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Editor's Note

March is dangerous, a month of meteorological mood swings and violently perforated togas, whose very name is a command to pick up our collective feet and get moving. The three stories in the pages of our eighty-seventh issue are all characterized by this intriguing blend of unpredictability and action. They also share an element of uncertainty, leaving the fates of their characters in question and implicitly inviting us to finish their stories ourselves.

Never trust anything that starts off as a lion but finishes up as a lamb; there's always a chance that a wild and carnivorous heart still beats beneath its soft white fleece . . .

— Laura Garrison

Snowball Wants to Go to Outer Space

Line Henriksen

Snowball wants to go to outer space.

"The stars," it says, as Limping Lotta looks at the void opening at the tip of her toes. "They're made of fire!"

"Won't they burn you?" Lotta once asked.

"Dragons don't burn!" Snowball scoffed at her. "Our scales are fire-proof."

"But you're made of plush," Lotta said.

Later her father dabbed her scratched cheek with soap and water. "How did you get these?" he asked, but did not believe her when she told him. "Snowball is just a toy, Lotta. But if he scares you so much, I can take him to the charity shop tomorrow."

Snowball was sitting right next to them.

Lotta shook her head.

"I'm sure he's very sorry for what he did. Aren't you, Snowball?"

"Sorry, Lotta," Snowball said in her father's best squeaky voice as he made its white snout nuzzle her bandaged chin.

Snowball was not sorry.

It was not sorry at all.

Snowball wants to go to outer space.

"Stars!" it says, as Limping Lotta leans forward, just a bit, her hands clasped tightly around a pole above her head. "They exploded a long time ago, but you can still see them. That's how far away they are."

The sun sinks a little deeper, bringing pink and purple to the clouds above and creeping shadows to the grass, the walkways, and the flowerbeds below. The sky is closer here, and Lotta lets go of the pole with one hand.

“How will you get there?” Limping Lotta once asked.

“I will fly, of course,” Snowball said. “Make me wings! These are too small for an astronaut dragon.” Snowball did not flap its tiny wings, for it rarely moved, but Lotta knew what it meant. For days she drew wings in her notebook and spread them out next to maps of the sky, pieces of cardboard and paper, sticks and plastic bottles. She glued and knotted, tied and hammered, and all the time Snowball watched from its place on the shelf, growing impatient, and in the living room her mother called the neighbours, yelling at them to get a grip on their bloody cat—Lotta could’ve lost an eye, for fuck’s sake!

Snowball wants to go to outer space, and it wants Limping Lotta to test the wings first. She is standing on the low concrete wall surrounding the roof terrace, but they still seem far away, the stars, the tiny exploding suns above.

“But why don't you try them out?” Lotta asks.

“Because you're a limper, that's why. The ground has already given up on one of your feet—now make it give up on one more.”

Lotta's hand lets go of the metal pole, and she feels the ground tugging at her, moving her towards the flowerbeds, and the walkways, and the patches of grass, all hidden in darkness below. She imagines how much better it would be to fly than to limp.

And so she falls into space.

LINE HENRIKSEN lives in the cold, deep dark of Denmark, where it rains a lot—except when it drizzles—and people generally avoid eye contact. Her work has appeared in, among others, *The Unlikely Coulrophobia Remix*, freeze frame fiction and *Pankhearst: Wherever you Roam*.

We're Not Dangerous

Sharon Mertins

The Building

The building used to have a decent little library. At least that is what it looks like it was. We all felt compelled to explore the remnants of it at the beginning, looking for literature that was fitting to our state of mind, convinced that if we exercised our social knowledge, filled our brains with philosophical thought, maybe we could stop whatever it was that seemed to be affecting us.

Some walked out of there with at least five books in hand, while others stood in front of broken shelves, confused, quiet, not even looking at the books, just trying to stay calm while something shifted inside them.

The first time it happened, there was a woman staring at the shelf next to me. She had short hair and was wearing a blue shirt. When Alexei saw her he leaned in and whispered, "Claire?"

I was inhaling, pressing an old book to my nose, smelling the dust, old paper, every finger that caressed it. "What?"

"Do you think she weel turn?"

Alexei speaks with an accent that I can't place. But he won't tell me where he's from. Or, like me, he can't remember.

The woman looked at us, then back at the shelf, then back at us nervously but without moving her head. She was panting. I put the book down, pushed Alexei back and hurried up the stairs.

She disappeared the next day.

The building is ours. At least we think it is. It's almost in ruins and it has five floors. The only intact part of it is the kitchen, all the way up top.

Quilty says there used to be green fields around the building. But the fields are a forest now, a luscious, large forest, and no one knows what lurks in there anymore.

I was exploring the fourth floor the other day and saw a girl I hadn't seen before. This one had straight, black shoulder-length hair. She was holding something candy red in her hands, a rubbery chew toy perhaps, but it looked like a giant tongue. She held it against her cheek as she peered out the window.

I wanted to ask her about it but was suddenly distracted by the violent rustling of the trees beneath us, outside. Something was dashing through them, breaking branches. Then a shrill scream. We both stepped back at the same time. The girl looked at me, holding the candy red toy in her hand. When she saw me looking at it she placed her hand on my arm.

"Please don't tell anyone," she said pressing the rubber tongue against her cheek. "I can't help it."

All I could do was nod.

Quilty is older than most of us, a bit heavier and with more than a few grey hairs. He spends most of his time on the second floor, on the west corner, where, he says, an invisible choir lulls him to sleep. He says he only hears it when he closes his eyes, helplessly falling

into a deep slumber. He says that the first time he heard them he heard a voice inside him saying, "Give up. Give up." So he did.

I don't hear the choir whenever I go there, but I want to.

When I asked him if he was afraid of the voices he looked at me through his thick glasses and shook his head. "How can you be afraid of peace?"

We spend most of our time on the third floor, sitting on a ledge, listening to the forest whisper and the movement beneath us rush by.

Sometimes we light a small fire, since there are no walls there besides a room in the corner. Alexei thinks that's what it is. But we don't know because the door is locked and we haven't managed to open it.

Adjustment

We don't go outside at all, still unsure of what we might encounter out in that forest if we do. This morning we were woken up by a rotting stench. It was so intense we all had to run up to the kitchen to escape it.

The kitchen doesn't have any walls. Windows surround it. They're made of horizontal glass palettes. They turn to open and shut. The good thing about these windows is that you can get fresh air through them without having to open them completely. You can put your hand between the palettes and throw things out. And

when you look down you can really appreciate the deep, deep green of the forest below.

The first time we entered the kitchen, the fresh smell of wet grass overwhelmed us. By the time we realized there was no grass we were already entranced by the singing of the birds. But there are no birds in there either. There is nothing alive in that kitchen, only food, lots of it. To be honest, I don't know where it comes from. But there's always more of it when the sun goes down. That's when the breeze pops up memories of spring, and the fireflies come out, hundreds of them. They light up their little bums in the air and brighten up the kitchen and the feast we all partake in, like a fairy forest at night.

Quilty and Alexei cooked for all of us yesterday. They used one of those disposable grill things we found in a cupboard. Alexei found a bottle of whisky and Quilty got drunk and started throwing chicken wings out the window.

He pranced around and threw them like Frisbees. "It's a wing!" he'd say chuckling. "It's meant to fly!"

Everyone was laughing, letting out shrill, euphoric screams. But I could hear the sound the chicken wings made when they hit the ground. *Thump*. I could feel it, inside me, like the beating of a drum that got louder and louder in my stomach, announcing, no, warning that *something* was being disturbed. That *something* was lurking out there. That it was coming and it was not far.

Quilty says he saw a deer standing next to the fire today. None of the others were there when it happened, when it stopped and looked at him, straight in the eye. The deer tilted his head to the

side and Quilty says he couldn't feel his legs. He saw a thousand thoughts shoot through his head at once. Then he felt it. He says he actually felt the deer saying something but it wasn't until it ran into the locked room, which was suddenly open, that he understood what it said.

When he regained feeling in his legs, he followed the deer to the room. But right before he went in, an electrical wave plunged through his body. The notion of reconciliation that engulfed him while the deer was there was gone. Everything went black and he passed out. When I was coming up the stairs he ran to me and said the deer said it would come soon.

"What will come soon?" I asked.

Quilty shook his head. "I don't know."

The room is open now. We spend a large chunk of our time with our cheeks pressed to its walls, embracing the cold breeze we feel at the beginning—a sign that the pink is coming—then feeling it all get warm. I've seen everyone's eyes roll back when it happens, as if dancing, when the images start to flood our brains. It's like being carried by a large ocean wave and washed ashore onto a bay of jelly.

I asked Alexei what he feels when he's in there. Alexei looked at me, brought his palms to his eyes and ran his fingers through his red hair. "It's like swimming in a warm pot of maple seerup," he said, and walked away.

For me it's like melting in the sweet scent of a puppy's breath. Quilty says it's like the sound of falling pillows and a warm sensation of youth, endless hope for a future that never happened

but exists infinitely inside him. The girl with the candy red tongue won't tell me what she feels but she always has tears in her eyes when the warm wave dissipates and everything goes back to normal.

The dissipation weighs on all of us though. It's like a claw that latches on to my chest, pumping something violent, primitive through my veins. I feel the heat rise in my body, the sweat released through my pores. I smell it on me. Like copper, dirt or rust. Whenever I feel this I hide out in the balcony on the second floor. It's close to the trees. And the canopy above it is so dense that no sunlight seeps through. I go there often now, to hear the forest speak, the panting, thumping and every so often . . . a scream.

They've gotten louder. And sometimes the impulse to dive into the green is overwhelming. But so is the fear.

Transformation

I was on the balcony counting leaves the other day. Trying to anyway, attempting to stall a feral instinct to jump. When Alexei came out he stopped in his tracks and glanced at my hands. I was gripping to the railing so tightly that my veins were swollen.

He leaned against the railing on the other end, glaring at me with dark alert eyes. Like a gazelle. He had cropped hair but the top was getting long and fell over his eyebrows. There were sweat spots on his t-shirt and his skin had a golden sheen.

"How are you?" he asked. I could tell his mouth was dry.

"I don't know."

I took a deep breath and I could almost taste the grass and savour the bark of the trees. I looked down toward the forest and saw the branches moving beneath us. My legs trembled and sweat dripped down my neck. That's when I felt the stench, wafting by with a hidden growl.

It's coming.

I swallowed and tasted something metallic in my mouth, felt that thump in the pit of my stomach.

When I glanced up I saw Alexei's pupils dilate. He was breathing panic. I could feel it. But he stopped when he saw me looking at him. Then he wrapped one arm around my waist and picked me up.

Smells, copper, bleach and soil fused. I felt his tongue in my mouth and wanted to say my mouth didn't taste right but the thought immediately vanished. This was not about us. It was about all those smells we couldn't recognize and these bodies, that suddenly felt new to us, adjusting to each other, thrusting, desperately wanting to be mollified.

Alexei disappeared the next day.

Quilty woke up shaky and drenched in sweat today. He says he's starting to see everything in black and white.

"If I change into something dangerous, shoot me," he says. He wipes the sweat off his forehead and hands me a gun.

I hold the gun in my shaking hand and stand there pointing it at him. After some time though, he covers his face with his hands and says the grey is fading. "It's like my head is full of butterflies."

I put the gun down and sit next to him. He drops his hands and smiles, or cries, or cries smiling. I can't tell.

"I still don't know what I'm going to be," he says.

I don't know either.

I have no appetite anymore. But when I go out on the balcony the smell of fresh leaves makes me salivate. I grip the railing as tight as I can, closing my eyes and inhaling. Quilty was right. Everything is black and white. I feel flat, like paper. But when I open them everything is crystal clear and the forest gleams with purity. I feel that wave of pink overtake my body and sway me like a loose feather.

When I hit the ground I breathe the forest in and feel the thick, humid air embrace me. I walk at first but soon break into a steady trot. I run, hide and look around for others. I hear them rushing past sometimes. I climb trees and smell them. I eat leaves and feel the soft, damp soil underneath my bare feet. Every time I inhale I hear something inside me saying "danger." But the danger is within us. I can feel it. It comes out when we breathe.

The others whisper in the shadows. "I'm not dangerous. I'm not dangerous," as if reassuring themselves that they can continue living without harming this strange social fabric that we are creating.

When I crouch down to drink water from a small stream I see Quilty running toward me.

"We're not dangerous," he screams. And there's a smile taking over his face.

The moon has a purplish hue and every time I look at the sky I feel as though I will be swallowed by it. The girl with the candy red tongue is sitting on a branch with her legs dangling from it. She looks down at us and says we are trapped inside our feelings of repression, our abstract emotions and infatuations. "We're wild animals riding a strange wave of mental sex," she says licking the branch.

I snigger but soon feel a putrid smell crawling up my nose. When I turn around, looking for something familiar, trying to find our building, my heart sinks. All I see is endless, infinite green.

"We're lost." I say, almost whispering. But the thought explodes inside me, giving me pain.

"Completely," the girl says holding the candy red tongue to her cheek. It's already covered in bite marks. "And it's wonderful!"

She pants as she says it and jumps off the tree, leaving me alone with Quilty and the sound of cracking leaves.

When the stench hits my nose again I hear it.

"Claire!"

I turn around. It's Alexei but I can't place his voice.

"Where are you?" I scream and break off into a sprint.

"Claire!"

I hear the thumping of my feet on the ground, deep inside me, in the pit of my stomach. I feel the night on my skin and this newfound agility in my body that propels me. Suddenly, the thumping isn't just beneath me but all around me. The others are running as well, hundreds of them. I can feel them, flowing through my veins.

When I glance up, just for a second, I see stars fly by. The sky is flooded with them. I'm drenched in sweat and my heart pounds as I scream. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* "Alexei!"

But my voice is devoured by the forest, by the rustling leaves, sharp gasps and heavy breathing, bodies dashing through bushes. The stench of their fear is overwhelming.

It's coming.

A growl echoes through me and I stop. "We're not dangerous. We're not dangerous. We're not dangerous. We're not dangerous."

But there's something running behind me. Us. Hunting. Getting closer with every breath.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

"By god, it's happening," Yells Quilty. "Run!"

When I glance back I see it.

It's coming.

And I know what I am.

I run as fast as I can. Flee through the trees, gasping. Terrified. Because I can't stop running.

Run. Fiercely, vehemently. Like a wild animal. Like prey.

SHARON MERTINS is a lover of gummy bears and surreal fiction. Her work has been published in *Leopardskin and Limes*, *Literally Stories*, *The Wild Word* and in 2016 she received an honorary mention for the Glimmer Train Short Story award for New Writers. She lives in Berlin, where she spends her time knitting threads of thoughts, dreams and weird little tidbits together, making them into stories.

Were It So Easy

Zachary J. Donnenberg

He rested on his back, no blanket. Just like me. Caterpillar fingers barely clasped his pacifier. His onesie hid his larva toes. It was two in the morning and this baby was calm, playful, happy. He was in a room of newborn blue and Bob Ross clouds, hypnotized by the nine—no, eight—planets. A rocket soared between the Earth and Mars of his mobile. With a flick of my wrist it spun—heliocentric, but not to scale. With a flick of my wrist the boy laughed, wide-eyed, toothless. The pacifier fell from his mouth; I shushed him silent.

In the light of the moon, the real moon, this boy, infant: mint condition, had no story, no memories—nameless. His eyes followed the rotating rings of Saturn, but he couldn't possibly know that the real deal was seven hundred fifty million miles away. Out of reach, an idea validated by the telescope, something he had never used. The horizon was the universe, the universe horizon. When I opened the opaque curtains and let loose the world, the trees to him must have seemed like nebulas to me. I wondered if the window's draft was his first experience with cold.

The infant turned his gaze from the mobile to me, lazy eyelids matching a wet thumb. We stared at each other, a battle of wits, or determination, or stubbornness. I hardened my brow, pursed my lips, crossed my eyes. He shivered. I recoiled. Was I not funny, entertaining, silly? Did this baby not have a baby's sense of humor? Was he elevated prematurely to some sort of higher thought, some transcended conscience that steered clear of the "funny face equals

laughter” formula of infantile comedy? Was my face so ugly, so repulsive, so grotesque, that even an unconditioned baby could have the capacity to reject me?

He shivered again. He shivered. He was cold.

It wasn't instinct that picked up the child. It wasn't paternity that pressed his head against my lungs. His hand curled against my collarbone, his feet dangled freely and kicked my abdomen. He struggled to get comfortable in my novice grip, a golden mole let loose from the sand. He grunted. He squeaked. He had volume.

I laid him on the carpet. French vanilla. I hesitated.

I did not stand up; I did not loom over the baby as if I were his master or his superior. Instead, I stretched amongst the Stanley Steamer grass on my side as a breathing, sweating buffer between him and the window. I shielded him from the voices of the wind, the light of the tree bark, the darkness of the two a.m. We were equals, mutually subordinate to each other's whim, congruent in our vulnerabilities and our flaws. He was incapable of speaking to me, and yet I was incapable of speaking to him. Words meaningless to his ears, expressions fruitless in his eyes. I raised my brow, expecting to be ignored in another failed attempt to entertain him, knowing that the result would be vapid.

Instead, he looked at me. He smiled. I smiled. Open mouth, teeth, no cavities. He smiled at my face, my dumb face. He acknowledged me. He was human, and so was I. My body curled, a concave billboard, an oaken plank flexed for his ship's bow. His smile grew. It was bashful, self-aware; his fists covered his mouth, then his nose, then his mouth again. I giggled. It was audible, vocal, incoherent to me yet coherent to him.

I raised my hand above us, my fingers dancing like jellyfish in the current. They fluttered, prudent yet free. He was fascinated, curious, enthralled. He was an arbiter elegantium, curating my every move. And so, my fingers danced. They were lilies in a stream, edelweiss with an Alpine wind, snow brushed from a hillside. Subtle, tactful, faking coordination. The infant stared at my fingers as if they were unnatural, yet his stare seemed so natural.

He extended his arm upward, pudgy and amorphous. It took strength to reach, perseverance to stretch. I could see it in his face. He wanted something. Mere inches from my hand, he swiped and lunged at the air between us. I lowered myself. His fingers wrapped around mine. Five caterpillars tightened around one branch. The dancing stopped. The current ebbed and the jellyfish ceased. There was no stream, no mountains, no snow. There were only fingers, and moon light, and his laughter.

How can one dare to silence the light that gleams from innocent eyes? As I lay beside him, his hand around my finger, his laughter echoing off the newborn blue walls, and his playful peeps getting more and more frequent, I couldn't bring myself to stop him. I could see his happiness and his ignorance. He tightened his grip and waved my hand with the sort of sporadic intention that only unadulterated joy could have. This infant, this child, this living creature both complex and simple was playing with my finger, smiling and laughing and squealing in ways that only we were experiencing. This moment was idyllic, singular, and conjoined. We were one, this baby and I. We were one moment, one memory, one single two a.m. of unfunny faces and tiny fingers that culminated into laughter, and to happiness.

And yet, this all was temporary. It was fleeting. This laughter, this happiness, this slow-motion panorama of joy and innocence was nothing more than chalk. The infant could never remember this night. He was too young, his slate too blank. His mind could not yet comprehend that which he could not see—memory, of course, being vision without sight. He could never recall the friendly man with the ski mask on his head.

The infant stripped from me all my caution and attention. In my ignorance, I never turned off the baby monitor that sat on the nightstand just beside his crib. I neither closed his bedroom door, nor walked downstairs, to the expensive television in the living room. In my trance, I ignored the sound of his mother's footsteps. Surely she had wondered why her newborn son was laughing at two a.m.; surely she had wondered why a man with a ski mask was lying beside him on the floor.

ZACHARY DONNENBERG is a writer of lucid poetry, quirky prose, and horizon-spanning fiction from northwestern New Jersey. His work has previously been published in *Nebo: A Literary Journal*. He currently attends the Creative Writing BFA and English BA programs at Arkansas Tech University.

On the cover:

“Save Us/Take Me”

JOSEPH BROOKS is a Pacific Northwest fine artist and illustrator residing in Seattle. He has lived and shown work in and around Seattle/Tacoma for the past 10 years. Joseph is a member of BLAM! in The Greenwood Collective. He has displayed work during Pioneer Square's First Thursday, West Seattle Artwalk, Rat City Art City, Phinneywood ArtUp, Georgetown's Art Attack, Blitz Capitol Hill, Fremont First Friday, SDC 2nd Thursday, and at various Coffee Shops, Music venues, and Galleries in the Seattle/Tacoma Metropolitan area. His work is available at josephbrooksart.com.

