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Editor's Note

We know. But—this is important—despite everything, you're still here. We are, too. With words to revive your exhausted and snacky spirits. From A. E. Weisgerber, there's "Bayonne Bridge," a gorgeous sestina that must be read aloud to be fully appreciated. (Trust us; your cat will love it.) Next, Miles Greaves ponders "The Identity of Indiscernibles" in a voice that feels contemporary yet Poesque, and we suspect Edgar Allan would grudgingly concede the grotesque imagery is streets ahead. Sergey Gerasimov spins a surprising and well-paced fairy tale "About People of Glass and Stone," while Hamdy Elgammal slowly tips the floor beneath your feet in the surreal creeper "Broadside." Completing the issue is a refreshing palate-cleanser of a haiku from Nick Corvino.

We never really trusted the old normal, and we sure as hell aren't gonna let them drop this new one in our pumpkin holes without a fight. Normal is for suckers. Keep being beautifully, earnestly, incandescently weird.

— Laura Garrison

Bayonne Bridge

A. E. Weisgerber

Come walk along the Bayonne sky
and pause above the Kill Van Kull.
where hallelujah arching vaults,
o'er asphalt launch their sonic songs,
Doppler Effects, Brian Enoes,
in curlicue wakes of tug boats.

Our muse assumes the shape of boats,
ambassador of bay and sky,
then, like old man Verrazano
whose distant towers peep the kull,
her steady hiccup-wheels spin songs
with expansion joints and asphalt.

Power-wedges? cushioned assault?
Nothing much has changed with tug boats.
Their surly, barging strong-armed song
pips under a chip of asphalt sky—
whose girders, cables, arches, cull
an eight-fingered wave from Queneau.

Something about this form, Q knows,
is shabby vintage, like John Galt.
Wooden word pallets, ladders, sculls,
strew the paths of prowling tug boats.
Rivets, bolts, footings, beams, the bridge:
It's aggressive, this Kill Van Kull song.

At mid-span our muse plumbs new songs,
Naphtha spills? Yes, quite apropos.
The Fresh Kills landfill birds the sky,
and greens the World Trade voids and vaults,
caresses sorrow. Noble boats
lay down their wreaths in Kill van Kull.

Men dredge and score the Kill Van Kull
where cars hurl sonic arrow-songs
of spanners, rivets, martyrs, boats,
and diesel muses let us know
this bridge is loved, loved to a fault:
a prayer aloft in Bayonne's sky.

Envoi

I love the sky, says Kill Van Kull.
I love the salt, the sky sing-songs.
Yo! gotta go, shrugs the tug boat.

A.E. WEISGERBER is from Orange, NJ, and has recent prose in *Many Loops*, *3:AM*, *Yemassee*, *SmokeLong*, *DIAGRAM*, *Matchbook Lit*, *Gravel Mag*, and *The Alaska Star*. She is a 2018 Chesapeake Writer, 2017 Frost Place Scholar, 2014 Reynolds Fellow, and Assistant Series Editor for the Wigleaf Top 50. Follow @aeweisgerber or visit neutralspaces.co/aeweisgerber

The Identity of Indiscernibles

Miles Greaves

I was sitting at my diningroom table consuming cereal, Cheerio by Cheerio, pinching and perching each O onto the crown of my tongue and then swallowing and then repeating, when I peeked over my knuckles and noticed that my wife Amy was gone, replaced where she had just been standing by a different yet seemingly equivalent Amy, and I erupted into gooseflesh, mountain range after mountain range. This new woman must have, I reasoned, been plucked from some repeating farm of Amys hiving in some endless aisle of apartments stretching, perspective point to perspective point, on either side of my own, strung taut across gray space, like a beam of cubicles; plucked up like a kitten from a box and breathed on like a lens and dropped into my wife's blouse and skin, like a pearl of chlorine onto the eye of the world, to stand before me, now, like a triangle among circles. This new woman was laminated freshly over the radiator and couch and her fetal, squeaky molecules hummed in place, like a weather map in a room full of weathermen, but other than that she stood like the old Amy used to stand, exuding the same colors and heat, bobbing on the same toes, in the same socks, on bones of the same length and bend, in flesh of the same heft and density. She circled my welcome mat, looking for shoes, and announced, still looking, that she was getting beer, and would return. Then she stepped into the original Amy's sneakers and left, and I slumped over my cereal, protectively gripping my scalp, as if beset by owls.

I had loved my wife. We had been to Portugal together. And Costa Rica. And we'd record and then watch *Top Chef* every Friday, after work, and our families met for Thanksgiving, and she'd buy me Cadbury Creme Eggs, et cetera, et cetera. But now where had she been displaced to? What world? Was she sad? Were the trees

there made of teeth? Would she try to return, but fail and fail and fail? Would she acclimate, in time? Where would she be buried? I saw, then, in a vision, my wife, wading alone across an endless field of vertical worms, and I thought about weeping, but my grief was so sudden and expansive that it precluded any actual weeping before that weeping could occur, like a sudden ouroboros, blinked into and out of being, so I just sat there, instead, with the tears gestating behind my eyes, without undamming, like a moon behind a keyhole. But then another horrific, more selfish thought occurred to me, which supplanted that original horror, despite myself.

What, I wondered, if this new Amy nibbles my neck off as we make love, expecting my hips to continue on and on instructionlessly? Or what if she bears me into the ocean one day, like a selkie? Or what if she leaches onto my belly and remains there, like a remora? Or worse: what if she differs from the old Amy, but so subtly that I'd never be able to definitively prove those foul differences? At this thought I almost screamed, in part because I could already half-see the follow-up question standing behind it, pacing, and I tried not to consider it, but I had to, it insisted upon itself, it insisted upon itself: what, I wondered, if this new wife was a teetering heap of spiders, wadded into a tender, elastic Amy-suit, that would torture me, daily, by behaving exactly like my actual wife—by forming the same sentences that she would have formed, and by scratching her elbow at the same time of day that she would have scratched her elbow? What if the spiders tortured me, daily, by counting to ten? The spiders would count successfully every time I asked them to, enunciating each accurate numeral, but they didn't mean to, they didn't mean to, they arrived at ten only due to some offensive, preposterous chance, conceiving of the actual numbers only in shadowy spidernumbers, like "pupa" and "thorax," that tumbled in hairy waves up and down the inside of Amy's bustling body, but still they would accidentally finish with

“eight, nine, ten,” every time, every time, every time I asked them to, like the one chimpanzee that finally types *King Lear*, but again and again and again, never on purpose, until finally dying, finally. At that I almost screamed again, or thought about almost screaming again, as I contemplated the unscratchable suspense that would dog me, day in and out, as the spiders hinted at hinting at hinting at themselves, every morning at breakfast, but demurred every time, on the cusp of revelation, like an orgasm that would never arrive, leaving me certain but uncertain, flickering between knowing and not knowing, the rest of my life, like Schrodinger’s cat, translucent and forlorn and haunted, from now until my death.

I stood from my cereal, as if from the possibility of the spiders, but the thought followed me up off the table, I could see it, like a sunspot on my pupil, so I fled to the living room, but the thought followed, so I fled to the kitchen, but the thought followed again, so I stopped in front of the microwave, and stood there, as my panic matured toward its zenith, and I gripped the microwave with both hands, as if holding a face, and I stood there, now at the airless peak of my horror, opening and closing my hands, until, miraculously, out of nothing, I remembered something, and my eyes widened briefly, as if having seen some hopeful form in the distance.

I had read once that there was no such thing as pure identity; that there was no property equal to being me, or being this, or being that; that there was no black cue ball lolling in my stomach, with my name tattooed across its equator, that could be used to pick me out of a parade of all things, like toasters and lollipops, when all else failed—instead we were just the sum of the descriptions we could pin to each other, like donkeys made entirely from tails, or pompoms without cores. I could have, for example, stripped my actual wife of every description that clung to her, and flattened them out and laid them on our bed to dry—in one column, the roll of her skull; in another, her love of *Arrested Development*—and I could have peeled and peeled but days later,

when I was out of things to say about her, there would have been nothing at the bottom of those qualifiers, no hook to hang them on, no bone, just a blank circle of air, like a barber shaving a head into nothingness. And the same was true of the spiders: I could flay them of their descriptions, like pulling petals from a weed, and lay them next to my real wife's descriptions, to index, but when I was done I'd find just another hollow eye, there'd be nothing to grip, and squint at, and compare to my wife, it would just be void versus void. And because of this, if the spiders' descriptions on the bed were the same as my wife's—if I could go the rest of my life without seeing, say, a single spider scamper from the new Amy's nostril into the new Amy's ear—and there was no one thing I could definitively say about the new Amy that I couldn't say about the old Amy, then they were in fact the same Amy, even if I knew they were not, even if I knew it in the nucleus of my heart, and wept nightly over it, I had no right to complain, or mourn my real wife's abduction, or the spiders that replaced her, because it had not happened, or because I could not say it had happened, which was the same thing.

It's the same thing! I thought, and my lips tensed, as if to smile, but before they could I remembered something, and sobered.

You'll still have to confirm the Amys' sameness, I reminded myself. *My god that's right,* I thought, and sat at the dining-room table again and gripped my scalp again, as if beset by owls again, as I waited for the new Amy to return, to officially determine if she was in fact identical to my wife, and as I waited I visualized the various forms that her deviations might take, and as I visualized these deviations my stomach rolled in me like a crocodile, and I began sweating in my seat, like a man holding his hand in front of a hole in the earth, waiting, waiting, waiting. I tried reading a newspaper, but couldn't; I tried reading the Cheerio box, but couldn't; I tried thinking of any other subject available to me, but couldn't. Eventually I either slept or ceased thinking, defensively, and I was

only aware of myself again when the Amy entered the apartment. I exploded upright and centered the woman in my vision and immediately began charting each nook of her visible cells, as if memorizing a necessary code, with my heart echoing out of my mouth. She was holding a grocery bag and wearing a maroon shirt with doily-like sleeves, and jeans, and her hair, which was a little darker than her blouse, was tied in a low ponytail. She stood on the shoe mat, seeming to think about something for two seconds, three seconds, and then looked across the apartment at me and said, “I got Blue Moon,” and moved into the kitchen. There she set the grocery bag on the counter, next to the cutting board, and extracted the beer, with her right hand, and tried fitting it into the refrigerator, but spilled something, and cursed. Then she put the rest of the groceries away in the cupboard above the sink and threw the grocery bag into the garbage. Then she continued passed me, into the bedroom, and disappeared, and called, “I’m getting in the shower,” and then reappeared, crossing the hall with a towel, and disappeared again into the bathroom. There was a pause, and then I heard the shower-water start, and the Amy begin to la-la-la inanely, and I lowered my forehead onto the tablecloth again and began thinking, and thinking, and thinking. Then I raised my head, and my face gravitated toward the ceiling, like an elated sunflower, and I announced, to myself:

The spiders are indistinguishable from my wife!

They were! The spiders had pronounced each of the ten words they’d spoken in the same faint California accent as my actual wife; and the sentences they formed with those words were ones my wife would have formed; et cetera, et cetera, et cetera—identical! Identical! Identical! I began vibrating with glee, and then I grinned dramatically, until my molars were exposed to the apartment-air: nothing had happened to me! Nothing! And while sure, yes, I would miss my wife; and while sure, yes, the spiders were probably mocking me under Amy’s back-skin, like a six-fingered hand under a puppet, they were nevertheless maintaining their

external poise, and expertly feigning their similarity to my wife, like an unblinking eye opposing the sun, in an act of profound professionalism, my god, my god, life can and does occasionally bloom into ringing, resplendent gardens.

MILES GREAVES lives in Brooklyn, NY, with his fiancée and their two small boys. One of his stories won first place in *Zoetrope: All-Story's* 2018/2019 short-fiction contest, and another appeared in *Tin House*.

About People of Glass and Stone

Sergey Gerasimov

Now his main concern was to find water.

He knew he couldn't survive long without water. Once he saw a heavy cloud with gray, swollen teats hanging down from its belly, but it soon dissipated without rain. In early mornings, when the air was icy cold, columns of fog walked between tree trunks. But still, the forest around him was as dry as tinder.

Vlas felt at home in the forest. So many years had passed, but city streets still felt foreign to him. Born in a taiga village, nursed by the taiga, he was in love with its mysterious twilight; he loved its echoless silence and the comforting crunch of pine needles underfoot. Being here, in the world of towering pines, he felt peace and tranquility as if he had found his real home at last. But now, he had to do something about water.

When it got dark, he used a trick his father had taught him once: he raised his head to the sky and howled, imitating the wolf's call.

He listened, and listened, and listened. The air was quiet, without a hint of breeze. Then somewhere, very far away, at the edge of hearing, a dog's barking answered him. Dogs meant people. Probably it was a remote settlement of Tunguses. Or, who knows, a labor camp zone, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by shepherd dogs. Searchlights. Guards with tommy guns, sitting in their nests like black storks. Sleeping and dying people who mumble and wheeze on their wooden bunks, with paralyzing fear in their skulls instead of dreams.

Tilting his head back, he imitated another long howl and waited again. No, the barking he heard wasn't the voice of brainless shepherd dogs guarding a camp. Only watchdogs could bark like that. They guarded a house and the kind, peaceful people who lived in it. At least, it was what he wished to believe.

The house built of logs sat in the forest of dead and dying pines, which seemed transparent like a lump of orange glass. There were three dogs: two of them chained, and the third one, muscular and tough-looking like a wild boar walked freely. It came to Vlas, poked its warty nose at his leg, snorted, shook its hind leg with contempt, and walked away, but neither growled nor tried to bite. The other two were strangely silent. Vlas saw a mossy stones of the well, and thirst dried his throat. He came to the well and drank from the rusty pail. Some clay pots hung on the old fence. He saw a pigsty and a pig at its door, which lay hugging a pumpkin and squinting its myopic eyes at the stranger. A barn, or probably a stable, was nestled under the orange candle of a big maple shedding leaves.

He could hear a song coming from the window. A young female voice sang:

*I'll be nice to my dear guests,
I'll make for them some mushroom scones.
They will eat a hearty dinner,
and I'll make a coffin for their bones.*

A broad-shouldered man with a graying beard opened the door. He was a boulder of a man, with large hands, arms, and chest, with a white scar curling below his right cheekbone. He looked the stranger over from head to toe, and let him in.

"Now tell me who you are," he said. "And show me your papers."

"I'm a geologist," said Vlas, trying to sound convincing. "I don't have to show my papers to you. I'll show them to a militia squad, if it's necessary."

"Hmm . . . Excuse my questions, stranger, but no one can be trusted now. There are too many enemies of people around . . . Geologists never travel alone."

"It depends on what they are looking for."

"You're probably right," the bearded man agreed. "Then, where are your tools? Have you lost them in the forest? Do you have a compass or a map? Where is your geological hammer? Or your microscope? I think you're lying, man. You must be a zek escaping from Rudnik."

"Of course, I'm lying," Vlas said. "You'd better put some vodka and a loaf of bread on the table if you want to hear the truth."

The man called his wife to the room. Vlas saw a young, rather tall woman, with nervous lips and somewhat mannered gestures. She brought water, a bottle of moonshine, a loaf of bread, and some mushroom scones. He was surprised to see that the woman's hair was tied up in a perfect ballet bun. He sat down to a clean wooden table, but decided not to eat the scones.

"I used to live in this area long ago," said Vlas to the bearded man who was watching him with an unblinking stare. "I lived in Anatamka and then in Kyerka. It's about two hundred miles to the north from here."

"Yeah, I know where it is," the man said. He had already emptied a glass of moonshine, and his cheeks and his veiny neck were red. "Now you're telling the truth. I can feel it in your voice."

"But I wasn't there for twenty years," Vlas continued. "When I returned, I didn't recognize my village. The taiga has changed and people have changed as well. I'm a city-dweller now, a philologist and a writer. I decided to write a book about people who were turning the Yenisei to the north."

The man lit a Kazbek cigarette and shoved it into the gray froth of his beard.

"A writer, you say? Right. Do you write about the taiga?"

"I'm mostly interested in stories people tell. Maybe you can also tell me something worth hearing, and I'll put your story in the book."

"Something interesting, you say, eh? I don't know. Life is simple out here. There used to be a lot of animals in the taiga

before. In early spring, bears broke into the windows when my mother, God bless her soul, was cooking salted meat. So many boars walked around that you could catch them with your bare hands. Pikes in our river, the Tazz, were so big that it took three men to drag them out of the water. But that was very long ago. When the Yenisei started turning north, the water spread wide, and the taiga around here turned into a swamp. It didn't last long. The swamp disappeared in a year or two, and we've been having a great drought since then. The big river turned into a brook. All the pikes in it died, and only roach survived. This year, the brook is going to dry up as well. But there are no mosquitoes anymore."

"Has the Yelloguy dried up too?"

"No, the Yelloguy is still running, but it's sixty miles away from here. You should know geography better. Don't interrupt me, philologist. When fish and animals died, people left this place. Only the old Pherrapont and I decided to stay. His old log hut is over there, behind that hill. We stayed because of our wells. To the very Yelloguy you can't find any water around. My hut here is the last oasis in the desert. So I live and give water to strangers who happen to walk by: to geologists and all kinds of philologists like you."

The man laughed unkindly.

"Tell me about Pherrapont. Is he still living in his log hut?" said Vlas.

"His well was better and bigger than mine. And his character was more cheerful. And his moonshine was sweeter. So all the travelers went for water to Pherrapont, and not to me. I didn't like it. Who would? One day I tried to throw some poison into his well, but his dogs didn't let me do it. So I invented a clever trick: I started to swear his well in mat words."

"In mat words? But mat is just profanity, a filthy language. How can it help?" asked Vlas, surprised.

“You philologists know nothing about words! My mother who was from a family of Tungus shamans, often said that Russian mat words are the last remains of pagan fertility cult, so they still have magic power. I remember her swearing in mat over her dough, and the dough rose much faster then, just before my eyes. When she matted milk, it immediately turned sour. One day she matted my father so severely that a bear broke his neck just a few hours later. There was a shaman’s power in her words, and probably is in mine because the same blood flows in my veins. So imitating my mother’s example, I started going out at dawn and curse Pherrapont’s well in mat for a whole hour, every day. And you know what? His well dried up some months later. Pherrapont died from grief and from drinking too much soon.”

The man emptied another glass, turned it upside down, and smelled a crust of bread. Vlas did the same.

Night was approaching, and the woman started making up a bed for Vlas, on an old sofa, outside the bedroom.

“How old are you?” Vlas asked her.

“Twenty three.” She shook a blanket, then patted the pillow to show how soft it was, all in precise, quick, but at the same time unhurried motions as if she were a professional dancer performing in a musical show. Her neck was impossibly long and slender.

“And how old is your husband?”

“Fifty-seven. But he isn’t really my husband. He is my master. I’m a slave here.”

Saying that, she turned to Vlas, and he felt her warm breath, and suddenly her eyes got incredibly, almost kingfisher blue and, for a fraction of a moment, he felt he could fly without wings. He was sure her eyes had momentarily changed their color. Now they were water reflecting summer sky. Two tiny magic lakes, with currents flowing deep, and full of underwater life. He was too stunned to say anything.

“Time’s pressing,” she said. “I’ve got only a couple of minutes. You should know that my husband and master gets paid for

catching such escapers from the camps as you. That's what he gets paid for. He gets seven hundred roubles for every enemy of people he has caught. He didn't believe your story. No one would. His dogs are trained to catch people. They let everyone in, but don't let anyone out. They can easily hunt you down in the forest, if by any chance you try to run away. He caught me one day too, but didn't hand me over to the militia. He let me stay with him as a wife and slave. I have no other choice than to serve him faithfully, or else I'll die in labor camps. I'm three months pregnant, so if you decide to kill him, please, don't kill me and my baby. There is a double-barreled gun in the pantry. It's always loaded. You must kill him if you want to live. There is no other way. He has a horse, so you can escape after killing him. And he has a telephone in the back room, to report the convicts who escaped from the camps. Now do something! Are you a man or what?"

Now her face was as white as chalk.

"I feel dizzy," she said. "I'd better go and drink some water."

She walked out of the room, carrying the future in her body.

An orange mist of the late afternoon rays poured through the window. Looking out, Vlas saw that the dogs were unchained now. They lay at the porch steps, watching the door, listening, counting each step behind it, lifting their muzzles again and again.

The bearded man came into the room and patriotically crossed himself in front of the blackened portraits of Stalin, the Father of the Peoples, and Marx, the Author of the One and Only True Theory.

"What's happened to you?" he asked Vlas. "You look terrible. What's wrong?"

"Your wife is three months pregnant," Vlas said, surprised at the hoarse sound of his own voice.

"How do you know about that?"

"I was a physician in the past. I understand such things. She felt bad just a minute ago."

"Such things happen to women," the bearded man said. "She's going to be all right."

"No," said Vlas. "She needs a doctor immediately, or else she'll die. Now, they have a new medicine that can save her and your baby as well. It's called antibiotic. Without it, she's going to die in a week, at most. You can buy that medicine for seven hundred roubles."

"Seven hundred roubles is big money," the man said, and his scarred fingers clenched into a fist.

"Penicillin antibiotic. And a doctor."

"Wait for me here, I'll be back soon, after I telephone to the city."

He shuffled off without haste.

Soon after the man left the room, Vlas followed him. He opened the door to the corridor, quietly. He could see two doors now: one led to a summer veranda, the other one to the pantry, where the man kept his gun. There was a heavy padlock on it. He didn't know what to do about that. He couldn't think clearly. It wasn't panic yet, but the damp, nibbling fear he felt made him sick.

The door to the veranda creaked. He was sure someone was standing there, watching him. The door creaked again, sending widening concentric circles of fear through his soul. Drops of perspiration trickled from his forehead.

The door opened slowly and the woman came out of the veranda. The sun shone through her dress, and Vlas could see how skinny or even emaciated she was. Her belly and breasts were almost non-existent. She held a stack of fresh towels in her hands. She measured Vlas with her eyes.

"You are scared, man," she said.

"Yes, I am."

"It's disgusting!"

“No, not at all. Some people are made of steel, some are made of stone, but some people are made of glass. I’m made of glass. I’m fragile, but it’s not bad. You can’t build a house of steel and stone, without any glass.”

“Oh, you’ll never do it, philologist,” she said. “You’d better not even try.”

“Open the pantry door.”

“No. I’ve changed my mind. You can’t kill him. You’ll just destroy me and yourself.”

“When escaping from the camp,” he said, “I killed a guard.”

“So what? Give yourself a Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union for it.”

“Now I don’t care if I have to kill anyone else. Open the door!”

They both were speaking in a half-whisper, afraid to alert the master of the house.

Her face tautened.

“I don’t believe you,” she said. “You’ve never killed anyone in your life. You are a rotten intellectual. You have no proper violence in you. I could take your eyes out with my bare fingers, if I wanted it.”

Still, she opened the door, came into the pantry, and put the towels on the lid of a barrel, carefully. “What’s now?” asked her eyes.

He followed her. She lit a candle, and two commas of golden light started dancing in her eyes. He didn’t know what it was, but he was sure she was going to say something extraordinary now.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Jadwiga,” she said. “But he calls me Jaga, the forest witch. I remind him of his mother, who was really a witch everyone around was afraid of. She could cast spells. He believes I have the same psychic powers his mother did. He believes I’m a witch too.”

“Are you?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m just a naïve city girl. In the past, I went to a ballet school in Moscow. People said I was really talented. Hoped to dance in the Bolshoi Theatre. And here... Here no one even knows how toilet paper looks.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“It’s better than pushing up the daisies. Or rather, pushing up the moss and pine needles... He is a kind of Bluebeard. You know, I’m his seventh wife, and the ghosts of all his previous wives speak to me at night. When he is drunk, he plays his accordion and makes me dance to the music. You know, the Dying Swan, Giselle, and the like. He keeps me always hungry, so I am in good dancing shape. He insists on it . . . Unlike you, he isn’t fragile.”

Suddenly he knew he would live. Live a very long life, a personal forever. Just because he had seen all this and many other terrible things like this. That was a sufficient reason for living long. He had been walking through his life, holding his attentiveness in front of himself like a small oil lamp, never judging, never intruding much, making visible this and that, and remembering, always remembering. If he died, so many things he ‘d been a witness to would disappear. The ultimate force ruling the universe would never allow that to happen.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m so sorry . . . ”

“Don’t speak too much,” she interrupted him curtly, “or you’ll faint from hyperventilation. Take the gun and do something!”

She handed him the gun. The barrels looked bronzed in the candle light.

“I’m going to lock you in the pantry,” he said. “Give me the keys.” He took them, and when their fingers touched, she startled and pulled her hand away, like a frightened child. He felt touched. “Be as quiet as a mouse here. I’m not going to kill anyone yet, but who knows?”

She looked at him with disdain. Her lashes trembled, and he was sure she was about to cry, but instead, she opened her mouth

so wide that he could see all her molars, even in the darkness, and let out a hysterical scream ringing in his ears.

Vlas jumped out of the pantry, locked the door. Jadwiga still screamed and yelled like mad. The next moment, the outer door flung open, and Vlas saw the bearded man with a sharpened axe in his hand. The blade glittered. A huge dog jumped out from behind the man's back and attacked Vlas. He shot point-blank. The dog gulped the bullet, its eyes expectant and uncomprehending; its head jerked back and burst into a bloody horror, into an open pomegranate. Vlas pushed the heavy body away. Seeing that, the man stopped in his tracks. The other two dogs were barking outside.

"Put the axe down on the floor," Vlas said, and the man dropped the axe down, then ripped open the cross-stitched collar of his shirt and breathed loudly through his nose like a bull. "Now turn to the wall, get on your knees, and place your hands behind your back."

The gun was cold and heavy under his fingers. It felt alive and having its own will. A metal snake about to strike out and bite.

The man did what he was told to do.

"Just don't hit my wife in the stomach," he said to Vlas.

"What?"

"Don't kill my baby, please."

"You surprise me," Vlas said. "I thought you were as unable to love as a fir tree."

"If I take a mature fir cone that has already begun to open," the man said, "and plant it under a big tree, it will never grow. But if I plant it in the shade of its parent tree, it'll become a seedling, even without full sunlight. It just goes to prove that even trees can love their babies. If you promise not to kill her and not to hit her in the stomach, I'll tell you where I hide my money. Seven thousand roubles."

"I don't need your money."

"I hid it in the pigsty."

"I don't need your money," said Vlas again, and the man howled softly, rocking back and forth. Vlas tied his hands behind his back with a lacy curtain he tore from the window. All the time Jadwiga was shouting and banging on the wall of the pantry.

Vlas tied the man's legs too, then he dragged him to the bedroom, shoved a gag into his mouth, and tied him to the heavy wooden bed. The man arched his back, flopped like freshly caught fish, in attempts to free himself, and tried to drag the bed behind him like oxen drag a plough stuck in the middle of a furrow. Vlas started searching the house. First of all, he cut the telephone wire, then took two big knives, a whetstone, salt, two lumps of sugar, a sack of flour, and seven boxes of matches in the kitchen. Drew new pants on: his old ones were drenched in the dog's blood, which was still wet and had the consistence of yolk. Found a razor and shaved accurately. Drank chilly water from a metal pail. Washed his hands. All the time he could hear the man cursing, his voice muffled by the gag.

Then he let the woman out.

"Why did you scream and bang?" he asked her.

"You never know how things are going to turn out, right?" she said. "If Pantelei, my husband, had been lucky enough, you know, to kill you, he'd have asked me then, 'why didn't you shout for help, bitch?' What would I have said to that? So I shouted for help. I have a baby in me to protect. And besides . . ."

"What?"

She started to cry. "I just wanted to make you angrier," she sobbed out.

"What for?"

"To make you kill this brute, of course! But you didn't, and now I'll have to live with him on and on until he decides to find someone younger. I'd kill him myself, but I can't."

"Sorry, neither can I."

"What should we do then?" she asked.

“I don’t know. Pity you’re not a witch, or you could curse him as he cursed Pherrapont’s well.”

“Do you think it is going to help?”

“Curse him in mats, as hard as you can. With soul. You might as well try.”

“With soul? Right.”

Then Jadwiga breathed in deeply and let out the longest and wildest hurricane of mats Vlas had ever heard. Being a philologist, he knew that the dictionary or Russian mat contained six thousand mat words derived from only four obscene roots, using the inexhaustible arsenal of suffixes, prefixes and phonetically similar words, but it was surely just the icing on the cake: the real number of mat words was infinite. Mat words could be any part of speech, except a personal pronoun. So you could use just personal pronouns, those four roots and their derivatives to build a complete language in itself, capable of expressing any emotions and ideas, including the subtlest ones.

Jadwiga was uttering her curse practically without stopping, taking just brief pauses to catch her breath, and then again, new and new curses exploded from her lips. Suddenly, pots jumped up on the old fence, the mirror above a dilapidated washstand cracked, and dust rose from the ground. Pine needles started swirling in a flimsy vortex around her.

Vlas knew that the official record of mat phrases belonged to tzar Peter the Great, who had managed to say seventy-four mat words in one sentence. The record sentence containing only one mat root and its derivatives but nothing else was twenty-four words long. But what he heard now was a linguistic miracle. Jadwiga still spoke, pronouncing her curse, and her eyes were sightless, unfocused, looking into nothing, but full of dark fire. A terrible thing to see. Then she tilted her head to the sky, as if cursing angels, or maybe, persistent communist rockets that

pierced the stratosphere and beyond, bringing Marxists ideology to angels, moons, planets, and stars.

At last, she stopped.

“Oh, you’re really a forest witch!” Vlas said. The last words of her curse still rippled through his mind, travelling back and forth.

“That was an epic symphony.”

She just smiled. Then she blushed, flattered.

She pulled the dogs on the chain.

He took the gun and cartridges and everything else and was ready to go. Jadwiga appeared on the porch.

“The Bluebeard has swallowed the gag and died!” she said, a note of undisguised triumph sounding in her voice. She came close to him and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you for your advice, enemy of people. Good luck to you. You’ll find water six miles to the west, in the old bed of the Tazz. It’s so shallow now that you can wade across it without the water getting higher than you waist. Then just let the horse go and she will find her way home. She always does.”

“Are you going to labor and birth alone?” he asked. “In the middle of the forest, like an animal?”

“Why not? I like being alone. I’m introspective.”

“But . . .”

“You know quite well you can’t stay. You don’t have your papers. You’ll be caught and sent back to the camp, and the communists will break you with tortures as they break anyone. Don’t worry about me. I’m strong. I’m made of steel. Have a nice journey, enemy of people.”

He saddled the horse, mounted, and rode away at a hurried pace into the infinite cathedral of pines and night shadows. He was going to look back and glance at her for the last time, but the next minute he already had to maneuver among the outcrops of boulders—the remains of ancient mountains that still tried to strangle the forest with granite fingers—and he didn’t.

So he didn't look back. And a minute later, she became a memory.

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Broadside

Hamdy Elgammal

I was alone at the warehouse that Sunday morning when all this, for lack of a better word, started.

After college I careened from one dead-end job to the next, avoided people, drove long trips on my own where I drank boxed wine and listened to the classical music station on the radio. Years passed. Soon enough, too soon, I found myself in the studio apartment I now call home. My hair greyed behind my ears, my toenails turned the color of dead leaves.

These days it seems as if all my memories are stuck in a file cabinet that's being consumed by a slow, persistent fire. Sometimes I don't know if the moment I'm in is now or ten years ago.

That Sunday morning I woke up, darted out of bed, brushed my teeth, ate some dry Cheerios straight from the box, washed them down with a glass of milk. I left for the warehouse.

As I exited my building, I saw Mrs. Green, the octogenarian who lives in 2B walking her brown cat near the building entrance. Mrs. Green's bathrobe was wide open, exposing her t-shirt with a large print of a cat's face. Her grey curly hair had streaks of deep blue dye where it sprouted from her forehead.

"Good day to you, Mrs. Green," I said.

"And to you!" Mrs. Green said, beaming a smile at me. She let go of the cat's leash, walked towards me and linked my arm in hers.

"Rick," she started. She smelled like cat food and burnt olive oil.

"It's Paul."

She paused, blinking twice at me. "Okay *Paul*," she said. "Do you know what happened in 4A?"

"4A? You must be talking about another apartment."

"No, 4A."

"4A is where I live," I said.

Her face took on a serious expression and she let go of my arm.

"A man," she continued, her eyes widening, "a man lost something in 4A. Something very important."

"What did he lose?"

"I just told you. Something very important."

"Well, I don't lose stuff. And I haven't lost anything recently."

"Sure, *Paul*," Mrs. Green said, rolling her eyes at me.

"Where's this coming from? Who told you this?"

She waved her hand at me, dismissing the question. Her cat sniffed at a parked car's back tire. I knew Mrs. Green was a little strange but this was over the top.

"Mrs. Green, did you miss your meds again?"

"Very important," she repeated, nodding. "Something very important."

I walked away from her and got into my car. As I drove, I talked to calm myself. "Mrs. Green is insane," I told the empty car. "She's on a cocktail of antipsychotics. She's insane. Insane. Remember. Insane."

I turned on the radio. The host was finishing a sentence, "As in all the whispers of dreams. The third suite." The music began. I listened to the violins, rising then falling, the cellos muttering ominous things, the horns like an afterthought. I imagined the instruments playing themselves, disembodied from their instrumentalists.

"Could bodies operate in the same way?" I asked the empty backseat through my rearview mirror. I liked mental conundrums to warm up my mind in the morning.

I turned the radio off then continued, "As in, could bodies one day be just like radios, receiving waves at the right frequency? Could one's frequency be possibly received from any other radio, that is body, if only said radio had the right tuning?"

There was only silence in the car. I realized I was, as always, alone. This manifested as a feeling of both exhaustion and liberation—a constriction of my chest and a charge in my elbows.

I pulled up to the Insure4Sure warehouse, where I worked my adjustments. When I took the key out of the ignition, I caught my reflection in the rearview mirror and saw that I had a milk mustache from breakfast. I wiped it clean and ran my fingers over my coarse stubble. I stood outside my car and looked up and down the street. The wind picked up an empty Pepsi can and it rolled away from me until it was stopped by a pile of wet-looking trash. “I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know if we’re radios.”

Inside the warehouse, I stood a few feet away from the gold Chevrolet I was there to adjust. The slanting sunlight filtered through the dusty clerestory windows. Dust particles floated in a slice of light right in front of the car. The light seemed to split the car in two: the passenger half that was still car-like and the driver half that was a mangled mess of metal, plastic and glass.

I opened the passenger-side door and put one knee on the seat, leaning my head in. The seats were black leather and there was a hole in the passenger headrest. A McDonald’s coffee cup sat next to the handbrake and a little brown toy dog with a chipped black nose was stuck to the dashboard, its head bobbing in all directions. I took notes in my clipboard; made little check marks, scribbled lists in all the right boxes. I underlined the words: “cup,” “handbrake,” and “dog.”

I picked up the green car freshener, shaped like a miniature pine tree, between my thumb and my index finger, untangling it from a wooden prayer rosary that hung over the rearview mirror. I touched my finger to my nose—wondered how much of this faded pine smell this man had smelled before he died.

In broadside collisions like this one, T-bones, your door is your first line of defense. It occurred to me that I must have seen hundreds of these broadside aftermaths. Yet I hadn’t thought twice

about any of them. For good reason, too—they were gruesome affairs.

I stood in the warehouse and thought about what it would be like to be killed by such a collision.

“The door goes first,” I said. “It would be the only thing standing between me and the 50,000-pound freight truck going 70 miles an hour—it’d be crushed like a soda can.”

I put only my index finger to the side of my chest. “My ribs would go next,” I said, resting the rest of my palm against my chest. “One after the other.” I felt myself almost choking up. What a strange thing it was that I was here, contained, in this body! I felt like I was barely holding on to myself, that if I let go for a second I would burst out the top of my own head.

I couldn’t articulate the rest of the consequences. I was already so emotionally distraught. But I imagined it all—my punctured gut, my intestines, my liver, my pancreas swimming in a pool of corrosive juice leaking from my stomach, my gastrointestinal perforation, my collapsed lungs, my drowning, my death.

In car crashes, there is usually no time to feel or to see your life flashing before your eyes. Your last thought would probably be “Pain” or “Hurts.” Except it wouldn’t be words, because who thinks in words? It’d be flashes—orange lights, the whir of a car engine in its dying throes, a million little images of loss, nested one within the other, faster than even the pace of the few cubic inches inside your skull. Color and noise and pain splashing like buckets of paint on a blank canvas.

You look at pictures of enough crash victims—the wet and bloodied hair; the cold, purple fingernails; the shirts, torn in some, carefully sliced by medical scissors in others, always too bright for a corpse; the eyes either rolled up or non-existent—you look at all this long enough and the photographs start to feel as dead as greeting cards.

I stood beside the car and saw my face reflected in a flint of damaged window—my face older and more fractured than I knew what to do with. I thought of how things were when I was younger, of Mary Perkins. We had gone out to a burger joint together on our first date. I had worn a white bomber jacket and put Brylcreem in my hair. She had said it smelled nice.

I remembered her face not in any precise, three-dimensional way but only her still picture from our high school yearbook—the defined cheekbones, the freckled nose, her blank slate of a forehead. I did remember the way her toenails were painted in alternating shades of red. Her warm lips on mine like a slice of fleeting summer, her faint jasmine smell.

How long ago was Mary Perkins? Why, it could have been two minutes ago for all I knew.

It was always now, I realized. Always this second. And this. And this. Forgotten, remembered, forgotten again. What a bind! If I would eventually never remember anything in time past in the way that mattered— as the thing itself, not just my singed memory of it—what sense did it make doing anything as routine as insurance adjustment with time present? Especially given that all time present, all of now, was destined to be burned into time past? There would be no point in continuing this nothing of a job.

Slowly, I unlocked the Chevrolet's passenger door, sat inside and buckled my seatbelt. Once buckled, I felt like I should say something. Anything.

I said, "Fine day today, don't you think?" in conversation with the nonexistent driver. I smiled, it felt less awkward now. I looked to my left and then I pulled both hands to my face, shielding my head and neck from an imaginary oncoming truck. I glanced at the name at the very top of my clipboard: Rick.

That was strange. Mrs. Green had said that name earlier today. If she was crazy then, what was this proof of, if anything? My eyes lingered on the all-cap letters of the name, I ran a finger across them, felt only smooth paper underneath. Then I looked at the

address—a part of me expected it to be mine, but it wasn't. 321 Folly, Apt. 6. Not me. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I felt silly. It couldn't have possibly been my address. This man was dead. I was, of course, alive. "Rick is dead," I whispered, reassuringly.

After unbuckling my seatbelt, I picked up the styrofoam coffee cup from the holder and shook it against my ear. I heard coffee sloshing inside. Rick's coffee, I thought. Rick's toy dog, Rick's freshener, Rick's car mats.

I felt claustrophobic. I stepped out of the car, slammed the passenger door shut. It had rained the night before and I could smell the damp dust in the air. I inhaled until my living, uncollapsed lungs were full.

Then I tasted bile rapidly climbing up my throat. I walked to the big trash bin in the corner and threw up Cheerios in wet yellow chunks. When I was done, I wiped my lips with my sleeve. I thought I ought to say something. "I'm not Rick," I said. "I'm Paul. Paul is here to do his job."

I snapped pictures of the passenger seat, the driver's seat, the crushed door, the front wheels, the fenders, the plates. Routine. I put the paperwork on the car's roof for my manager to find Monday morning. I looked at that wooden rosary around the rearview mirror again. I wondered if whoever knew this man might benefit from getting it a little early. I thought of Mrs. Green's words, "something very important." I pictured myself sitting with Rick's widow or mother or orphaned child, giving them the rosary and then feeling very good about myself afterward.

It would also prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that I was not nor have I ever been Rick. "Paul, Paul, *Paul*," I said. "Not Rick." I leaned into the passenger door again and carefully untangled the rosary from around the rearview mirror.

When I stepped outside, it was cold and the clouds hung like big grey dogs in the sky. I didn't know if anyone was going to be at

Rick's address but I felt I should try anyways. 321 Folly Street, Apt. 6. I rolled down the windows as I sped down the I-80, watched the white stripes melt into each other on the road.

321 Folly Street was an old apartment building, three floors high. There were two tall jasmine bushes on either side of the front gate. When I touched them, soft dust rubbed onto my thumb.

I took the stairs to the third floor; Rick's apartment, number 6, was the last one on the left. The door was ajar and there was a red and yellow doormat in front of the apartment labeled, "Home."

I was here. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. What would I say if somebody asked why I was here? I would babble about time present and time past, about rosaries and radios. I would sound insane. I shut my eyes tight, heard blood rush behind my ears. I pushed the door.

When I stepped in, I smelled the unmistakable aroma of broiling burgers. Somebody was cooking in the house and I was scared I'd be caught trespassing. I turned to leave but felt a soft hand on my shoulder.

"You're back," a woman's voice said. I turned my head and saw Mary Perkins, my first and only girlfriend, the most beautiful girl I had ever known. She looked exactly like that night we went out to the burger joint, nineteen on the nose. Her teeth were as pearly and perfect as I remembered, the smile pursed and a little secretive, her eyes June-sky blue and the toenails painted in alternating shades of bright and dark red. She wore a black cocktail dress with no shoulder straps that stopped just short of her knees.

"Mary?" I whispered.

There was a silence. Then her face broke into a smile. She hugged me, her fingers digging pleasantly into my shoulder blades.

"It's been so long," she sighed into my neck.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

She shrugged.

I closed my eyes tight again and stretched my neck to the right then to the left. "Okay," I said.

I opened my eyes and Mary was still there except one half of her right eyebrow was now bright gold. I noticed, too, that right under her neck was a tattoo of the Chevrolet logo. I touched my index finger to her smooth skin, traced the corners of the tattoo.

“Is this a dream?” I asked. “Am I dreaming right now?”

She looked pitifully at me. “Not quite,” she said. “Walk with me.”

We walked, hand in hand, down the short hallway. There were hundreds of framed pictures of Rick hung on each wall. I saw that Rick had had sleek black hair, a double chin and bright green eyes. He was overweight, dressed in a brown tweed suit and red suspenders in every picture. The pictures seemed to have been taken everywhere—Rick holding a USA flag at a 4th of July rally, Rick standing proudly over a deer with a bullet wound in its head, Rick leaning his elbows against the hood of his gold Chevrolet, Rick flipping the pyramids off.

At the end of the hallway, we turned left into the living room. There was an apple-green couch against one wall, an open window to the right and a small walnut chair in the left corner. On top of the chair sat a blue vase of fresh jasmine.

I turned to Mary. I cupped her face in my hands and ran my fingers between the strands of hair above her ears. I felt such longing! I was so old and alone and she’d remained so young. How? That didn’t matter. It seemed we now finally had a chance to set things right.

I leaned in and kissed her. With her lips against mine, I tasted burnt rubber and pine car freshener. She smiled at me when I pulled my head back. She touched her nose against mine; I could count the four faint freckles above her upper lip.

I let go of her head. I held my fingers to my temples, slowly kneaded the skin. I knew that, in a way, she *was* the car crash but I also knew that she was Mary Perkins, this kind, intelligent girl whom I thought I’d lost forever.

Mary walked over to the couch and sat down. She crossed her legs and looked straight ahead at the wall next to the living room's door. I went and sat next to her. It was soothing sitting there in Rick's house, Mary next to me, the afternoon sunlight from the window gently warming my forearm. It was then that I was aware of the rosary in my pocket—the rosary I had come all this way to deliver. The something very important. I took it out of my pocket and held its beads between my fingers.

"This was Rick's," I said.

Mary shrugged. "Thanks," she said. "But it can't help anyone now."

I paused. "I've missed you," I said. "I once felt such affection for you that it seemed to wash over me like rain. And yet now..."

"Now what?" she demanded.

I thought about it. "I can't explain," I said. "It's as if I'm touching you through a layer of fog. All these years, *they* seem as much a dream as this."

"You're not making a lot of sense."

She was right, I wasn't. "I'm sorry," I said. I put my head in my hands. I wept. For what? I didn't know. When I turned my head up towards Mary, she had peeled her face off her head. Underneath the face, which she now held in her lap, was a mesh of arteries, blood, flesh as raw red as the paint on her toenails.

"This is the nose," she said, pointing to the nose on the face in her lap. Her voice was muffled now that that she had no lips.

"This is my nose," I said, pointing to my nose, very much intact on my face.

"This is the mouth," she said and I repeated, pointing to my mouth.

"Here," she said, aligning her face with mine like a mask. "Wear my face and tell me something I don't know about this world."

I considered this for a second. I could see the bloodied mess through the eye sockets, but only barely. Then, strange as it was, I did what she asked.

HAMDY ELGAMMAL is an Egyptian software engineer and writer based in Oakland, CA. His prose has been published in *Bourbon Penn*, *Origins Journal*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *Easy Street* and *Five on the Fifth*.

haiku

Nick Corvino

Mint sprouts
on squirrel bones —
daytime moon.

NICK CORVINO has poems in *Eunoia Review*, *The Haven*, and *Helicon Literary & Arts Magazine*. He enjoys writing after midnight, and revising in the morning.

On the cover:

“Rise and with the
Valkyries Fly”

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