucks, how do I put this . . . *absorbed* into that success."

"Hmm." Donovan nods in approval. "Insightful, Ralph. You know what you want. I like that. And really, isn't that what we're all searching for in this violent, confounding world of ours? To be absorbed into something greater? Isn't that the point of art? Science? Religion?"

"Maybe that's the point of religion," Ralph entertains. "That and being a good person, I suppose. Can't comment on art or science."

"Are *you* a good person, Ralph?"

The question wallops Ralph like a kick from a bucking bronco. An instinctual two-pronged reaction takes over him. First, his body reddens to the shade of a raw chuck steak and he begins to mumble to himself incoherently. Secondly, he contemplates his escape routes. Front door. Back door. Window. In his mind's eye, all Ralph can see are faces of hospitalized children, anchormen hollering about mad cow disease, his mother's look of disappointment when he told her he would be liquidating the farm. It was a simple mistake. All he had done was feed his cows some bone meal supplements he'd purchased from his uncle in the UK; those poor

heifers must get sick of eating grass all the time, he had reckoned. Stupid! So stupid!

Donovan grips his clammy hand. "Hey, relax," he consoles. "I already know about all that. So you goofed up, made some people sick. 'Deadliest foodborne outbreak in United States history,' yadda yadda yadda. Do you think I care about something that happened years ago? I'm only concerned with the purity of your body, not your soul."

"My body's pure. Don't you worry about that."

The features of his new acquaintance's face begin to shift and stretch as if by influence of subcutaneous tectonic plates. He is clearly trying to hold back some strong emotions. "Not until you go cold turkey on that beef, my friend," Donovan enunciates. "Only after six months of my prescribed vegan diet will you be cleansed of all nitrates, nitrites, prions, antibiotics, additives, E. coli and growth hormones. Only then will we be able to work together. I would have preferred an applicant who was vegan to begin with, but beggars can't be choosers, as they say. Can you agree to this?"

Ralph falls into silence. For a minute, he listens to the two nasally voices in the booth behind him, who are discussing the pros and cons of coffee enemas. Finally, sullenly, he nods his head.

Donovan unclasps the bindings of his briefcase, digs through a collection of vials that appear to contain spices and rubs, and unearths an intimidating stack of papers.

"The contract," he states.

At that moment Harmony reappears, bearing their platters of cruelty-free, sustainably sourced lunch. She stands facing Donovan as if Ralph were invisible, or at the very best a warty cave troll with whom eye contact should never be attempted. She places

Donovan's salad daintily before him. Ralph's plate issues a loud clatter when she half-serves half-drops it onto the table.

"Unbelievable!" Donovan snorts when their waitress is out of earshot. "She's acting like you poisoned her child or something!"

Ralph only blinks and frowns at his black bean burger.

"Okay, okay, bad joke. My apologies."

While Donovan tears into his house salad with his pearly incisors, Ralph nibbles his emasculating dirt-flavored burger and skims over the contract. The header on the first page is baroque and professional:

Deacon Oncology Institute, LLC

A beacon of hope!

Below this, legalities. More legalities than what any FDA or USDA representative had thrown Ralph's way during the mad cow fallout period of his life. The words of the contract make conceptual sense to Ralph, but the existence of the contract itself does not.

"So," Ralph murmurs, drawing in close. "I ain't suggesting you're anything but a law-abiding citizen, but I still got to ask: are you *sure* that cannibalism is legal as long as I put my John Hancock on this here form?"

Donovan inhales, drops his fork and runs his fingers through the blonde stubble on his chin. "Please don't use that word," he says.

"What word?"

"*Cannibalism*," Donovan shudders. "Such a nasty word. Someone says 'cannibalism,' and all anybody can ever think of are those dirty pygmies in Papua New Guinea who spear each other in the back and devour their elderly when they grow too old and

inconvenient. Would you want to work with someone who roasted his own grandmother on a shish kabob?"

"Not 'specially."

"My point being: we live in a civilized society, with rules and mores. We stand above the animal kingdom. Whereas a lioness does not ask an antelope's permission before she rips it to shreds, I am proceeding with a contract, which is based on mutual trust. So don't call this '*cannibalism*'. Call this 'mutually agreed-upon consumption'."

"Well, hell," Ralph chuckles, "it makes no difference to me. Going in one end and out the other, no matter what you want to call it."

This answer fails to rouse Donovan out of his sour mood.

"Don't think of me as a cannibal, Ralph. You're *signing* a *contract*. This is legal. This is advantageous for both parties. For me and my scientific pursuits; for you and your stated desire to be absorbed."

In the corner of Ralph's eye, the pale dreadlocked fellow is playing his mandolin so ferociously that you'd think his strumming arm is powering a generator. He is singing a song about winemaking, apparently: "*Brothers! Sisters! Plant an organic vineyard!*" Just as he is about to reach the grand finale, the zenith of his artistry, the E string snaps and whips him in the face. "Fuck!" he yells. "It does that *every time!*"

Donovan cups his hands over his mouth and calls the performer out on his language. The ears of the children around him are too sacred to be fouled with cursing.

"Anyway, Ralph," he says, returning to the matter at hand, "Do you agree with everything on the contract?"

"I don't know. It's a lot of ten-cent words. Could you give me a summary?"

"Do you agree to be, um . . . snuffed, rubbed out—declared legally dead, if you will —and also, er . . . *harvested* for consumption?"

"Yep," Ralph agrees.

"Do you agree, er . . . " Donovan pauses before the plunge, "to have your thigh and arm muscles prepared as flank steaks, your ribs and torso coated with a Memphis Style BBQ rub and grilled to perfection, your heart cooked in a lentil stew and paired with a South African Cabernet Sauvignon, and your intestines apportioned out and ingested in half-ounce doses over a span of two years as part of the Microbiome Transfer Project?"

"This the project that'll cure cancer?"

"With your help, yes."

"Well, can't say 'no' to a mission like that," Ralph reasons, "not with a clear conscience." Truly, this is the crux. As long as his body is being put to good use in the body of another, he doesn't give a hoot about the surrounding circumstances. *Be a part of something greater*, his father had always told him while they were out prodding herds towards the slaughterhouse truck. *Well, pa*, Ralph thinks, *I might've screwed everything up, but I'm making up for it now, ain't I?* Although he can't fathom how any of that science stuff works, Ralph imagines how his proteins could fuel the brain of this man of inscrutable genius. He imagines how after years of intestinal experiments, Donovan and his scientist buddies would on one glorious morning squint in disbelief at a sheet of data or some cells on a petri dish and dare to say, finally, 'Eureka! We've found the cure!'

After a few more back-and-forth exchanges which only reinforce his trust in the project's merit, Ralph Newman signs his name with the very best cursive he can manage—wobbly and amateurish. Having done this, he leans back in his seat, cracks his knuckles and feels the sweet calming presence of the Holy Ghost spread through his bones.

"Congratulations, Ralph," Donovan beams. "Glad to have you on board." Under the light of an overhanging lamp, he glows like an angelic revelation. All the surrounding hustle and bustle, all other conversations dwindle and evaporate. What is happening between the two of them, Ralph knows, is the only story that matters in this joint.

"One thing that's pestering me," Ralph admits. "Could you maybe have a Budweiser with my heart instead of a Cabernet? And baked beans instead of lentils?"

Donovan Deacon tips his head back and laughs a rich, flowing laugh, occasionally punctuated with squawks. "That can be up for future debate," he says after collecting himself. "As for now, my friend, let's give you a tour of my property."

For the briefest moment, Ralph cannot help but second-guess. "Already?" he asks.

"I have a pearl of a day planned for us. Horseback riding, VIP access to the oncology lab, maybe watch a film. Just to get to know the man that is Ralph Newman."

They set their credit cards down on the table. When Harmony returns with the check holders, she seems less angry with Ralph now and more worried about dropping any of the four plates balanced in her hands. The lunch rush hour is bringing her to the

verge of a panic attack—a weekly misery that she silently endures in the handicapped stall of the woman’s bathroom.

“Harmony?” Donovan asks. His eyes sparkle and a roguish grin stretches across his face. “What if I told you that this man across from me is an American hero?”

The sentence causes Harmony’s eyes to shrink back into their sockets. “Listen,” she begins, even briefly glancing at Ralph, “I’m sorry about being rude earlier. You don’t have to tip me. The meatloaf thing just really set me off. Once again, I—”

“I’M AN AMERICAN HERO!” Ralph yells, slamming his fists on the table. The words “American” and “hero,” when coupled together, never fail to send him into a tizzy. The fact that Donovan had labeled him as such is almost too much for his brain to process. Yes, he *is* an American hero! Stars and stripes forever! Glory hallelujah! They might as well chisel his face besides Lincoln’s at Mount Rushmore.

“That’s right, an American hero!” Donovan echoes back. “Harmony, without brave men like Ralph Newman, who sacrifice themselves for the advancement of our great nation, where would we be? And you treated him like he was a gnat in your eye!”

Harmony begins to quiver and crack under the strain of their unbridled patriotism, which by now has drawn the eyes of every last patron in Gaia’s Bounty. “Sir, even though I’m a pacifist,” she ventures, “I can still appreciate that you’re a veteran—”

“I ain’t a veteran!” Ralph roars. In his fervor, he can no longer see this girl as a human being with quirks and pains and joys, but only as an obstacle to his redemption. “Those goddamn pension-pinchers got nothing on me! I’m an AMERICAN HERO! What’ve you ever done for our country, huh?”

Instead of answering this reasonable question, Harmony drops all four of her plates, grips her head and, hyperventilating, collapses to the vegetable-littered floor.

While Ralph seethes, Donovan signs his own receipt and forges a signature on the other, tipping nothing. He coughs and clutches his briefcase. “Shall we be off, then?”

They sidestep the body of the incapacitated waitress. With chest puffed out and confidence fully restored, Ralph follows Donovan into the blinding, boiling heat of the afternoon, crosses the street without looking both ways—for he has no fear of being struck on Main Street—and then, without a moment’s hesitation, slides into the passenger’s seat of Donovan’s Toyota Prius.

Back at Gaia’s Bounty, the crowds swell and slump, tables are filled and vacated, and vegan delights are served on porcelain platters until the last customers have ambled home. At the day’s end, Harmony is called in to the office and “agrees” to tend to her mental health by pursuing other career opportunities. Instead, she enrolls in art school.

The world continues to spin on its normally crooked axis until one December morning, six months later, when Ralph sets everything off-kilter again by emerging naked from the woods on the outskirts of town with half an arm chewed off and his genitals gone. “Should’ve read the fine print,” he rasps to the shocked old widow whose backyard he stumbles into. “The foreplay . . . Christ almighty, that foreplay . . .”

There on the patio, surrounded by garden gnomes and bird feeders, he exhales “the foreplay” once more, shudders at the horror of it all, and dies.

Police trace the blood trail back to Donovan’s mansion, where they find him unconscious on the floor of his crackpot laboratory amidst signs of a struggle. Three other bodies hang on meat hooks in his freezer for the purpose of curing cancer.

No one could have predicted the outcome of all this: miraculously, Main Street is resurrected. Journalists covering the “Craigslist Cannibal” case fill up the dilapidated motels. Tourists driven by morbid curiosities flock to Gaia’s Bounty and other known haunts of Donovan Deacon. After Donovan is sentenced for anthropophagy and assisted suicide, film crews roll into town with their vans and cameras to immortalize the story through a critically acclaimed HBO miniseries. Then come the investors, the upsurge of local businesses, increased funding for public safety, shiny new playgrounds. Slowly, the question on the lips of Hubert’s citizens morphs from “Should we profit from the Craigslist Cannibal?” to “Why *shouldn’t* we profit from the Craigslist Cannibal?”

If Ralph Newman weren’t decomposing under a headstone, he would have smiled at all the good things that he, an American hero, had brought about.

JOSH EPPERLY is a graduate student in watershed sciences at Utah State University, which allows him plenty of time to concoct his stir-crazy stories while counting mayflies under a microscope in a windowless basement laboratory. He daily finds himself torn between the great outdoors and the great word processor, and often settles for writing sessions accompanied by sagebrush-scented candles. Four of his short stories have been published in his undergraduate college’s literary magazine. He grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Georgie

Isha Ro

Georgine “Georgie” Koloniewska is forty-two years old and unemployed. She’ll tell you she’s a mango picker, if you ask her what she does, but she lives in London where no mangoes grow. Instead, she liberates the imported fruit from various stands around the city and makes herself lashings of fresh mango juice. She drinks these on high park benches where she can swing her feet through the dirt. There’s always dried mango strings stuck in Georgie’s teeth.

Georgie is from the Ukraine. Her mother was a seamstress and her father was a drunk. His favourite drink was vodka and lime juice, which was very sour and made Georgie’s lips twist up that one time she tried it when she was ten.

Georgie must throw salt over her shoulder if it is spilled.

Georgie has long red hair that falls to the back of her knees and a nose with a rather pronounced hump. Other than these two things, Georgie is fairly unremarkable.

Georgie does not watch films or television; she makes shadow Puppet Theater in her living room, to an audience of one.

Georgie is lonely.

In Georgie’s refrigerator, there is an egg, a dried up leek, a bottle of old olives in a salt bath, and a full container of soy milk. Georgie rescued the eggs from the organic store and covered them in warm blankets, but they never did hatch.

Georgie's favourite hobby is knitting woolen hats for pigeons. She has made dozens of pigeons' hats but has yet to place one on a pigeon's head. Pigeons are a bitch to catch.

Georgie enjoys autumn leaves, small dogs, large cats and almond butter. She goes to bed at seven p.m. and wakes up at four a.m., except on those days when she goes to bed at two a.m. and wakes up at one p.m.

Georgie smells like patchouli.

Georgie is also a pen collector. She collects the pens she finds in the streets, the ones she borrows from people at the unemployment agency, the ones she rips off the desk chains at doctor's offices. She asks people on the trains if she can borrow their pens and then flees swiftly out the doors at the next stop, cackling with glee and holding her prize aloft on the platform. She once stole a pen sticking temptingly out of a woman's handbag but then felt pretty bad about it afterwards so she placed it in a completely different woman's handbag two days later.

Georgie steals and begs and borrows dozens and dozens and dozens of pens. She puts them in a cup and then a box and then a drawer and then a cupboard and then a great, big sack, like Santa's. Her sack of pens takes up too much space in her tiny studio apartment, so she decides to give them away on craigslist. She writes an ad that says

Pens (Brixton)

I have collect so many pens that I have to say goodbye to some of them. Anybody interested? Thanks for looking. Georgine (071 xxx xxxx)

She is giving away her pens, but she is really hoping to meet someone: someone like her who she could, perhaps, collect more

pens or liberate mangoes with. Maybe a friend. Maybe something more. She is very excited with the anticipation of it.

But nobody calls.

At first. But then Petra gives her a ring and says she would like some, but not all, of Georgie's pens. She agrees to meet Georgie in front of the Jamaican Jerk Chicken place near the tube station. She is very tall and very young and wears all black. Her shoulders hunch and her hair is lank and her expression is a bit like a dazed cow lost in a field. She grabs a handful of pens out of the sack and says "right, thanks, yeah?" and stomps away before Georgie could even say "how d'ye do?" Georgie is a little disappointed, but not too much because they would not have made good friends.

Percy calls two weeks later. He suggests they meet in a café and have a cup of tea while he sorts through the pens. He only wants a particular type, he says: 0.5 fine ballpoint, black. Or he will take the fancy calligraphy ones, if any. Georgie meets him at The Fang Dangle, a hipster café on the corner of a busy street. Percy wears prescription-less glasses ironically, a top hat and striped socks. His face is half-buried in a full and bushy but manicured beard. This is why he likes this pretentious café, thinks Georgie.

Percy orders an almond milk cappuccino for himself and nothing for Georgie. He rifles through her sack of pens and begins pulling the caps off them, one by one, with his teeth. He bites deeply into them as he yanks the tops away from the bottoms, examining the nibs to find just the ones he likes. Each bite is like a piercing in Georgie's heart. My pens, she thinks, sorrowfully, as she watches them being abused by the hipster. "MY PENS!" she shrieks out loud, startling Percy as she grabs the cap dangling from his mouth, sweeps the exposed pens from the table into her sack and

storms out the café door. What kind of crazy person, thinks Georgie, bites pens like that?

The craigslist ad was a bad idea. So Georgie leaves the sack of pens beside a sleeping homeless man on the corner of her street. She is sure that he will appreciate having some working pens. When he wakes up, he looks excitedly in the sack to see what has been left him. He hopes it is some fresh bread or a nice, clean blanket or maybe some warm socks. He is decidedly annoyed when he realizes it is just a sack full of cheap pens. Is someone expecting him to write his PhD thesis with them, there on the streets? But the sack might be useful. He takes the sack to the river and dumps all the pens in. Thank goodness Georgie isn't there to see.

Georgie feels very sad about the failed craigslist ad, even though she believes the homeless man to be enjoying the pens thoroughly. She decides to cheer herself up by trying once again to put a warm wooly hat on a cold pigeon's head. Doing something good for society always makes her feel better, like the time she went around giving all the dogs in the neighborhood refreshing lemon wedges as treats in the summer.

Georgie is walking through the park. It is snowing and the snow is catching on the bare trees and Georgie thinks it is very pretty. Soon she sees a man running around in a very strange manner. He is moving frantically in a zigzag motion, his body bent over at the waist, his arms outstretched. She watches him for a while and realizes he is chasing pigeons. Georgie knows that people like to abuse the birds, kicking after them and trying to stomp on them. She hates when people do this.

"Hey!" Georgie cries. "You! Stop bothering that pigeon!"

"But . . . " he huffs, out of breath, "I'm just . . . I'm trying . . . oh bugger it all!" He flops himself down on a park bench as the pigeon flutters away in a huff. Pigeons have so much God damn attitude. "I was just trying to help," the man says, dejectedly.

Georgie looks him over. He is of average height and very skinny, with lots of lines around his solemn brown eyes. This must mean he laughs a lot, thinks Georgie, although he is so sad now. His hair is slightly wild; dark curls on top with a smattering of gray just over the temples and then a very long braid all the way down his back. He is wearing a threadbare black jacket with small, chunky pieces of avocado dried on the left lapel. He is twisting a small piece of fabric around his thumbs and looks like he's about to cry. Georgie's face softens and she sits down beside him. Georgie doesn't like to see people cry.

"It's so cold, you know?" says the man, almost to himself. "I just wanted to help."

"How?" says Georgie, her hand upon his back.

"Well, I've made them scarves, haven't I?"

Georgie's eyes widen as she looks at the fabric that the man is now holding up on display. She reaches out to touch it; it is tiny and soft and red and well knit. The man puts his hand in his pocket and brings out a heap of these wooly pigeon-sized scarves in every color of the rainbow. Georgie slowly reaches into hers and pulls out her stash of wooly pigeon-sized hats in every color of the rainbow. The man's jaw drops slightly open as he reaches out and plucks one from her hand; it is tiny and soft and turquoise and well knit.

They look up at quickly at each other. The man smiles first. It makes his laugh lines crinkle.

"My name is Ronald," he says.

She smiles back.

“And I,” she says, “am Georgie.”

ISHA RO is a Jamaican writer running on a corporate hamster wheel in the East side of Berlin. She lives with a large Czech, an oversized stuffed monkey and an imaginary Golden Retriever. The monkey is Luigi, the dog's name is George, and the Czech is called Schatz. She is trying to get off the wheel so she can write full time and make George a reality.

On the cover:

“Dead Reclining”

Darin Forrest is a tattooist and artist in Tacoma, Washington. He has been tattooing for over fifteen years, thirteen of which in Tacoma. He has two children, eighteen and fifteen. When he's not tattooing, he enjoys drawing, painting, and multimedia projects. Images of his tattoos and other art are available at flamingdragontacoma.com and on Instagram at [@defrost1974](https://www.instagram.com/defrost1974).

