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Editor's Note

Welp, when lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd, we weren't trying to smell them through DIY bandana face-masks while maintaining twelve-foot-diameter personal space bubbles. This shit got hella real and then proceeded to fling itself into our collective fan.

The poems and stories here in our one-hundred-and-eighth issue brought some sparkle to our gloomy days, and we hope they'll do the same for you. Take a leap with Sarah Sexton's statuesque protagonist and sing the sheep electric with AR Dugan's replicant. Ride a Sisyphean ouroboros with P.K. Read, look down on Leatherface with Anne Gresham, and explore the final frontier with Deborah P Kolodji before trying on a new (out)look with Chris Stanton.

Take care of yourself and your loved ones. We'll be back with another issue in July.

— Laura Garrison

Weightless

Sarah Sexton

The girl began turning to stone at a young age. When she first noticed the spot on her arm, it was only about the size of a dime. She enjoyed running her index finger over the smooth surface in tiny perfect circles, the way an older woman might rub lotion onto her face with the pads of her fingertips. Smooth, rhythmic circles. The stony surface spread further and became heavy, and she became stronger for carrying the weight. The girl liked the way it grounded her, the way her heavy feet pulled against the sidewalk as she walked, challenging the concrete not to crack under her greatness. Eventually, the stone took over most of her body. If other children made fun of her, she couldn't hear their taunts through her cold, hardened ears. She did poorly in school and passed her free time reading comics about mutant superheroes and trying to force her body to do simple, insurmountable tasks, like whistling or turning cartwheels.

When the girl was of age, her parents pulled her from school and paid a career specialist to steer her towards a lucrative career that would befit her specialized condition. The specialist recommended multiple still-life career choices, such as holding trays of champagne at holiday parties, or handing out towels in upscale bathrooms. These career suggestions were offensive to the girl, as she knew she was much more skilled than a table.

With her heart full of dismay, the girl decided to travel while she considered her future. She toured the crowd-sanctioned destinations of Europe and found herself no closer to happiness. In

museums, she was mistaken for works of art; strangers posed next to her as their friends took pictures. It was the first time she considered she might be beautiful. She pictured herself in the photo albums of strangers, their families oohing and awing with envy as they studied the girl's face. But the hands turning the pages of the album would be effortlessly soft. The girl raised a stony hand to her stony arm and made tiny perfect circles, her finger scraping an imprint into her arm as it moved. Flecks of dust sprang into the air from the gentle grinding. She stopped. The girl considered the cost of softness and whether it was a price worth paying. She walked to the bus station and bought herself a ticket.

Along the way, she admired many things out the bus window. She loved the buildings. She loved the animals. She loved the small, efficient cars. She loved the light, distant clouds. There was no one thing she loved the most.

As she disembarked from the bus, she became immediately entranced with the song of the ocean. She followed that song to the edge of a cliff. The weight of her toes on the edge crumbled away the loose dirt. She heard small rocks rattle down the earthy wall toward the water. The girl knew the ocean was a brute force, but from such a great height, the waves against the large boulders below were only a gentle purr. She knew that gravity was likely but not indisputable. She knew that rules are always changing. She knew that if she stepped off the edge of the cliff, one of two things would happen: so she did.

SARAH SEXTON lives in northern Minnesota with her strangely industrious cat. Sarah is working toward her MFA at Pacific University, where she particularly enjoys reading and writing flash fiction.

Do Sacrifices Dream of Empathy?

AR Dugan

*Time and tide he thought. The cycle of life.
Ending in this, the last twilight.
Before the silence of death.
He perceived in this a micro-universe, complete.*

— Philip K. Dick

I want more life, fucker.

— the android Roy Batty
in *Blade Runner* (1982)

*Ask: When did the word please / become our weakness? / Say: In every
declaration I see sacrifice. / Ask: On how many altars must I open? / Say:
I need the response to my call — / I love you. / Ask: Is the lie you told me
empathy? / Say: Take two in the morning for your trouble. / Ask: Where's
the floating red cross that fills my vessel? / Say: Life is like a cell / phone
battery—a little less each charge. / Ask: When I feel the weight of it all, /
will you find the brim and overflow me? Say: My fullness is yours now. /
Call me Capacity. / Ask: Why does every offering find us here? / Say: The
light that burns twice as bright, / burns half as long. / Ask: Do tears
count? Do thoughts? / Say: Speak my name like a good machine. Join me.
/ Ask: When is the expiration date? / How much time? / Say: The
knowing another loss / itself. Ask: In the end, / will your depletion be
enough to bring me back?*

AR DUGAN is the author of the chapbook *Call / Response* (Finishing Line Press, 2019) and has an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College. His poetry can be seen or is forthcoming in a number of literary magazines and reviews, recently in *Barrow Street*. He has read poetry for *Ploughshares* and taught literature and writing at Emerson College and Wheaton College. He lives and works in Boston.

Coiled

P.K. Read

The seams of the last bag came apart at the summit of the loading ramp and an arterial gush of red lentils spilled down onto the pavement below in a whispered rush. Temo shut his eyes for a second, sack still on his shoulder and bleeding out, and hoped that when he opened them again, the bag would be intact. He opened them and the spill was spreading faster than a rumor of free food. He slid the bag to the side to stop the flow but it only made it worse. The sack disgorged its last few beans, covering the top of his criss-cross sandals, until it just was a limp rag.

An animal cry went up from Uncle Fester the supervisor. Temo knew the gist of it without paying attention to the words. He was already bobbing, nodding, sorrying with a bent back and raised hands to the yells. Then came the command to clean up every last lentil. When he raised his eyes, finally, to meet those of the burly Uncle Fester with the Old Spice, old sweat, old hate smell, what he saw was a round mouth filled with anger, tongue a bright cherry tomato in a loud hole. Temo lowered his head again.

The problem wasn't the lentils or Fester's sucker punch that landed somewhere between Temo's shoulder blades and knocked him over. The problem was that he would miss allocation time at Al Jade's.

The sleeping cots would all be gone and here he was, scooping lentils and boot dirt and dead bugs into the torn sack and wondering how he was going to keep it from busting open again before he was even done.

The daily serpent, the one he felt creeping up his back, the snake in search of his head, the one that would swallow his eyes, had already started its upward journey in his heavy feet and clumsy hands. Fester's red hole was spouting noise above him, something about hurry up and want to go home and why was he taking so long and useless moron idiot retard and more words that meant the same thing.

Temo scooped the lentils into the sack, tilting it to keep them in, the remaining lentils on the ground bright against the black bitumen, why couldn't it have been something black or grey instead of dark orange? Something invisible against the street, just like he longed to be when he slept rough. Something unseen and left alone.

It didn't matter how long it had taken once he was done, because he knew it was too late. A last trumpet burst from Fester, louder because Temo dodged an awkward kick, and he would spend the next half hour walking to Al Jade's and indulging in what was less than hope. Because it was hopeless. The other places were all further away, he didn't know the masters as well, and anyway, it would be even later and they'd all be full. The sky was a slurry of impending rain; the spots under the bridges would have been claimed and anyway, anyway, Fester had withheld what he said was the cost of the ruined goods—he'd made Temo carry the sack straight to one of the stinking disposal slips only after checking the ground for every last damn lentil—and somehow the cost of that sack had equalled exactly half of Temo's wage for the day. Who knew how expensive lentils were? He could have at least used the lentils for cooking but no, Fester made sure that the lentils

were scattered all across the slip, covering everything from rotten fruit to bags of what looked and smelled like dog shit.

Cars drove by on the road, new, old, with one person, with more, with families, all driving toward places that had a place to lie down. If not now, because maybe they were driving to dinner or to the movies or to a ballgame or to make love or just to stroll along a waterfront and hold hands, in the end, they would go back to a place that had a bed. A bed in which they could lie down, spread their arms or curl into a ball or hold one another, and then fall into a slumber, head on a pillow or a shoulder, a slumber that was theirs and only theirs.

If Uncle Fester had even an inkling of the power he could have over all the shoulders and backs and lives of the men like Temo if, instead of a loading dock and a wad of crumpled cash, what he had was cots and blankets, well. Then he would be a despotic ruler, indeed.

Fortunately, Al Jade and the other sandman merchants were benign despots. Not because they were kind, because they never offered anything for a discount when they could ask for more, but they didn't rule their nighttime realms with hate. Just greed, a simpler beast to placate. You could feed greed and it wouldn't bite you like that gutter rat hate.

Al Jade said a master of slumber was friend to no one. Friends wanted favors and Al Jade traded only in zzz's.

The dim lights of Al Jade's flickered between riverside tree trunks. Temo's legs were getting heavy at the sight, like a dog that starts drooling at the sound of running water. The bus shelters already had men shoving one another for the slanted plastic half-seats. Temo felt the first drop of rain hit his forehead. The street

lights came on, spots of orange as bright as a burst bag of lentils. He could smell Al Jade's bone and barley soup on the wet air, not much better than a bowl of dog hair but still. The elusive hand of nod waved to him on its scent, curled a tempting finger and he followed, damn it, he followed even though he knew it was a lie.

Al Jade was blocking the door, arms stretched, against three men. All of them larger than the proprietor, all of them cowed by his fierce restedness, his fed belly, his sated vigor. "Full, full, doesn't matter if you have money, we are full as a sack of ticks, you have to come earlier if you want a bowl and a cot at Al Jade's." The men muttered and moved on and Al's gaze found Temo. "Ah, boy, you are late. Late, late, late. King Sleep does not wait."

"I've got money." Which was partly true.

Al Jade shrugged, still filling the door.

"A corner, I'll just sit, full fee for a wall."

"That's the start of all bad things, a little slip here, a wall for your back there."

"Bowl of soup?"

"It's a package deal, kid. See you tomorrow."

"You said that yesterday."

"And I was right."

The snake writhed up Temo's hips and was flexing, tightening its grip. The boy tried to meet Al Jade's one working eye but the man knew how to look and not look at the same time. Temo had missed the cot the night before, the fault of an ill-advised back alley detour to a where a guy on the docks said a butcher dumped the day's unsold steaks, a tip that turned out to be both patently wrong and sickening as well.

If he didn't get a good doze soon, at least three hours in a row, he might lose his mind. He could feel his edges fraying like a burlap sack. He didn't want to find out what parts of Temo might spill onto the pavement.

He watched his feet in the sandals slide forward at the bottom of his legs. Left foot, right foot. The last bed had been the back seat of an unlocked car, four nights ago, what a windfall. Like finding a week of free meals.

A glossy black car slyed up, a cat ready to pounce. Temo edged to the other side of the sidewalk, furthest from the curb.

A man leaned out. Old. Thirty, maybe. Smooth pale skin, hair in neatly tousled curls, a beard oiled and trimmed into a sculptural statement. The time it must take to do that every day, the lack of intrusion. The man was smiling, white teeth saying words that Temo barely heard above the hissing of the snake at his waist.

"Hey, kid, need a ride?" The guy waved his hand, beckoned like a nap, friendly-like.

Temo shook his head.

"Come on, we'll go get something to eat, take you where you need to go. Maybe you need a place for the night?"

Temo glanced inside the car without turning his head. The driver, clean-shaven cheeks glowing with rest and food, had that hungry grin that only meant one thing: The kind of guys who tried to pick up fifteen-year-olds like Temo never delivered what they promised. Temo knew from experience that if there was one thing he wouldn't get from these two, it would be a safe bed.

These men would never suspect their wealth lay in a single piece of furniture in a single room, and the undisturbed space around it.

“Hey, your mom know you’re out this late?”

A flicker of response would only spur them on. That part of life, a mom who worried about where he might be, was lost to time and memory, a dissipated dream that leaves a vague uneasiness but no real image upon which to build one’s own story.

They drove off in a spout of laughter.

It was truly raining now. Temo felt the first drip trickle down his spine but the snake was already there and the snake was stronger than cold or wet. Every park bench that was under any sort of cover, every doorway, every space under trucks in the parking lots, everything was either taken or too dangerous.

There was always the Heap, but that sewer would be stinky and dripping in the rain, heaving with boys, and the older ones weren’t any better than the two men in the car.

The snake was almost at the nape of Temo’s neck and he’d be done soon. The worst bedtime, the one that left him somewhere on the pavement like a lost penny, cut or bruised anywhere, at the hands of anyone.

He made his way to the train station, bought a two-day old stale roll, then spent the rest of his food money on a round-trip ticket to the city’s downtown sector, a good hour from here. If he could find a corner between party-goers heading in and late commuters heading out, he might even get in two round trips before a security guard found him. Then it would be a question of finding a spot to lean, any place out of the rain.

It wasn’t the shuteye that Temo craved. It wasn’t the rest, or the darkness, or the release of his muscles and bones and the nod of his head against his shoulder or someone else’s. That was just the snake’s hiss.

What Temo craved was a dream, just a single real dream, one that would show him the way out, a path to follow by day, one that would lead him somewhere softer at night.

He got on the train. There was a space near the front next to a couple in a deep kiss. They didn't even notice as he snuggled in between them and the wall. He swallowed the bread in three bites and then the snake swallowed his head.

He awoke with a start. The train, the kissing couple, his dry corner, all were gone. How long had he been out?

There was a sack on his back, heavy, and his feet were below him, walking up the loading ramp. He was sweating in the sun. Uncle Fester was bellowing at the boy ahead of him, and a rush of lentils skittered everywhere, down the ramp, on the pavement, bouncing impishly, impishly bouncing everywhere. Temo adjusted his own sack, and blinked against the blue sky above. He didn't remember how he'd gotten here, he didn't know what time of day it was, or why his stomach felt neither empty nor full. But the snake was already there, making its daily climb.

The lentils fell and covered the tops of the criss-cross sandals of the boy ahead, feet and sandals that looked just like his own. They were his own. Where did the snake end, and the dream begin?

He felt Uncle Fester's punch land between his shoulders.

P.K. READ's non-fiction (mostly on feminism, environment and extinction) and short fiction have been published in *Mother Jones*, *Undark*, *Litro*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Bartleby Snopes*, the 2015 Bristol Short Story Prize Anthology, *The Feminist Wire*, *Huffington Post*, *Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel*.

The Youngest Cannibal Returns to Texas for the Holidays After Her First Semester of College

Anne Gresham

By the time we finally drag out the sledgehammer, I'm ready to be back in my dorm and as far from my family as I can get. The meat—a middle-aged accountant that wandered into the family store last night—is screaming bloody murder, and I've got a splitting headache. All of this—the chainsaw, the blood sucking, the bone cracking—is mortifying me. I find myself wishing someone who shares my genetic material were at least with it enough to know the difference between Descartes and Kierkegaard.

Once the meat's eyes are sticky and still, Daddy offers me its dark wet liver with a big smile. There's a desperate hope in his expression that if I take it, it'll be like nothing has changed. I look around at the dust covering the skull pile on the mantel, the sad flapping of decades-old skins hung up over the rusty, unreliable radiator clanging away in the kitchen, the overflowing litter box serving ten or so resident cats whose odor underscores the coppery tang of blood and bowel. I look at Daddy, his beard streaked with gray, and I see ghosts of my childhood surrounding him, ghosts he's trying unsuccessfully to resurrect by offering me my favorite treat, ghosts who are content to stay here, who aren't asking for anything more from the world than to be the family baby forever.

I take the bit of liver and do my best to smile back.

ANNE GRESHAM is a writer and librarian living in Northwest Arkansas with her husband, daughter, and assortment of tiny carnivores. Her work has appeared in *Unnerving*, *X-R-A-Y*, and elsewhere. For more, visit annegresham.com or follow her on Twitter at @agresham.

Three Scifaiku

Deborah P Kolodji

insomnia
those fierce Martian
winds

planted trees
in the surface dome
forest bathing

unbridled drones
the year of the horse
nebula

DEBORAH P KOLODJI moderates the Southern California Haiku Study Group and is the former president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. She has published 4 chapbooks of poetry, over 1000 poems, and has appeared in several anthologies, including "Aftershocks: Poetry of Recovery," The Red Moon Anthology, the Rhysling Anthology, *Dwarf Stars*, and *A New Resonance 4*. She has published several short stories and a memoir appears in *Chicken Soup for the Dieter's Soul*. Her first full-length book of haiku and senryu, "Highway of Sleeping Towns," from Shabda Press won a distinguished book award from The Haiku Foundation.

Ellen

Chris Stanton

Ellen's husband Pete died in February. He owned and operated his own plant nursery, and there were still pots of ivy and succulents all over the house that were a constant reminder of him. Ellen was having trouble keeping them alive, but she didn't want to throw them away, because she thought that would be disrespectful to his memory. So her grieving process had been traumatic and never ending.

On top of that, Barb—her stylist of thirty-one years—retired just before Thanksgiving and moved to Boca Raton. So Ellen, who had gotten her hair done every Saturday morning at 9:30 for as long as she could remember, had to find a new place to get spruced up each week. This was a distressing dilemma.

Denise, Ellen's grown daughter who lived on the other side of town, wasn't sympathetic. "Why do you need a perm so often?" she asked. "You're destroying your hair! Just let me do it. I'll come by and trim your bangs when you really need it."

Ellen's gray hair was awfully thin, but it did have a gentle curl that gave her bright hazel eyes an extra spark, so she knew it would be tough to find someone who did it justice, like Barb had. She also wanted to remind her daughter that Barb had been a trusting confidant and shoulder to cry on during her many years of marriage to Pete, and she had been particularly supportive during his illness. But Denise had always been stubborn and it wasn't worth trying to explain it to her. She kept her hair in a perpetual Dorothy Hamill bob that required little to no maintenance, and she

had a loyal husband to lean on. So Ellen changed the subject and tried to focus on having a nice Thanksgiving with her family, even though Denise burned the stuffing.

That night, she had trouble getting to sleep, and it wasn't because she missed Pete lying next to her, snoring gently. It was because she had decided what she was going to do next.

Dandelion Crossing was opening the next morning, and it was incredibly close to her house; it would take less than ten minutes to walk there. Ellen still remembered when the spot had been a vast field full of clover and wildflowers. A woman at the Bingo had told her that there was a salon inside the mall that would be a completely viable option for her hairdressing needs, so Ellen decided she would go there to scope out the situation. She was a retired nurse and felt it was important to get a full picture before making any decision.

Ellen considered driving there, but she felt nervous maneuvering her 1974 Chevy Impala around crowds of excited shoppers in the parking lot. So she put on a pair of comfortable shoes and left the house right before *Press Your Luck* started.

She had written down the name of the salon—New Attitude—on a sticky note, and she went right to the first security guard's desk she saw to ask where it was. It turned out to be across the way from an arcade where throngs of teenagers milled about like ants around an ice cream cone melting on the ground.

The place was brightly lit and the receptionist had teased hair that lifted off her forehead like she'd just stuck her fingers in an electric socket. She looked like a spokesmodel from *Star Search*.

“Hi there,” she said. “Come on in. What can we do for you?”

Ellen looked past her with considerable trepidation. She saw four stations where stylists were at work, as well as a row of hair dryers and sinks. Television monitors played a music video from a cheerful androgynous man who was singing about a church of the poison mind. Ellen wasn't sure what that meant.

“I need a perm,” she said quietly. “Do you do those here?”

The receptionist looked at her as if she'd said a word in Russian.

“A permanent,” Ellen clarified.

The receptionist grinned. “Our policy here at New Attitude is to give our clients a one-on-one consultation to determine your needs and subsequently recommend a course of action before we move forward.”

“Am I in court?” Ellen asked.

“No, ma'am. But after your appointment, you'll definitely have a new attitude!”

Before Ellen could counter, the receptionist called to the back.

“Timothy! You have a guest!”

Ellen was seventy-five years old and even though she was used to high-pressure medical situations, she still felt slightly uncomfortable when things moved too fast. Before she knew it, an extremely tall person entered the reception area. His hair was dyed blackish-purple and pointed in several hundred different directions at once, like a porcupine. He wore heavy dark eyeliner and his t-shirt had an image of a screaming zombie on it. It read: THE DEAD LOVE BRAINS.

“I—” Ellen began.

“Come on back,” Timothy said. And before she knew it, Ellen was following the Gothic scarecrow to his station.

Truth be told, Barb had always done Ellen's hair in the front room of her house, giving Ellen an excellent view out the wide bay window of her front yard and the cars driving by in their quiet suburban neighborhood. She wasn't used to a proliferation of mirrors and bright lights magnifying each wrinkle and liver spot, or the intense smell of hairspray. But that was the situation as the person named Timothy escorted her to her styling chair.

Ellen sat down and took a deep breath. She had spent her life dealing with patients of all kinds at the hospital, but men and women who dressed like they had just risen from their coffins were a relatively new thing, as Phil Donahue had discussed in a recent episode. New Wave Punks—if she was getting the name right—didn't frighten her, but she had no idea how to connect with them, or if they even wanted to exist in the same world as the people around them.

"My name's Timothy," he said, leaning against the counter and smiling a tentative smile. He wore tight black jeans and a studded leather belt, along with combat boots that he had probably stolen off a dead person in an alley.

"Ellen," she replied. His station was in the corner and there were no personal touches anywhere—no coffee mugs or photos of his family taped onto the corner of the mirror. It looked sterile and lonely.

"You seem scared," Timothy said. "I want you to know that I graduated second in my class in cosmetology school, and I worked at Astor Place Hairstylists for just over a year."

Ellen didn't know what that was. "Why did you leave?" she asked.

"I ran out of money," he replied. "New York is really expensive, even when you're living in a basement with six roommates."

Ellen shivered at that thought. "Are you originally from here?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm living with my parents until I can get back on my feet," he said. "I'm real grateful to be getting another shot."

Ellen felt herself sweating under her bra straps. The television behind her started playing a music video featuring men singing about a union of the snake. "Do you have photos of past clients of yours?" she asked.

"No ma'am," he replied. "I guess I should start doing that."

Ellen told herself then that there were other salons around the city. She didn't mind driving, if there was plenty of daylight.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," she ventured.

Timothy smiled again. "Your hair is really nice," he said. "Can I touch it?"

After a moment of debate, Ellen nodded. His fingers were surprisingly gentle as he lifted her hair, then let it settle back. "Daphne mentioned you'd like a permanent," he said. "I'm fully qualified to do them."

"My last stylist knew how to give really delicate ones," Ellen told him. "I don't want it to come out looking frizzy."

"Agreed," Timothy said. "Frizzy is for Nina Blackwood only."

Ellen had no idea who that was. She thought about Pete, how he would patiently sit in his living room chair after work as she tried out new recipes for dinner. How he never complained, even when they both knew she'd screwed up.

"All right," she finally said. "Let's get to it."

Timothy did a horrifying job on her permanent. Ellen looked like a grandma version of Little Orphan Annie.

“What do you think?” he asked proudly, standing behind her chair as they looked at the finished product in the mirror.

“I—” Ellen began. She reached up and tried to tuck some of the Medusa-like curls behind her ears. Timothy waited with expectant eyes that were heavy with dark liner.

“I guess it’ll take some getting used to,” she ventured.

There was a flash of disappointment on his face. “Sure,” Timothy replied. “It’s a change. But I really think you’re going to turn some heads.”

Ellen wanted to say that she would, but for the wrong reasons. But she decided that would be too cruel. “How much do I owe you?” she asked, trying to keep her voice even.

“You don’t like it, do you?” he asked. “You can be honest.”

Ellen took a look at him standing there behind him, the dejection causing his shoulders to slump, his dark clothes magnifying his pale skin. Even the zombie on his t-shirt suddenly looked disappointed.

“I love it,” she told him.

Ellen got home in time to have a late lunch and watch a bit of *As the World Turns*. She had stopped watching the show regularly years ago, so she didn’t recognize much of the cast.

The rest of the afternoon she did her vacuuming and dusting, but she kept going into the bathroom to check her hair, hoping that her opinion of it would change. It didn’t.

But on her fourth visit, she noticed the potted cactus on the windowsill. That particular part of the house only received sun for a brief time early in the morning, so the plant just wasn't doing well. She remembered a similar one that Pete had kept in his office at the nursery that bloomed beautifully in shades of purple and pink.

There seemed to be even more shoppers at the mall the following day. Ellen resisted the urge to wear a hat during her walk over. She tried to walk proudly and without regard for how people looked at her as they went past.

Daphne looked up from her desk as Ellen approached. "Well hello," she said. "It looks like somebody's got a new attitude."

Ellen was momentarily distracted by the receptionist's enormous geometric earrings, but she held fast. She held her plastic bag carefully. "Is Timothy in?" she asked. "I've got a gift for him."

Daphne raised one eyebrow, almost imperceptibly. "Oh?" she asked. "Let me check for you, sweetie."

Ellen resisted an urge to trip her as she swooshed past in a swirl of pastels. Instead, she waited until she heard Timothy calling her name.

"Hey," he said as she walked over to him. His client was sitting under a hair dryer nearby. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"This is for you," she told him, and handed him the bag. "Be careful. It's sharp."

Timothy carefully pulled the cactus plant out of the bag. "Righteous!" he said. "I've never owned a plant before!"

“I’ve had trouble getting it to bloom,” Ellen told him. “There’s so much light in here that I think it might do well. And you need a little personal touch on your station. I’m a grandma, so it’s okay for me to say things like that,” she added.

Timothy smiled his genuine, crooked smile. “Yes ma’am,” he told her. “I’m going to take excellent care of it. And maybe you’ll give me another chance.”

“That was never a question in my mind,” Ellen replied. She smiled back, because she realized it was the truth.

CHRIS STANTON is a creative writer and artist in Los Angeles. His first novel *Kings of the Earth* was recently published and has been nominated for the 2020 TopShelf Book Award. He also created the graphic novel *Nick Pope* with the late Christopher Darling, and his short stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines, most recently *Orson’s Review*. You can check out more of his work at christopherstanton.com.

On the cover:

“Every single hand is just a tree”

Ajay Kumar (Jordan) Singh is an Indian Photoshop digital artist who is currently working with Leo Burnett Mumbai as Associate Creative Director. He can be found on Instagram @jordansingh838 and on Twitter @artist_ajay.

