

NUDE BRUCE REVIEW

Issue 12

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&
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Loyal Nude Brucians,

Since our last issue, our collective sense of time has become continually distorted. Reality has given way to surreality. The pandemic rages on. Mental health struggles are now part of our balanced breakfast. War looms as the lone post-storm nimbus cloud that can't take a damn hint. Poverty, medical debt, and student debt parade around as the trendiest throuple from hell. And plenty inequities are running rip-roaring rampant. And plenty politicians are greedier than ever. And plenty conspiracy theorists are louder than ever. And someone needs to take them all behind the proverbial woodshed.

And that someone, my friends, goes by the good old Scottish name of Bruce.

And while Bruce is taking care of that, he has trusted you, reliable reader, to tend to his freshly cultivated cornucopia of poetry and prose. One word/phrase/clause/sentence/page at a time, these pieces will plant your brains and hearts in the fertile earth of the literary Eden that is called *Issue 12*. We've got your classics whom you've relished before. We've got your debut names who've graciously given us their words. Basically, we've got a bunch of talented folks from all over the world who've cooked up *un plat principal* of delicious writing. All for you. Now, let us deliver it.

Infinite thanks once more to the one and only Britney Logan for her fabulous cover art and the newest iteration of our boy Bruce, who, incidentally, dares anyone to make a ginger joke—he double-dog dares you. Well, these are dog days anyway ain't they.

Andrew and Tim,
Editors-in-chief

Question.

Is 'Brucian' pronounced
'Brooshyun' or 'Brooseean'?

Or otherwise?

Please don't post your opinion
on our Facebook page.

Seriously. Facebook is evil.

Just take a side.

Poetry

CHOPHOUSE

by Salvatore Difalco

A clawed hand here, a grinning head there, severed limbs all over the place—the world, my dark friend, is your cutting floor. And yet you hesitate committing to the edits. Rub your fingers together and look at the electric sky: love is not more magic than this, could not be. Let us walk shoulder to shoulder. I am in pieces but soon to seek help. This is a promise. This is a heart matter. This is where I stand, stiffly. My hand is yours; lead me to your nowhere.

Post-it Note to a Young Poet

By Mark Decarteret

I'm guessing by how little you're dinged-up
or gin-duped, pitted-against-the-world,
you haven't been old (or even good) for very long—
so it's too soon to trip over your past's past
or to pull at that string identified as "reverse"
in one travel guide, "fits of passion" in another.
Still I'll pray to Saint Asterisk for you.
Assume he's a substitute for a muse.
Kiss his head's sinkholes. And its death-shine.
All he said of a heaven that's now nearing nil.
So how is this for a segue? Now, get going.

Stations

By Cameron Morse

The eaves cover me
in shade. Wide
with the sun spiraling away
to the west. I exchange
denim for swimming trunks
and return to the wicker
chair. Cicadas tase themselves
in the bright air, discharging
sexy volts in the vacuum
tube of late summer. No one
listening to their swan
song, the tantrum
of internet radio. The same
spider repeatedly.
The out of juice start juicing,
jaundiced extremities.
Stargazer, keep stabbing me
here where it feels good.
Godawful or god
given. Lightspeed or lightened.

A Painted Garden

By Desiree Remick

We were starving, so I painted us a garden
Rows of red tomatoes, waves of beans
The pumpkin vine with its solitary son
Onions in orbit, peas flowering into stars

The corn stalks threw long shadows over
Striped zucchinis, kale bowed in prayer
Underneath, potatoes slept
And dreamed of foil jackets and a fire

I forgot to water our painted garden
And woke to find it withered, all the color
Fading like a sunrise into noon's impoverished hour
Fading like a smile stolen by the frost

Enlightenment

By Esther Fishman

Some days are just
that day, getting up,
and going back down
again without the
interruption of memory
or desire. Today it took
two cups of coffee, a smoothie
with protein powder, and
a power bar to believe
that I could face any world
outside of myself. Some
days it's hard
not to notice
transcendence
because it's right
there, in front of me. The
masters say live
in the moment, and
then smile their
inscrutable smiles
and it is
so hard. Who do
you think I am, a Buddha
sitting motionless
for so long that vines
grow between the legs? Why
should washing dishes be

anything but washing
dishes, boring, but
necessary, a task that's never truly
finished, is never fixed. Rain
slices the heavy sky. A crack
of blue appears, and then
another until
sun, everywhere.

Untitled

By Simon Perchik

*

Again you hear the moon—it forgets
just minutes ago it asked and you sing
over and over the same lullaby

that's used to loneliness. sure
your lips were once blossoms, would open
as the soft breeze still wandering

keeping watch for a voice
that could be hers bending down
scraping the ground to hear again

where love goes when it falls asleep
still listening for what is now grass
and the step by step among the small stones

broken off though you sing all night
without a sound from the pieces
closing their eyes with your fingertip.

*

At the evening roll-call you yell, *Here*
as if your shadow would never leave you
though not that long ago it began to lean

the way these walls gathered to grieve
were warmed around a wooden table
with its pots and plates and bowls

shining all at once where the ceiling
should be, poured from this small pitcher
half as the first morning on Earth, half

filling it with the darkness your shadow
still needs to go on alone, leave you
never sure there's a shore to rest on

close enough to watch your voice rise
circle back as an echo, louder and louder
as the *Alone* that lost its way.

*

Like this bedside lamp that knows no rest
you wait for a click to widen the hole
already filled with some star hiding inside

the way your fingers are set on fire
by some darkness once you're reminded
and mid-air return as the night sky

—it's not worth it! in this wall, circling down
are the same demons you see in your shadow
making its way closer till the pillow

is covered with songs from the 40s
has heard it all before as kisses

now that it's alone and naked on the bed.

*

Nineteen million years from now
a bent over glance will be enough
—the remedy will arrive at the site

and the dead sit up to rub their eyes
as if nothing happened though nearby
you will be falling through two hands

shaken by time to come looking for proof
the first scar came out when one hand
took hold another's—even then

care was counted by twos. one
to look around while the other stays
as something close by to nod

where to send the needed dose
already the small stone that cures

Ace

By Andrea Janov

Not that I've had a lot of
one night stands,
but, I've had a lot of
one night stands.

Maybe it is the thrill of flirting.
Maybe it is being on the rebound.
Maybe it is the challenge
and the conquest

of landing a guy you know
you have nothing in common with
but looks great in skinny jeans.

A guy who you don't want to talk to
but can't take your eyes off his lips.

A guy who is good for the night or the weekend
but who will fade into the morning.

A Pillow During War

By Jason Visconti

Softness is a final weapon,
the endurance of cotton haunts a missile,
rank and file are cleared to the bedroom,
a bullet skims by with a feather's bristle,
and the bed reclines away from the bomb.

Fiction

Craigslist: Missed Connections

By Chase Mauerhan

I sit next to a man at the haberdashery on South Boulevard. I'm sticky from the mile I walked while wearing too many layers. I peel off my button down and then my vest leaving only the black long sleeve shirt I wear like a uniform. I like the way it clings to me without it feeling too feminine. The man doesn't notice me and I'm not sure if I'm happy or if it angers me. He's on a phone call. "Call me back at 218-586-9987" he says. He sounds like a businessman. "Douchebag," I declare him. I open my computer and type his area code into the google search bar. "Ew, he's from Texas." I worry that I said that outloud. I pick up my phone and pretend to dial someone. "Hey mom, just letting you know that I bought tickets to go visit uncle loren in texas" I pause for a second and then loudly say "yeah mom, he's in houston." The man looks over at me. I got his attention. He opens his mouth to speak. I stand up and start packing my bag to leave. "The audacity of some people" I think to myself while waltzing back out onto the street leaving behind the button down with my name written on the tag.

A Connection to the Earth

By Josh Peterson

I've been traveling across the country with this guy in a bird costume. It's not a big plush costume like Cy the Cardinal or Big Bird but more like Hawkman from the DC comic books. He has a bronze helmet with thick metal beak and a couple of wings that can sort of sprout out of a leather-bound contraption worn like a back pack. He doesn't wear a shirt either, revealing a set of well-sculpted abs. I haven't seen him hit up a motel gym or do a sit-up once on this trip, so, yeah, I'm a little jealous. How he's managed to remain so comfortable in the passenger seat of this rented Toyota Camry with all that equipment on his back is beyond me. He told me that he can fly.

"Your bones aren't hollow," I said. "And that contraption must weigh a ton. That solid, metal helmet won't help either. Sorry." And we haven't really talked in the few hours since I said it. It doesn't matter. We're focusing on the task at hand, the task of finding the treasure.

I'm sure nobody else in our car believes he can fly either. Baroness Christine De La Rocha Von Sharless surely doesn't think he can fly and neither does "Joey from *Friends*."

I know that "Joey from *Friends*" is a fictional character. This Joey is not the character played by Matt Leblanc or even Matt LeBlanc. Hell, he looks more like

Ross. This guy is a method actor who is playing Joey in a stage play. And he refuses to break character.

When the birdman said he could fly, all “Joey from *Friends*” could say was “Woah!” which I think was the catchphrase of Joey from *Blossom*, but I didn’t want to say anything. You never know what kind of person you’re going to get haphazardly teamed up with on one of these cross-country treasure hunts things. “Joey from *Friends*” might be a gangster in hiding or a murderer on the lam, so who am I to judge which TV sitcom he’s quoting. I mean, he seems like a nice guy, but these madcap treasure hunts attract a certain type. If you have a nice family and crave stability, you probably don’t want to travel 1,000 miles based on the mysterious utterings of a dying silver miner from Bakersfield.

Take the Baroness for example. She’s royalty from one of those European countries that’s mostly just casinos. She doesn’t need a stake in an Appalachian silver mine. I’d guess she’s worth hundreds of millions of dollars. When we found out she was royalty, “Joey from *Friends*” asked if she owned a diamond hat which I think is a Chandler Bing line and not a Joey line. (“Joey From *Friends*” may not be who he says he is). Anyway, the Baroness is here for the thrill of the hunt and not the actual treasure. Coming from a casino culture, it’s likely about the risk with her.

I flew chopper during the first Iraq War, the real Iraq War, the one we won, (not the one we’re currently turning into a new Vietnam), and I never lost my yen for adventure, although I did lose my eye flying into a sandstorm during maneuvers over the desert outside of Baghdad. They discharged me due to the loss of depth

perception. I bought an eye patch with a smiley face on it. That's my thing now. All the other treasure hunters call me Smiling Roland, but my real name is Tony.

When I got back stateside, I drove truck. Somehow during a delivery of Graco cribs, I wound up searching for the tomb of D.B. Copper with a trapeze artist, an Aztec warrior (fake) and an Australian big game hunter and his bush kangaroo named Taiga. We didn't find the tomb. We ended up getting arrested for crashing into a fruit stand during a chase and fleeing the scene of the accident. The tomb of D.B. Cooper may still be out there, but all my leads dried up while I was doing community service in Muncie.

Tonight, we stopped at a KOA campground to sleep. It costs eight bucks to rent a lot. I'm a little miffed that the Baroness won't put us up in a swanky hotel, but I don't say anything. I guess living like a hobo is how she gets her kicks. We're somewhere in the wheatier park of Kansas, so I'll save the fight when there's a nice hotel in a 100-mile radius.

After setting up tents, Hank, the birdman, gathered a pile of firewood and started a nice fire. The Baroness pulls the cooler from the rental Camry's trunk and brings it fireside. She hands out hot dog buns and hot dogs, then distributes metal pokers to impale the hot dogs on. Royalty is too good for an old-fashioned sharpened stick, I guess.

"There are also marshmallows," she said, "For later." I noticed that she has, at some point, changed into a pair of camouflage coveralls and matching hunting cap.

"We're about a full-day's drive from the Kentucky-Virginia borderlands," I tell everyone. "If we can

minimize the piss breaks. We can start hunting for the mine the next morning.”

“This is supposed to be a silver mine hunt, not boot camp,” Joey said. “I don’t want to be limited on my pee breaks.”

“Smiling Roland is right,” the Baroness said in her strange eastern-European accent that made a lot of her i’s sound like e’s. “The sea captain, the grand puppeteer and the Royal Geographical Society were there when that silver miner died. If we’re going to claim a stake on this mine, then we have to find it first.”

“Do you think it’s messed up that we just left the miner there?” The birdman asked.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“After he said that the treasure was between the claws of the sleeping bear, everyone ran to their vehicles as fast as they could. We just left his body on that hillside,” said the birdman.

The day we all met, “Joey from *Friends*” had ripped the map from the dead miner’s hand. The gentlemen from the Royal Geographical Society menacingly asked what he had there, but birdman pulled the cord on his apparatus, and he brushed the geographers aside with the mighty wings that had emerged from his backpack with an unearthly whoosh. I ushered Joey and the birdman to the vehicle and acted as their getaway driver. The Baroness hopped in, offering to fund the venture. That’s how we met. What were we all doing in that glen at the base of those foothills? That’s a story for another time.

“He was almost dead,” said the Baroness. “Why else would he give up his secret?”

“A silver miner has a connection with this earth,” I said. “He’s been down in the soil. He can feel the vibration of the world’s precious metals. The way they hum and how they are tuned to music of the spheres and of all life, really. The precious metals of the earth practically move through him. When he dies, he has to tell their secrets and, then, finally, he will be claimed by the earth, his lover. And that’s why we should feel no remorse for leaving him.”

The birdman nodded slowly while gazing into the fire.

After a meal of hot dogs and marshmallows, Joey did a bit where he put on all the clothes he had brought with him and reenacted that scene from *Friends*, complete with lunges. Birdman read all the Chandler lines from a little branded pamphlet of *Friends* scenes that Joey carried around. (Joey may not be such a bad guy after all).

After everyone went to sleep, I walked across the campground and climbed over a fence into a small meadow that had a FOR SALE billboard in the middle of it. The moon was full and bright and cast the world in a faint silver glow. A fog of gnats buzzed above a shallow mud puddle. The interstate in the distance sounded like the ocean. I idly smoked a cigarette while gazing at the smiling face of the man in the moon.

I heard footsteps. They were light, as if they barely made any contact with the ground, only touching it as a courtesy. I assumed it was the Baroness. My other traveling companions clomped about the earth like horses counting with their hooves.

“Do you have a cigarette for me?” she asked.

I slid a Lucky Strike out of its pack and handed it to her. She put it in her mouth and I lit it.

“A dirty habit, but a nice excuse to do something out of the ordinary,” I said.

“How do you know so much about silver miners?” she asked. “What you said near the fire was moving.”

“It was a lie, Baroness. We let that man die on that hillside cause we’re greedy sons of bitches, addicted to the thrill of the chase. Our traveling companions are greenhorns, basically children when it comes to this life. I thought some pretty words may soothe their souls, but I figured you knew the truth.”

She looked hurt. I could see it even in the moonlight. A light breeze blew her jet-black hair across her face. The hunting cap was gone, and she wore a new outfit, a Carhartt jacket and light-brown dungarees.

“Look,” I said, about to soften the blow.

“I was hoping you believed it,” she said. She tossed her half-smoked cigarette onto the ground and stomped it out in an eerily quiet manner.

“Come back,” I said, lazily jogging after her. But she had jumped the fence in a single bound like a trained gymnast. (A trait typical of Eastern European treasure hunters.)

I finished my cigarette as a cloud eclipsed the moon.

The next day, we saw the large brown and yellow mobile home of the Royal Geographical Society, their symbol of a globe with a sword through it painted garishly on the side. They seemed to be following us. When we got off the interstate to get some McGriddles for breakfast. They were in the drive-thru behind us,

also ordering McGriddles with hot McDonald's tea in their loud, posh accents.

"They're going to find the silver mine for sure," Joey said, staring at his syrup-slicked hands. He was riding shotgun.

"No," I said, gunning the rental Camry out of the parking lot. "They aren't." I allowed myself to go five miles over the speed limit. I guess all that community service paid to the great state of Indiana had softened me, but I knew that it was impossible to find a silver mine behind bars. The Baroness protested that we were going too slow, but at least she was smiling now.

After about 80 miles, I came to the realization that the Royal Geographical Society was, indeed, following us. I had turned off the interstate onto some back roads. It felt awkward sharing the interstate with them. I figured we may lose some time; we could afford it because we had the map, but there they were: barreling down a country road in their ugly recreational vehicle, a cloud of brown dust roiling behind them.

"Why would they follow us?" The Baroness asked.

"Beats me," said the birdman.

"I know," said Joey. He unfolded the map. The bottom right-hand corner was missing. "When I took this from the miner, he didn't let go all the way. They must have found the missing piece and realized that we had it."

"We're going to have to lose them," I said, putting the pedal to the metal. "If I get pulled over for reckless driving, all of you will have to continue on without me."

The rental Camry kicked up dust on these empty backroads flanked by cornfields, the corn at least ten

feet tall. I took a sharp turn down a narrow dirt road, but the Royal Geographical Society followed our dust cloud.

“This is a rental,” I explained as I barreled through a barbed wire fence into a field. The corn stalks snapped as the car plowed through them. The bottom of the car collided with something very hard and I could hear a knocking noise in the engine. The Royal Geographical Society still followed, their RV wobbled threateningly as they bounced across the furrowed topsoil.

I made an erratic 180 turn and gunned towards what I believed to be the north end of the field, but when we came out of the field, we were in a damn meadow on the edge of a canyon. Smoke issued from the Camry’s hood and the vehicle sputtered to a stop.

“The mine is just across this gorge,” Joey said, looking at the map.

“Can we climb down? Do you have climbing gear?” the Baroness asked.

“All my gear is my truck,” I said. “This is a rental.”

Suddenly, Hank unfurled his majestic wings. His wingspan had to be over fifteen feet across. “I will claim this mine,” he said. “It is only across the gorge.”

“You can’t fly,” I said. “Nothing about you is aerodynamic. I’m a pilot. I know these things.”

All three members of the Royal Geographical Society emerged from their mobile home wearing pith helmets. One of the men had a large butterfly net.

“Look,” I said to the geographers. “We’re all on this side of the gorge. Let’s work out a deal. We don’t need for things to get ugly here.”

“We radioed our other chapter and they will be arriving on the other side in mere minutes. We’re only to keep you away from the mine,” the guy with the butterfly net said in his British accent.

“So we’re beat,” I said.

“You can’t give up,” Joey said. “Is that what a dinosaur would do? It’s a Joey from *Friends* line,” he explained to the Englishmen. “I’m in a play.”

“You have to fly across, Hank,” said the Baroness.

“He’ll fall,” I said. “The silver mine isn’t worth it.”

“It’s not about the silver mine,” the Baroness said. “It’s about honoring a man’s connection to the earth and his mysteries. That’s what we all yearn for. Probably what you once longed for, too. Before whatever it was that happened to you.”

I looked at Hank. He was swinging his arms back and forth, like a diver at the Olympics.

I grabbed the butterfly net from the Englishman and ran towards Hank.

Hank leapt. When his wings caught the air it made an audible noise, like an air bag expanding after a car accident. He flapped his wings and rose slightly, the sunlight glinting off his bronze helmet, but he didn’t rise high enough. He was on a downward trajectory and would likely hit the gorge wall and tumble to his death. It would take a miracle, a genuine miracle for him to gain enough altitude to make the other side.

“He’s doing it,” the Baroness said. Joey cheered.

I put my hand over my good eye and waited for it to be over.

Ghost on Fire

By Dennis Vannatta

1.

Johnny Hackett was eight years old when his uncle Max came home to die. Well, actually it was Johnny's family's home. Uncle Max hadn't been there for so long that Johnny had almost forgotten what he looked like. But it was the closest thing he had to a home, Johnny's dad had said. "Besides, he's my little brother," he'd said with a catch in his voice that caused Johnny to lie in bed for nights afterward picturing his dad breaking into tears like Johnny, who cried easily, cried if somebody looked at him the wrong way, his dad said, wanting him to be tougher because "the world will eat you up starting at your toes and ending up with the hair on your head," another thing his dad said, but that only made him laugh. Johnny hadn't cried at everything after all, even when he was only eight. Now Johnny was ten, and Uncle Max was still alive and "still living in my house and eating my food," his dad said without any catch in his voice.

"He sure looks like he's dying to me," Cory Studer, Johnny's friend, said after they'd passed through the living room where Uncle Max was sprawled across the couch watching *Doctor Oz*. He looked up long enough to say, "Here comes the cavalry." (Uncle Max claimed to have been in the French Foreign Legion, but Johnny's dad said that if he was in the military anywhere "it was a

good bet he spent his entire tour of duty in the stockade.”)

Uncle Max didn't look anything like his brother, Johnny's dad, who was stocky with jet black hair and a ruddy complexion from working construction outside all day. Although younger, Uncle Max had thin, graying hair pulled back in a scraggly pony tail and skin that looked like newspaper. He wasn't a short man but seemed short because he walked with a stoop and kept his hand at the small of his back as if it hurt him, but if it did, “He sure didn't hurt it working,” his dad said.

Johnny and Cory went into Johnny's bedroom, but his mom was cleaning the bathroom directly across the hall, and Cory said, “We can't talk here. Come on,” and led Johnny back through the living room, where Uncle Max didn't even look up, and out into the front yard.

“Trust me, the son of a bitch is dying,” Cory said.

Cory was ten, like Johnny, but desperately wanted to be older. He cussed more than any other boy in the fifth grade, smoked cigarettes, and carried a pocket knife, which he said he'd be happy as hell to use on any son of a bitch who crossed him. He especially kept an eye on the rick kids in class, the ones with smart phones. (Cory, Johnny, and Eric Owens, who was slow, were the only kids in class who didn't even have flip-phones.)

Johnny asked Cory how long he thought it would take Uncle Max to die, but Cory waved dismissively and said, “Whatever, who cares,” and went on to the subject he was really interested in—obsessed with, in fact—and Johnny got nervous. When he was eight, he probably would have started to cry, but now he just got nervous.

*

They sat in Johnny's dad's '59 Dodge with the enormous tail fins. It had sat rusting on blocks in the side yard since before Johnny was born. His dad intended to restore it and sell it for good money as soon as he could afford to buy the parts, which wouldn't happen as long as he fed, clothed, and housed "every did-beat relative who won't go out and work for a living"—meaning Uncle Max. Johnny had overheard him threaten to give Uncle Max the boot any number of times, but his mom would always say, "What if he really is dying, Joe? What then?" His mom said she couldn't help liking Uncle Max. Johnny kind of liked him, too, although he often made Johnny nervous.

Johnny was nervous now, sitting in the Dodge under the steering wheel, Cory across the bench seat from him with his hand down his jeans, massaging himself.

Sex. That's all Cory was interested in, all he wanted to talk about. But it made Johnny nervous. He'd learned the essentials of it only a few weeks ago, after all, and he still wasn't sure he had it right.

It was Cory who'd told him.

"The man takes his wienie and puts it in the woman's pee-hole. Then he shakes it around until a seed comes out. Then the seed grows into a baby."

Johnny thought it was a joke.

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard," he said.

Cory was beside himself.

"You don't believe me? Ask your parents. Go on, smart guy, ask them. You should thank me for telling you because you're the last kid in the fifth grade to find out, and that includes the retard, Eric. You're so navy,

Johnny. You're the naviest son of a bitch in the whole world."

Cory had called him "navy" before. He'd had found the word in a book, which shocked Johnny because Cory hated to read and didn't do it very well. The word—Cory showed it to him—was n-a-i-v-e. Johnny, who was a very good reader, tried to tell Cory how to pronounce it, but Cory only said, "Well, you're just one smart son of a bitch, aren't you? A real smart guy," and looked like he was about to start busting Johnny in the face. Johnny knew that the only reason he didn't was because Cory didn't have any other friends. If Johnny ever got a flip-phone, though, he'd be in for a beating.

"I think it's getting hard. I think it's getting a little hard," Cory said, really working away with his hand in his pants.

Suddenly, he pulled his hand out and muttered, "Oh, the hell with it."

He slumped against the door and gazed out the window. Whatever he saw seemed to fill him with disgust.

Finally, he said, "I need twenty dollars. If I give Sophia Buckholtz twenty dollars, she'll let me see her titties."

Cory's family, the Studers, lived in a trailer-home on Little Spring Road. They were even poorer than the Hacketts.

"Hey, would you steal twenty dollars from your dad?" Cory said. "I'll be your friend for life."

Why don't you steal twenty dollars from *your* dad, Johnny almost asked him, but he knew the answer to

that. Cory's dad would kill him. He was a scary man. Johnny didn't like to go into the trailer-home when he was there.

"I won't steal from my dad, Cory, but if I had twenty dollars, I'd give it to you," Johnny said.

"I know you would, buddy," Cory said, reaching over and slapping him on the arm. "You're a good guy. The only good guy in the fifth grade. Even if you are the naviest son of a bitch in the world."

Then he gave Johnny a hard stare as if daring him to correct him.

That was the day the ghost house burned down.

2.

Or rather the night. Johnny slept right through it even though he was a bad sleeper and would lie in bed hours some nights toting up all the things he worried about, things that frightened him.

When he found out about the fire the next morning, the smell of smoke so thick it in the air it was almost nauseating, he wanted to kick himself for picking that one night to sleep well. He'd never seen a house burn, after all, and it would have been something to see one burn at night.

Now, all he could see from the attic window was a square of charred remains, looking absurdly small for what had been a two-story house, glistening strangely in the morning light. Firemen must have come in the night and hosed the house down. And he'd slept even through that. He let the curtain fall back in place.

They still called it the attic although it was now Uncle Max's bedroom, with curtains, table and lamp,

two throw rugs and a “Chester drawers,” as Johnny called it.

He’d never seen his dad go up there since he’d moved the furniture in two years ago, and his mom went there no more than once a week to dust and change the bedding, but Johnny went up several times a day to empty the trash can, collect day-old newspapers, and take up food and then bring down the dirty dishes when Uncle Max felt too sick to come down and eat. “Too sick to eat with the family,” his dad said, “but never too sick to eat. Notice that?” But that wasn’t true at all, his mom said. Uncle Max didn’t eat much at all any more. And his dad threw his head back and laughed up at the ceiling—“Arf! Arf! Arf!”—like a seal barking.

Sometimes Uncle Max would talk to Johnny when he came into his room, and sometimes he would just lie there staring up at the planks and beams of the underside of the roof that slanted up over the bed.

On this morning Uncle Max seemed to be sleeping when Johnny came into the room and pulled back the curtains to view the disappointing remains of what should have been the most dramatic event in the neighborhood since the police came to arrest Troy Sands for vandalizing the junior high building. When Johnny turned to leave, though, he glanced at Uncle Max and saw that his eyes were open.

“So what happened to the ghost?” Uncle Max said.

“What ghost?” Johnny said with a tentative smile.

He was never sure how to take Uncle Max. He’d say some things with a straight face that Johnny knew were meant to be funny and other things with a laugh or grin that Johnny suspected were serious. Now, lying on

his side with his face half-hidden in the big fluffy pillow, Uncle Max could have been grimacing or grinning or something else entirely.

“You know what ghost I’m talking about. The VanDyne place was haunted. Everyone knows that.”

Johnny edged toward the door but couldn’t help pausing to say, “I don’t believe in ghosts,” pushing his chest out and throwing his shoulders back to stand as tall as he could. In fact, he was tall for his age, almost a head taller than Cory and with broader shoulders. He would be a big man like his father. Why then did he feel small, got picked on at school, and had to be protected by Cory, a little guy, but he’d fight in a frenzy that was scary even for Johnny to watch?

“So, you don’t believe in ghosts, huh? Have you ever seen one?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know they don’t exist?”

Johnny knew that that didn’t make any sense, but the question bothered him anyway. The world was full of things he’d never seen, didn’t understand, couldn’t explain, yet he felt them all around him, waiting.

“Just kidding you, John John. Hey, lighten up, kid. You take life too seriously. Wait, the VanDyne place, though. Do you know we lived in that house for a couple of years before we moved into this one?”

“What?”

“Yeah, your dad and I lived there when we were little, right after old lady VanDyne died. We moved because of that damn ghost.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s true. Ask your dad.”

“It’s a lie. You’d rather lie than breathe,” Johnny said, a thing he’d heard his dad say.

Johnny went on out the door but before he could close the door behind him, he heard his uncle say, “No, I’d rather breathe.”

*

“Why is Uncle Max living with us? Why doesn’t he have a family of his own to live with?” Johnny asked his mother in the kitchen. He was still mad at his uncle for saying that stuff about living in the VanDyne house although he couldn’t have explained why it made him mad. Another one of those things . . .

“Well,” his mother said, buttering toast at the counter, “your uncle Max has been married three times, but none of the marriages took.”

“Why not?”

“Well, Max is what you’d call a ladies man. That’s a man who’s good with women—good at getting women but not so good at keeping them. Probably they don’t really want to keep any one woman. They like to jump from one to another.”

“Dad says Uncle Max can’t keep his pants zipped up.”

His mom laughed so hard, bending down over the counter, that she almost got her chest into the buttered toast.

When he’d heard his dad say that Uncle Max couldn’t keep his pants zipped up, Johnny thought he’d meant that Uncle Max’s pants would fall down in public, a thing Johnny had nightmares about. But now he suspected it had something to do with sex. More and

more it seemed like everything had something to do with sex.

When his mom finished laughing, she handed Johnny the plate of toast and a glass of orange juice and told him to take it up to Uncle Max.

“I don’t want to. You take it.”

“I’d better not. It’s not safe for a woman all herself to get too close to a ladies man.”

“You’re not all by yourself. I’m here.”

She started to laugh again, and Johnny, tired of being laughed at, damn tired of it, grabbed the toast and juice and headed up the stairs.

*

Uncle Max was still in bed, asleep, apparently. He’d thrown the sheet off him. The attic heated up quickly on summer days, and Uncle Max didn’t even have a fan. He didn’t need one because he was cold all the time, he said. The sickness.

Lying there in his boxer shorts, he looked like a sick man to Johnny, ribs pressing up against skin like knife edges, lozenge of hair on his breastbone gray, an aureole of gray hair around each nipple. His hands and feet, nothing but skin over bone, looked grotesquely long.

“The thing you have to worry about when a haunted house burns down,” Uncle Max suddenly said, startling Johnny so that he almost dropped the plate of toast, “is what happens to the ghost. It has to go somewhere, doesn’t it? Has to find some new house to haunt. And when a ghost comes from a burning house, he comes trailing fire.”

He hadn't opened his eyes to speak, and now, silent again, once more he looked like he might be sleeping.

Johnny set the plate and glass down beside his bed very quietly so as not to wake him.

*

Johnny walked down the street and stood before the remains of the VanDyne place.

He looked to his right toward his house, then to his left where, across another empty lot, stood the Poindexter house. There was no doubt about it. The Hackett house was closer.

*

He walked on past the Poindexter house and at the next intersection turned onto a blacktop road and in a few minutes was almost out of town. And then there was Cory's trailer-home in a little clearing among brush and stunted trees.

Brutus, a damn mean dog, was lying on the dirt in front of the trailer, but he was too interested in gnawing on a bone to pay much attention to Johnny.

Johnny walked around the trailer-home and climbed up on a barrel beneath a little window. On the other side of the window was Cory's cot. Johnny had been inside a few times. He didn't like it in there.

He tapped at the window frame. Almost instantly Cory was there. His face seemed to fill the whole window, the left side red like he had a sunburn and swollen, his lips puffy and his left eye almost swollen shut.

"Yolanda says I can't go outside until my face looks OK again. Yeah, the old man caught me getting into his money. All he had was a goddamn ten-dollar

bill, but I figured if Sophia would let me see both of her titties for twenty dollars, maybe she'd let me see one titty for ten. But the old man caught me.”

“Jesus.”

“Aw, he didn't even use his fist. He uses his fist on Yolanda, but he only uses his open hand on me.”

Johnny wanted to tell him that it'd be all right, that he'd get the twenty dollars for him even if he had to steal it from his dad. But when he tried to say that, a sob broke out, and then he was crying.

“What the hell are you crying about?” Cory shrieked. He pressed his faced against the window screen as if he wanted to burst through it in his rage. “I told you he didn't use his fist, so what are you crying about? Cry baby, cry baby! You're nothing hut a goddamn cry baby!”

*

It was barely mid-morning by the time he got home, yet his dad's pickup was in the driveway. Inside, he found his mom and dad sitting at the kitchen table. They were talking in low voices, their eyes cast down. Something they needed at the construction site hadn't come in, so they'd sent his dad home. Johnny thought a day off work should make his dad happy, but he didn't look happy.

When he realized that Johnny was standing in the doorway, his dad said, “What are you starring at? Go play something.”

“Before you do that,” his mom said, “go up and get your uncle's breakfast dishes.”

The plate of toast and glass of juice were on the floor by the bed where Johnny had put them.

Uncle Max was lying on his side exactly as he'd been when Johnny left him, only now he had the sheet pulled up to his chin. He was shivering so the sheet was rippling like a wind-swept pond.

"Do you need a blanket?" Johnny asked.

"I'm scared, Johnny," he said, staring out of yellow eyes. "I'm so scared."

Johnny went back downstairs. His mom and dad were still in the kitchen. He went into their bedroom and took his dad's wallet from his work pants, which he'd left in a pile on the floor before changing into shorts. It was going to be a hot day.

He went back into the kitchen and screamed, "He's dying, you son of a bitch! He's dying!"

He ran out the front door and then, clutching the twenty-dollar bill in his fist, ran down the street toward Sophia Buckholtz's house.

Dead Dreams

By Sandeep Kumar Mishra

In his dreams, Rajan searches for the ghosts. He hunts for them, tracing their footsteps in the dirt. He is back in his hometown—he knows these roads. The moonlight shivers on his skin. The crooked streets rattle around him. His heart burns in his chest. *Baba, mama. Where are you?*

He runs, following the path laid out for him. The streets smell like smoke. Everything is hazy and deserted, shuttered up and locked away. He knows his neighbors behind each door, but no one steps out to help him. They're too scared. Rajan is terrified, too, but he keeps running.

Please, if I could just see you one more time. I didn't know it would be the last time. I would have said so much more. Baba, mama.

When he looks up, the ghosts are further away than before. They blur in the distance, like a poorly developed photo, but he can still sense the sadness etched upon their faces. Their feet twist backward from their bodies. *Bhuta*. Spirits. He should have known better—he's been following their trail the wrong way the entire time. He won't ever catch up now.

Grief sweeps over Rajan like a monsoon. He drops to his knees. The ground begins to crumble. A dark pit opens underneath him—a grave, cloying and sticky with the scent of death. The spirits watch from a distance, cold in the low moonlight.

Rajan falls.

He wakes up with a jolt. It's still dark outside. Warm air filters in from the cracked window by his cot. The only sound in his cell is his own unsteady breath, and what sounds like the rustle of paper. He looks at his journals, but they lie still across the room, untouched.

He looks out the window. Two beady black eyes stare back at him, then rise in the dark, unfurling into an undulating brown body. The snake's tail lashes out and strikes the window. Rajan jumps back, heart hammering in his chest. The snake hisses, but it sounds more like a shriek of mocking laughter.

He doesn't sleep for the rest of the night.

Dawn spills like pale pink soup over the horizon, bringing with it a searing heat that refuses to break. The prisoners queue up to receive sloppy rations of oatmeal ladled into their bowl. The cafeteria smells like vinegar and bleach.

Rajan sits down at a table and pulls out one of his journals. He's made it a point to write every day he's been imprisoned—it's the only thing keeping him sane. A flip of the journal's pages shows his journey: raw confusion, first, legal jargon for later lookup, then feverish thoughts of revenge as he realized what had happened. After, a dull acceptance of his fate, then a sudden jolt back to confusion as the pandemic hit and the world spun upside down.

He still feels all those things like an ache in the pit of his chest, a heartburn he can't get rid of. Rajan used to take pride in his sensitive emotions—it made him a

better poet, after all, and his poetry landed him a teaching position at a prestigious university. Now, though, he wishes he could turn off his mind. There's too much to feel. It's overwhelming.

"Hey." One of the other prisoners— a skull-inked man aptly nicknamed Bones— nudges Rajan's side. "Stop writing, professor. What's the point? None of us are ever getting out of here."

Rajan does not spare him a glance, and continues writing. "The words are the point." If he doesn't write, then the words haunt him in the dark, and he doesn't sleep.

Bones grunts. "That's deep, man. I bet if I was that deep, my wife wouldn't've left me."

This is a ritual the prisoners go through daily, sitting around the table and wishing things had gone differently— a storytelling, of sorts. Rajan has heard it all by now. *If I hadn't met her... if he hadn't pissed me off so much... if the cops hadn't been nearby that day...* Rajan has never played their game. There's no point in wondering about the past. He isn't even sure about enough details about his case to wish differently.

All Rajan knows is this: one minute, he was an esteemed professor travelling internationally to attend a literary seminar. The next, airport security found a bag of white powder in his carry-on, and there was a global pandemic. The world was having a collective panic attack, and his pleas of innocence were lost in the cries of a million others.

Rajan's mouth goes dry just thinking about the horrors of that day. He takes a sip of milk, but it's

curdled, and stings going down his throat. He hacks up a cough.

Bones leans back. “Hey, get away from me, man. Is that contagious?”

“The sour milk? I hope not.” Rajan understands Bones’ anxiety. The fear of the plague is almost a second pandemic in and of itself. He sets the cup on the corner of his tray, as if it must be quarantined from the rest.

“Ugh.” Bones makes a face. “Why is everything here so rotten?”

“It’s a metaphor,” Rajan tells him dryly, and they both laugh.

Mid-morning, he gets a migraine, which makes him scream and kick his cot in frustration. He’s been plagued by headaches his whole life, but they got viciously worse when he came to Australia eight months ago: something about the climate, he suspects. He’s learned that there’s nothing to do but wait them out.

Rajan curls up in a corner of the room, hands wrapped around his knees. White spots dance in his vision. It feels like a hammer is raining blows down on the back of his skull. When things got this bad, his wife used to soothe him with a cool compress, but now she’s a continent away. He passes out with her name on his tongue.

In his hazy, pain-filled sleep, he sees a snake. He can tell by the markings that it’s the same one from the previous night. Mottled spots of green blot the snake’s body like mold. No, not mold—it reminds Rajan of the

diagrams of the Covid-19 virus he and the other prisoners were shown at the beginning of the pandemic.

The snake hisses at him. Rajan is distantly aware that this is a dream, so he does not flinch. The desert blurs around him. The prison at his back. He's outside. He's free, if he can just get past the snake in his path.

Rajan picks up a stick from the ground, intending to shoo the snake away. Before he can, the snake shrieks and flails, tail lashing on the ground. Rajan jumps back. The snake hurls itself towards him. He raises the stick and clubs it over the head. Its scales brush his wrist. He feels a pinch of pain. He pulls away, hits it again. It keens, wild and pained. Adrenaline floods Rajan's veins. He strikes the snake for a third time. It lies still.

Breathing hard, Rajan looks down at his wrist. Two pin-point pricks of fangbite are embedded in his skin. Poison seeps slowly through his veins. Dizziness overwhelms him, and he collapses.

He wakes up smothered in sheets from head to toe, like a funeral shroud.

The rest of the week flits by like a ghost in the mist. Time blurs, and Rajan struggles to find things to record in his journal. It's just another day after day after day— what is there to write about when everyone is trapped, when nothing changes? He knows vaguely that this is momentous, that the world has never seen a pandemic of this magnitude, but he's so isolated in the prison he can't even conceptualize how the outside world would be changed.

He is starting to forget the details of his family's faces. He draws awkward, crooked pictures of them in

his journal. Does his father wear two rings or one? Does his mother have a mole under her right eye or left? It strikes Rajan with a deep, tolling sadness that he will never again be able to look at them and remember.

With nothing else to do, Rajan starts recording his dreams. The doctor prescribed him sleeping pills to help with the migraines and insomnia— and they do help, but they make him dizzy, thick-limbed, unable to differentiate wake and sleep. In this half-twilight, he writes:

October 18 2020. The ghosts came to visit me again. This time, it was my children. They danced around me in a circle, chanting, “Baba’s dead! Baba’s dead!”

I tried to tell them that I wasn’t dead, that I was just away temporarily, but they couldn’t hear or see me. I tried to embrace them, ruffle their hair, but I couldn’t touch them. It was as if I was invisible or a ghost. Am I becoming a ghost? My feet are straight, and bhuta are restless, transient things. I am not ever-moving. I am stuck. I hate being so stuck.

October 19 2020. Last night, I saw the snake— the same snake I always do. I killed the snake. But the snake returns. It bits itself— a perfect, pure, ouroboros. It behaves like it also wants to die. I don’t know how to feel about this. The snake returns. The snake returns.

The rest of the entry trails off into unintelligibility, marked by a spot of sleepy drool at the edge of the page.

“What’s up, dude?” Bones prods Rajan’s shoulder. They’re in the exercise yard, Rajan crouching to pick up a dumbbell bar, Bones watching to make sure he doesn’t

injure himself. “You look even more depressed than usual, which is saying something.”

Rajan focuses his efforts on squatting, then lifting the bar over his head. His muscles burn, but it feels good to sweat. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Really?” Bones arches an eyebrow. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I am not—” A burst of light-headedness flows through Rajan. He sways unsteadily on his feet and sets the dumbbell down with a *thunk*. “I am not going to pass out,” he says, panting.

“Seriously, professor, you’re worrying me.” Bones offers him a water bottle, which Rajan gratefully accepts. “Is it the nightmares? Are they getting worse?”

Rajan blinks. Water drips down his chin. “How did you know?”

“You cry in your sleep.” At Rajan’s expression, Bones rushes to reassure him. “We all get the bad dreams, dude. We’ve all been through something heavy. If anyone judges you for it, I’ll beat them up.”

“Thanks,” Rajan says, flattered by the offer. He wipes sweat off his forehead. “I think... I might be cursed. I don’t know.” He gestures to his chest. “All my emotions are like water, filling me up, drowning me. There’s only so much grief a person can take.”

Bones sits next to him. “What do you see in the dreams? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“A snake,” Rajan says, holding up his hands. “About this big. We fight. I kill it. The snake returns.”

Bones scratches his head. “The same dream? Every night?”

Rajan shrugs. “Pretty much.”

“Cool,” says Bones. “In my dreams, my wife always yells at me all the time.” Rajan laughs humorlessly. “If you had the same dream every night, a spirit was haunting you. You needed to do something to appease it.”

“Like what?”

“Well, leave bowls of honey and milk outside for the fairies to eat, but you can’t do that here. Maybe just do something different to help it out? Hmm.” Bones taps his hand against the barbell. “Saying that aloud, it all sounds pretty nutty.”

Rajan gestures to the prison yard, to the barbed-wire walls and the world at large, where panic and a pandemic consume them all. “If you ask me. Anything’s worth a try.”

“*Or* ask your doctor to double your prescription.”

“No, thanks. If I take any more sleeping pills, I might never wake up again.” The thought had been appealing, at times, but Rajan can’t go through with that. He has to find his way back to India, to his wife and to his children, to his parent’s ghosts and graves. He has to believe that someday, this will end. Giving up means *he* will end.

Rajan takes no sleeping pills that night. He lies on his cot, arms folded over his chest, and watches the moonlight seep like spoiled milk through the window. Some part of him thinks the snake might come to find him while he is awake, but the desert outside his window remains bleak and empty. In the end, he has to go to it, instead.

He closes his eyes. His breathing is soft and steady. He slips into sleep and dreams.

Here he is again. The jail behind him, the snake in front of him. Imprisonment or death. Are those his only options? Is he supposed to give up and let the snake poison him? Rajan refuses to believe it is so.

The snake bares its fangs, which curve like crescent moons in the light. Rajan picks up the stick. The wood is familiar in his hands, grooved from his grip.

“Back off,” he tells the snake. It hisses at him. “I mean it.”

The snake lunges for him. Rajan dodges away, swiping the stick out to protect his bare feet.

“What do you *want* from me? Just leave me alone!”

The snake writhes and coils. Its tail thumps in the dirt again. Rajan hits it with the stick. It howls.

This is his dilemma, the problem he’s figured out over many nights of mystic battle: he can wound the snake, but whenever he closes in for the killing blow, it finds a way to bite him. Slaughtering it only results in both of them dying.

Do something different. Break the cycle. Bones’ voice whispers in the back of Rajan’s head.

Rajan backs away. The snake follows. Blood drips from its abdomen.

“Stop,” Rajan says. “I don’t want to hurt you.” The snake ignores him. It seems compelled to attack. Its black eyes fix on the weapon in his hand.

So Rajan sets the stick down.

His heart is pounding in his chest. He raises his hands above his head. “See?” he says, mouth dry. “I mean it.”

The snake rises up, twists its head to consider him. Its eyes reflect the white-chip light of the stars above.

“Go,” Rajan says. “You’re released. You don’t have to die to be free.”

The snake places its body back on the flat ground, as if it is bowing to him. Then it slithers off into the desert, leaving soft plumes of dust in its wake. Rajan drops his hands, breathing heavily. He takes a step forward into the night. Nothing stops him. For once, there are no ghosts, no migraines, no spirit-snakes waiting to strike. He is free.

The next morning, a guard comes to visit his cell, rapping loudly on the bars.

“Hey. Wake up.”

Rajan hasn’t slept. This time, it wasn’t insomnia, but indecision: he is burdened by his choice to let the snake go free. What has he set loose? The nightmare has so warped his life that he can’t help but imagine it will impact the waking world, too. For all his metaphors, for all his knowledge of spirits and curses and dreamscapes, he doesn’t know what he’s done.

“Get going,” the guard snaps. “You’re leaving.”

Rajan blinks. Sits up. “Leaving?”

“In three hours.”

He almost doesn’t want to ask. It’s too much to hope for. “Where— where am I going?”

“I dunno. Back to wherever you came from, I guess,” the guard sneers, but Rajan barely registers the jab. He’s going to get *out*.

He glances down at the page in his journal, where he has written the first scrawling lines of a poem: *today I did not kill the snake / I set it free / it will return to the wild / I will wait for its mercy / and it will return to me.*

He asks, though he already suspects the answer: “Why?”

“Prison’s full— we need more space than usual because of the pandemic. You’re a minor offender. Your sentence was shortened. Congratulations.” The guard tosses a piece of paper at him, presumably some sort of official court document. “Pack your stuff.”

Three hours later, he’s out the door.

Two guards accompany him on either side, nightsticks swinging. A car idles a few yards away. Rajan breathes in the sweet desert air. The heat doesn’t bother him, and his migraine has faded. Clouds of dust bloom like flowers. The world is still. Even the tumbleweed has stopped its travels to watch him. It would make a good setting for a poem, Rajan thinks.

Nonfiction

Armageddon In Bloom

By Mike Dressel

I had only been in Zagreb for a few hours when I received Helmut's first text, "It seems crazy but you are in my mind." That may have been so, but I was also physically in a different country, for only seventy-two hours, and my intention was to sightsee not cement a new relationship. The messages that came in rapid succession after were all of a piece, broken-English declarations of love, escalating in intensity. "I am a human nature and I have to tell you how I feel" read the following one. My hope that these SMS salvos might diminish as the day went on was in vain. "I have fallen in love with you a little bit," he wrote, and I wish I felt equally enamored, or at least suitably flattered, but my first thought was "this is a pay-as-you-go-mobile and each of these texts is costing me." The last one that evening read "Don't worry I'm not a stalker but I must speak about my feelings." I began to worry.

It was 2011 and I was living for half a year in Graz while completing a joint master's degree program. Thought it's the second largest city in Austria, Graz is basically a university town, the population swelling to approximately four-hundred thousand at its peak. Having spent the last decade in New York City with its eight million inhabitants, the chance to live and study abroad, in a small but lively *stadt*, seemed to be an antidote, or corrective, to the urban rut I was experiencing. I arrived in August knowing only one other student in my graduate program, ready to lose

myself in exploring, but after four months the avidity of relocation had given way, as it inevitably does, to routine: dining in the same handful of cheap restaurants near the *Studentenheim*, mumbling haltingly and self-consciously through quotidian transactions at the market or the cinema in my stilted, textbook German, silently cursing everyone at the post office or tram stop who was oblivious to the concept of an orderly queue.

What leisure time I had outside of class was devoted to the local sights, like the Baroque Eggenberg Palace, or short weekend excursions across the border to nearby cities like Maribor or Bratislava. I attended the weekly *stammtischs* at the bar run by English expats, and sometimes stopped in to parties in various dorm rooms. After one disastrous night early on, I made sure to never again set foot in the cramped, sweaty nightclubs in the *univiertel*, where on weekends undergraduate students a decade younger than me binged on watered-down cocktails while dancing to saccharine eurodisco. As the semester progressed and the hot, Aperol Spritz summer afternoons gave way to damp, foggy Austrian fall I felt increasingly isolated. I had come to push against something I couldn't articulate, but had only succeeded in bumping up against my own loneliness. I had an itch to be among my own kind, and not just English speakers doing trivia night at the pub.

Austria is still a nominally Catholic country and the gay subculture in Graz was hard to come by. To the best of my research at the time there were only a handful of gay bars in the city, and I investigated most of them already, leaving only Rush, a small dance club on the outskirts. Getting there involved a five-minute walk to

the bus stop, then a twenty-minute ride, then an additional ten-or-so minute walk. I turned up on the early side, around nine pm, since I had a train ticket to Croatia the following afternoon. Descending the stairs, I found the dank brick room occupied by precisely three people: two bartenders, rinsing and drying glassware, and a DJ, who was setting up his equipment. Here, I thought, is your rousing Friday night. I consoled myself with a pint and kept an eye on the time, as the last night bus to get me home departed at quarter to twelve.

My first image of Helmut is him landing on the stool next to me and aggressively signaling the bartender. His dark goatee was neatly trimmed, his black hair shiny, his nails lacquered, his eyes kohl rimmed. He wore denim overalls and pointy, polished black boots. His look didn't match the elaborately constructed fantasies I had about Austrian men, stereotypically lederhosen-clad blonde brutes. Drink secured he pushed through the small knot of bodies to the DJ booth to request Lady Gaga, then annexed a section of the dancefloor to stomp and twirl.

"I am sorry but I just had to dance it out" He said when he sat back down next to me, less an apology than a provocation.

"You do you," I replied, sipping my *Puntigamer*.

"Where are you from?" He asked, picking up on my American accent.

"New York."

"The city?"

I nodded.

"Oh, pack me in your suitcase and take me home with you!" he said, grabbing at my knees in an

exaggerated genuflection. From then on, he did not let me leave his side.

I checked the time. I was nearing my self-imposed curfew, but Helmut, as he introduced himself to me, was the only person I'd met in Graz who seemed remotely interested in getting to know me. I stoked his attention, fully aware that my allure to him was partly due to that fact I was from New York. (Most of the Austrian kids just wanted to know if the city was exactly like *How I Met Your Mother*. They were all watching, and obsessed, with watching *How I Met Your Mother* at the time.)

We drank, and flirted, and danced a bit, and Helmut took to pouring half his fresh beers into my glass. I had earlier on conceded that I would miss my night bus, but as another replenished glass stood in front of me, I announced that I had to get home.

Helmut implied that his apartment was around the corner from the club, should I be interested.

"Well look, I'm either getting a cab or going back with you, but I absolutely cannot drink any more beer," I said.

"You should know I have a cat," he said.

"Cats are fine. I like cats. Let's go," I said, firmly taking his hand.

At seven a.m. he mashed the alarm then bounded out bed to blast Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" on the stereo while I struggled to get my bearings. Right as the song ended, he queued it up again, then skipped into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. He was clearly a morning person, unaffected by the copious beers we'd consumed, whereas I felt sluggish and muzzy. My intention was to collect my things and see myself out,

but he gestured to the freshly brewed pot, entreating me stay. The lure of a large steaming mug full of strong coffee, versus the miniscule dribble served in takeaway cups from various cafes I had endured the past few months, was strong. So, I sat in the kitchen, mug in hand, negotiating my hangover and smoking a cigarette cadged from Helmut's pack of Gauloises while he showered. The aforementioned black cat made its first appearance, rubbing incuriously against my shin. Emerging from the bathroom in a black ribbed sweater and plaid bondage pants, Helmut lit a cigarette of his own and conducted a running monologue about his life while he finished his morning routine. He told me his last relationship ended because he was "too intense" (information I should have flagged, I realize in hindsight) and that dating in Graz was a difficult proposition. He worked in a salon and was in the process of getting his license to become a hairstylist—at this he pointed to a coiffed blonde wig resting on a Styrofoam wig head—and was taking a crucial exam this morning. He spoke about his art, gesturing to the paintings displayed around the apartment—well-executed explosions of primary colors and aggressively rendered figures. When I asked why they were all signed Tituss—with two s's—he indicated that Tituss was his artistic persona, his public-facing self. "I am Helmut, but I am also Tituss," he explained with a flourish of his hand. "This is Tituss," he said, referencing his eyeliner, his lip gloss, his outfit.

At the bus stop, we parted with a soft kiss and an exchange of numbers, his stored in my phone under Helmut/Tituss, and I planned to get in touch when I

returned. A few hours later I met up with Stacey and Taylor, my traveling companions from the university, and we caught the train to Zagreb.

Since returning from Zagreb, my interactions with Helmut were still mediated solely through text messages, many of which, when he forgot to compose in English, I could only make sense of by plugging into Google Translate. Like *Ist es so schwer zu erkennen dass ich dich ehrlich kennenlernen will?*, a barrage of frightening-sounding German which roughly translated means “is it so hard to see that I want to get to know you honestly?”

My mornings and afternoons were spent in lecture halls, followed by hours of reading every night, plus writing essays, but sitting there at my small desk, I always replied that I’d be happy to grab a drink or a coffee. “I am missing you,” he wrote, then, “I am wanting to be with you.” My attempts to arrange a definitive time and location for a face-to-face encounter were roundly dismissed. How was he supposed to “know me honestly” if he wouldn’t see me in person? Every high-pitched beep-beep-beep alerting me to a new text pushed me closer to vexation, as every non-declaration of love on my part seemed to do him.

“Is it really over before it starts?” He wrote.

I responded that I had truly been engrossed in my work but my offer to meet stood.

“So, I was only a one-night stand?”

I weighed the limited time I had left in Austria against his lingering, and outsize, attachment.

“You didn't have be but you are now.” The reply felt like the final button on our correspondence, cruel but definitive. Though it was not quite, I’d discover.

Two nights later I was out after class at a tavern near the city center when a bitter volley of texts came, including the admonishment "Thank you for feeling like a slut." I'm certain he meant "thank you for making me feel like a slut," an error in syntax, but there was some credence to the line as delivered. He was right to call me out. My brand of mating ritual, practiced and perfected in New York, that of the "fuck first and then figure out where on the scale of ghosted to husband material you rate," clearly didn't translate here. Attraction can transcend a lopsided lack of common language, but our misunderstanding went beyond merely words; mutual desire has its own grammar and we hadn't established a shared one. At the same time, I felt like a prop in his psychodrama, a silent stage partner to a running monologue he was continuing to hone, an exercise in reaffirming his beliefs about love and men. This went beyond a difference of the mores from one city, one country, to another, or my transgressing his personal moral code. This was not a language barrier but a willful mistranslation of wants. Who was I even negotiating with on my phone this whole time, Helmut or "Tituss"?

I looked at message in blocky type on the Nokia screen: "I am still alive you are not my Armageddon!" And there it was, to his mind. We'd gone from ardor to metaphorical annihilation in slightly over a week. How does one respond to that? I wrote "I believe we're done here." And we were.

I caught a glimpse of him one final time, from afar, as I was exiting the *Banhof* on a frigid winter day a few weeks before I returned to the states. He was waiting to cross the intersection, standing there with his silver

makeup case, chin in the air, defiant. Not for nothing but I'm glad it was true. I had not been his Armageddon.

Contributors

(in order of appearance)

Britney Logan is no stranger to Bruce or to Little Rock, AR. A photographer by profession who moonlights as a talented artist, she has done remarkable justice for our mustachioed boy with the cover art for this issue. Check her out at britneylogan.com and on Instagram: @britneylogan.

Salvatore Difalco lives in Toronto, Canada.

Mark Decarteret has appeared next to Charles Bukowski in a lo-fi fold out, Pope John Paul II in a high-test collection of Catholic poetry, Billy Collins in an Italian fashion coffee table book, Mary Oliver in a 3785 page pirated lit-trap, and Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon in an anthology of 62 New Hampshire poets he co-edited with Rick Agran and Hildred Crill. His seventh book, *lesser case*, will be published by Nixes Mate Books.

Cameron Morse is Senior Reviews editor at *Harbor Review* and the author of six collections of poetry. His first, *Fall Risk*, won Glass Lyre Press's 2018 Best Book Award. His latest is *Far Other* (Woodley Press, 2020). He holds an MFA from the University of Kansas City–Missouri and lives in Independence, Missouri, with his wife, Lili, and two children. For more information, check out his [Facebook page](#) or [website](#).

Desiree Remick is a poet and author currently pursuing her BFA in creative writing. Growing up in Southern Oregon, she learned to love nature, good literature, and fencing—three passions that

remain with her to this day. Her debut short story was the runner-up for the Chester B. Himes Memorial Short Story Award and arrived in print in 2021 in the *Ocotillo Review*.

Esther Fishman is a poet, storyteller, and playwright living in San Francisco. Her work recently appeared in the magazine *Deep Overstock*.

Simon Perchik's poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere.

Andrea Janov is a punk rock kid who believes in the beauty of the ordinary, the power of the vernacular, the history of the abandoned. She strives to reveal the power in what we see, say, do, ignore, and forget every day. She holds creative writing degrees from SUNY Purchase and Wilkes University.

Jason Visconti's work has appeared in various journals, including *Literary Yard*, *Allegro Magazine*, *Indigo Rising*, and *The American Journal of Poetry*. He especially enjoys the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Billy Collins.

Chase Mauerhan is a queer poet, proser, and fiction writer currently studying at Queens University of Charlotte. Her writing is based on personal experiences, queer theory, and an unrelenting desire to become a stand-up comedian. Their passions lie within discussing the uncomfortable truths of being queer and depressed in the South and buying books she will never read.

Josh Peterson lives in Boise, Idaho. His work has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Mississippi Review*, and elsewhere.

Dennis Vannatta is a Pushcart and Porter Prize winner, with stories published in many magazines and anthologies, including *River Styx*, *Chariton Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Antioch Review*. His sixth collection of stories, *The Only World You Get*, was published by Et Alia Press.

Sandeep Kumar Mishra is the bestseller author of *One Heart—Many Breaks* (Indian Poetry Review Press, 2020), an outsider artist, a poet, and a lecturer. He is a guest poetry editor at *Indian Poetry Review* (IPR). He has received the Readers Favorite Silver Award and the Indian Achievers Award in 2021 as well as the IPR Annual Poetry Award and the Literary Titan Book Award in 2020. He was also shortlisted for the 2021 International Book Awards, 2020 Indies Today Book of the Year Award, the 2021 Joy Bale Boone Poetry Prize, and the Oprelle Rise Up Poetry Prize 2021. Finally, he was nominated for the StoryMirror Author of the Year in 2019.

Mike Dressel is a writer based in New York. His work has appeared in *Warm Brothers*, *Bachelors*, *Newfound*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Chelsea Station*, and *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, among others.

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