



# Temporary Infinity

Volume 2 Issue 1

## *A letter from the editors*

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Dear Reader,

There are many things that people say make us human - our ability to communicate, our desire to destroy one another, our opposable thumbs. These, though, pale in comparison to our ability to create. That is a small word, though, for what we are capable of. Creation is more than just the act of making something from nothing -- though this is a task that is overly impressive on its own. Creation is the act of taking an idea, a concept, a lingering thought and pulling it from the mind, and then placing it on the page (or screen, as the case may be).

It is the idea of taking something that is originally intangible and making it, altogether, physical and real. It is taking the story that plays out only in your mind and placing it in the written language. It is taking a snap shot that only your eye can see and saving it with the lens for all future generations. It is taking that image that floats around inside of your thoughts and applying it to the canvas with little more than ink and lead and paint.

It is building, sculpting, drawing, writing, poetry, photography: these are what make us human. It is our ability to create and, thereby, express the condition of our interior to the exterior world around us.

Here, in the second issue of *Temporary Infinity*, is shown the best of the human ability to create. Here, in this issue, we are given a glimpse into the interior condition of the creators made exterior, so that we, the reader, can enjoy it.

Sincerely yours,

Z.T. Burian and Andrew Fortier  
The Editors of *Temporary Infinity*



## Contributors

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**Michael Bourdaghs**

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## Timing Is Everything

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Humid sunlight falls across two reception tables, each draped with a black cloth. Samuel strides through the courtyard gate and heads for the closer one. He stands in line behind three other people waiting to sign the condolences book. Samuel has participated in a handful of Japanese funerals before, so he knows the basic routine. But those were all conducted in private homes. Today's ceremony is too big for that – they've rented out a public hall for this service.

As he waits, he remembers that Michiko asked him this morning to pick up something at the Ito Yokado store on his way home. He can't, for the life of him, remember what it was, and if he shows up empty-handed tonight, she'll kill him. Literally.

Finally, it is his turn to sign the book. A woman in a black dress sitting behind the table bows her head and slides toward him a lacquerware tray containing a formal writing brush. He's never seen the lady before; she must work for the undertaker. Samuel writes out his name vertically in clumsy, foreigner's *katakana* script: sa-myu-e-ru ku-re-me-n-zu. He thinks about entering his address, too, like most of the preceding entries but decides against it. His childish scrawl would only further mar the page. He sets the brush back down in the tray and bows his head slightly to the woman. She's scrutinizing his boorish handwriting, he's certain.

Samuel hurries toward the glass-and-brick building where the service will be held. He glances at his watch: not a moment

to spare. At his office that morning the monthly budget conference ran overtime, forcing him to depart for the funeral half an hour later than planned. He had to change into the black necktie on the subway, without benefit of a mirror: he could see himself only dimly in the window reflection as he tried to knot it. Is it crooked? He brings his hand to his throat, taps the knot. For the tenth time on this hot August day, he wishes he owned a tropical-weight black suit. The short walk from the station already has him feeling beads of sweat on his back and under his arms.

Two men standing to either side of the building entrance bow and pull the glass doors open for him to pass. Samuel walks into the main lobby, where he finds another set of double doors, and, passing through these, he arrives in a medium-sized auditorium. The hall is packed – there are easily four hundred people there, and most rows are completely full. The only empty seats he spots are in the very front rows, closest to the stage. That's what he gets for arriving so late. Timing is everything.

He makes his way down the aisle stairs, his eyes scanning the crowd. He is surprised to recognize so many of the mourners. Over there is his middle school principle from Sherman Oaks, the man who first interested Samuel in East Asia. Behind him sit his old summer workmates from the lawn care crew back in Santa Monica, a group with no connection to Japan. Over by the far wall is Ogawa-kun, Samuel's roommate from his first year in Japan as an exchange student in Osaka. Samuel hasn't seen Ogawa-kun in ten years; he sits next to what looks to be his wife and two children. Why are they all here? How could these friends be connected to the deceased?

Samuel takes a seat in the front row. He is pleased to find the room heavily air conditioned. At the back of the brightly lit stage sits a Buddhist funeral altar, deluged with flowers.

At its center stands a black and white photograph of the deceased, a Western man, but the image is too small for Samuel to make out. It seems to him that the room has grown quiet since he entered.

A priest in white robes appears from a door at the side of the stage. He bows to the altar and to the assembly before, taking his place behind a small wooden podium. He looks to be a thousand years old. The priest begins chanting. In the front row, Samuel listens to the droning, unintelligible voice, trying again to remember what it was that Michiko asked him to pick up at the store. But he begins to sense, with increasing discomfort, that the priest is looking not at the sutra scroll but rather at him, Samuel. In fact, he suspects that the people sitting around him are staring at him, as well. He now recognizes the Kowalski family, his old neighbors from Van Nuys, sitting further down along the front row. What in God's name are the Kowalskis doing in Tokyo? They could barely afford to keep their children in food and clothing. But they are staring back at Samuel as if he were the one out of place.

It dawns on him. There can be only one possible explanation for why so many people he knows have traveled to this memorial. This is Samuel's funeral. But he is not dead – he is alive and as fit as ever. He even reported to work this morning, filed an overdue expense report and attended the monthly budget conference. How could such a mistake have happened? Who could have told all of these people that Samuel had died? How could the false report have reached his oldest friends and acquaintances, even those back in California? What could have convinced them to come all the way to Japan to mourn the passing of someone who has not really passed?

Samuel feels more keenly the eyes of the priest upon him. The air conditioning doesn't feel nearly strong enough now.

Samuel glances wildly back around to his right. There are his cousins from Fresno, and behind them are workmates from the office here in Tokyo, including some he met this very morning. They all stare back at him.

On stage, the singsong recitation of the sutra stops in what feels like mid-sentence. The priest now stands in silence, glaring at Samuel. He points with a finger and beckons to him. Samuel has no idea what is expected of him. The only thing clear is that he must mount those four steps leading up to the stage and stand at the priest's side.

Samuel wonders if his own feet and legs will even work. Perhaps he really is dead and just hasn't noticed. Didn't he read somewhere that consciousness continues for several minutes after the physical body dies? He attempts gingerly to stand up and finds his limbs still functioning: the legs move when he tells them to. He walks toward the stage. The wooden steps creak under his weight, the sound magnified because the room has fallen deathly quiet. Samuel's heart pounds; the sweat glistening his neck now seems irrelevant. Somehow, he must explain to the hundreds of people assembled, no doubt at great expense and inconvenience, why they have been summoned to his funeral even though Samuel is still alive. But Samuel hasn't a clue. How can he explain something he himself does not understand?

He isn't sure how he managed to cross the stage, but he now stands at the wooden podium. The priest motions toward the microphone, a look of irritation folded into the wrinkles of his face. Samuel bows his head to the priest and then, turning toward the audience, bows more deeply from the waist. It is a gesture of apology, one that seems more truthful and meaningful than any words he might come up with.

English is better than his awkward Japanese, of that much he is certain. Many of the people facing him are Americans who know no Japanese.

"My friends, family, loved ones," he begins, unsure where he will go next. He realizes, with equal measures of mystification and annoyance, that his parents and wife are absent from the hall. It's all a bizarre mistake, of course, but surely if the Kowalski family can travel halfway across the globe to be here for the service, then Mom and Dad and Michiko might have made the effort. Yet this is hardly a time for expressing selfish peevess. Samuel resumes speaking into the microphone. "I thank you so much for coming today, but there has been a misunderstanding. As you see, I am very much alive."

The crowd maintains a stony silence. Samuel cannot read what impact his words are having. He sees his old roommate Ogawa-kun lean over and whisper something to his wife.

Perhaps a touch of humor. What was it that Mark Twain said? That history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme? No, that's not it. That the coldest winter ever was the summer he spent in San Francisco? That's not it either. Just keep going: maybe he'll remember it.

"I have no idea how the mistake was made, how it came about that someone decided to hold a funeral for me. Whatever the reason, I am gratified and astonished to see how many of you have come, some from great distances, to honor my memory. But I do not deserve this because, as you see, I am not dead."

Still no response whatsoever. What more can he say? He wishes he could remember that Mark Twain line.

"I hope there is some way I can make this up to you," he continues, grasping for new ways to apologize. But he is just moving his lips at random. He has said what he can; he knows nothing more. Better to stop now before it's too late, before he

says something foolish that would only makes matters worse. Samuel steps back from the microphone and bows deeply to the audience again, holding it a full five seconds. He then turns to the priest and bows again. He walks back across the stage, down the stairs, and heads for his seat in the front row.

No one in the audience is looking at him anymore. Behind him on the stage, the priest resumes chanting the sutra. When Samuel takes his seat, he sees that the priest has been joined by two men in black suits, the ones who held the doors open for Samuel when he entered the building. They approach the altar at the back of the stage to begin preparations for the next element in the order of service. The funeral will continue. Perhaps Samuel's still being alive is not so important a matter as he had thought.

He hears a ruckus outside the hall. Michiko storms into the auditorium, her hair disheveled, her face warped with rage. She is still wearing the blue jeans and Bob Marley t-shirt she had on when he left home this morning. In each hand, she carries an old-fashioned Colt revolver.

"*Dare ga kore o shita no?* Who did this?" she confronts the crowd. "Who did it? *Dare?*"

She spots Samuel and strides directly toward him. Samuel isn't sure if he should try to comfort her or flee for his life. As she draws closer, he can see her fingers trembling against the triggers. She stops three feet short of Samuel and bursts into tears.

"Who would do this to you?" she blurts out. "Who would make a funeral for you while you are still alive? And not even tell your wife?"

The pistols clatter to the tile floor. Samuel winces, but the guns do not discharge. He takes Michiko in his arms. It is a relief; for now, at least, he knows what he should be doing:

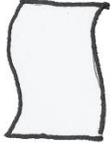
comforting his wife. But she suddenly pulls away from him. She stares at the Kowalski family, whom she knows only from Samuel's stories. "It was you, wasn't it?"

She snatches up one of the pistols and points it at poor, old Mrs. Kowalski, her obese body squeezed into a pale green dress.

At this moment, Samuel remembers. Batteries for the bedroom alarm clock. That's what Michiko wanted him to pick up on his way home. Then a second flash of memory crowds up against the tail of the first: "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." Samuel is pleased that his memory is functioning again. But Michiko is pointing the revolvers up at the ceiling. BANG BANG, she pulls the triggers. Mrs. Kowalski blanches. It's a chaotic moment, everything in flux, but Samuel is dead certain of at least one thing: the timing is all wrong for the Mark Twain joke now. Maybe later, after the funeral, when things have calmed down. If only he can get Michiko out of here before she kills somebody. Literally.

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**Michael K. Bourdaghs'** fiction has previously appeared in a number of small literary journals, including (among others) *Avery Anthology*, *Colere*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Elysian Fields Quarterly*. As a professor of modern Japanese literature, he has also published a number of translations and scholarly works.



**Ariel Glasman**

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## The Flowers

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The flowers knew they were not wanted. This came as something of a shock to them. Who doesn't want flowers, especially when delivered to the door by a well-meaning van with stenciled decorations on the side? But the flowers knew the moment they were passed over in their sensible flute that this woman was not at all happy to see them.

After a few perfunctory words back and forth, the flowers were clunked onto a forgotten side table, next to some discarded untouched issues of Home & Garden. The process was so immediate, so cold, so, so utterly joyless that they were stunned into silence. The quiet was broken a few minutes later by the tiger lilies.

"Well!" one sniffed. "What's HER problem?"

And just like that, they began swaying back and forth, conversing first in hesitant whispers, then at a full-out chatter.

"Oh, let's not be hasty," cautioned a lone hydrangea. "I bet we caught her right in the middle of something. She was probably just about to step into a hot shower. Or maybe she was just about to put something in the oven."

"Doubtful," scoffed a petite, rather snappy, little baby's breath. "She seems like the type of woman who wouldn't be caught in the middle of anything."

"Caught off guard, then," responded the hydrangea, who seemed bound and determined to forgive this woman and wrap her

in her white, cottony blooms. "Flowers are used to catching people off-guard."

No one could disagree with her there. In the distance, they heard the van drive away. The apartment was quiet.

"Zyrest called. Your brother strangled another resident again."

Bringing her fingertips slowly to her temples, she pressed, hard, kneading the sides of her skull. Rubbing her temples, she briefly fingered the flat button that would capture her voice, pushing it through the office walls and onto the desk of her assistant, Max.

"'Strangled'? They used the word 'strangle'?"

"Verbatim, that's what the director said. She wanted you to know that this was serious enough to warrant another meeting. They want to see you right away."

This time, she abandoned the machine and pushed herself away from the desk. The chair was silent but she could still feel the "woosh!" in the pit of her stomach. Staring blankly at the sleek, rich desk, she debated, in her head, a series of quick back and forths that left her neurons tingling. First, the words came, firing like blanks. Strangled. Another resident. Again? Were they allowed to give that confidential information to an assistant? Well, then again, the assistant was Max; Max, who had been with her for four years now; a middle-aged, grad school drop out with bland features but dark eyes. He acted as an actual sentry between her realm, the office, and the outside world, screening would-be clients begging for her time, but his calm demeanor and refusal to raise an eyebrow at anything - even her, and let's just admit it right here, right now, INSANE FUCKING FAMILY - created a much more valuable barrier. If anyone else had given her this information, she would have been fuming.

As it was, she hooked her heels into the floor and dragged herself back to the desk.

"Cancel my two thirty. I'll drive there after lunch."

"All right."

No formal goodbye needed, not even an awkward silence - just those two, clipped words, as though she were scheduling a haircut. Max, she thought, you are my unlikely hero.

Back home, the flowers were sleepily waking, stretching towards the sun that was just beginning to lay faint yellow fingers on their petals. They were still on the side table - "Where things go to be forgotten," remarked one of the lilies, only to have the hydrangea chide him for his attempt at being pensive - away from the good light and air. No attempt had been made to rearrange the stems or tilt the vase this way and that, trying to find their best side. No, they were just there, like the magazines, though unable to be thumbed through.

The baby's breath especially longed for attention. "Why doesn't she like us? We want her to like us. What have we done?" They whined incessantly until even the black-eyed Susans were ready to swat them. After one, two, then three days of being completely ignored, a few of the more practical blooms began thinking ahead, feeling doubtful that she would remember to water them, and began suckling less from the pool that lay against their stem bottoms. The baby's breath, however, slurped away.

She came and went. The flowers were used to a constant human presence. Their florist had been a sprightly man with a ponytail. He complimented them until even the hydrangea giggled. When the order came in, he seemed reluctant to gather them, and

he spoke in soft, lilting words as he tenderly laid them upon a green-speckled table to be bound in ribbon:

"You are going somewhere special."

The tiger lilies wept.

Shop flowers know they are meant to be given away. The circumstances under which they are given are dubious at times, even dishonorable. The roses especially would loudly voice their fears over being handed over by some cheating spouse, only to be dumped in the trash to live among rats. Bundles destined for funerals were always subdued, staring out the window before being loaded into a hearse. The hydrangea hadn't realized how ignorant she had been until she was seated on her lonely perch, white tips browning. Hydrangeas are reserved for joy: weddings, baby showers, welcome home! Hydrangeas would look out of place at a funeral, and roses are a natural answer to infidelity. This hydrangea had never been hated, had no idea what it was like to be ignored, and she felt the most wounded of all.

At least I don't whine about it, though, she thought, casting a withering glance at the baby's breath as they slumped over the vase's mouth, sobbing loudly. As the hydrangea stared at them, something small and white and square caught her eye, lying just out of their shadow: the card that had accompanied them.

When her Lexus dealer handed over the keys, he asked in a well-fed, flirtatious tone, "Why are you a Lexus lady?" With about as much warmth as a terminal cancer doctor, she had replied, "I like the commercials," snatched the key ring away, and drove off. He had been very, very blonde, sleek, like an albino seal; her least favorite maritime animal.

The drive to Zyrest was scenic, but all the evergreen acres in the world couldn't soothe her after an hour and a half.

Growing up, she had hated being in the car. Something about the upholstery made her barf. Thirty minutes was pushing it, so it was with great trepidation that she had agreed, at the age of 13, to go with the family to Nebraska – a four day drive from their home in California. In the end, she went because Matt begged her. At eight, her little brother was still what his third grade teacher called an “odd bird.” When she remembers the drive now, she cannot see the circles under his eyes. They must have formed after the trip.

For about an hour, she was fine. Matt had some stupid MadLibs book, and he made her laugh by inserting the names of their teachers and enemies in the blanks.

“Mrs. Fox went to the purple avocado stand. That night, she had the runs.”

“You dummy,” she had said, laughing until her belly cramped, “‘Runs’ isn’t an adverb!”

“I know. But maybe she shouldn’t have gone to an avocado stand.”

Her mother smiled and lowered her Jackie O sunglasses.

Two hours in, she wasn’t doing so well. Matt threw her helpless, pained glances, which she could not return because he was sitting next to the window. The lines streaming past made her guts churn. Her head felt like dreidel, and then she forced herself to stop thinking about spinny tops and the dashed yellow-yellow-yellow that went by her because then she really would be ill. Her father had tightened his hands on the steering wheel and was shooting poison into the backseat.

“Don’t let her throw up. Don’t let her. She better not,” he growled. When she slitted her eyes open, she could see how white his knuckles were and this made her feel inexplicably, savagely happy.

One hundred miles into the salt plains, near Reno, her will gave out. Sour bile poured from her lips, which had puckered inward in a last attempt to stop what was coming out of her. She couldn't even moan - that's how awful she felt. All her attention was focused on the wretched pungency that was coursing up her dry esophagus, and then, in the midst of her heaves, she felt the small, warm hands of her third grade, goofball brother cupping her chin, catching it all, the MadLibs curling on the floor just inside her line of sight.

The browning had crept up the hydrangeas middle. Her puff was less proud. The baby's breaths had stopped crying, but they still hung there, their raspy breaths stirring the tiger lilies, whose petals had a mottled, curled-up quality to them. Their lustrous orange created a smear just inside the hydrangea's line of sight. The black-eyed Susans, normally a hearty breed, sagged back, chins at an uncomfortable angle. The flowers had stopped talking. Conversation took too much energy. They focused on drawing as much sunlight as possible towards themselves. With each glimmer, they could feel the Vitamin D crawling inside them, burrowing deep, but there was never enough. Several sprigs had already bit the dust. Their dry stems rattled - or was it their imagination? Whatever it was, the eeriness of it all was almost too much to bear.

They hadn't seen the woman for a while. Three days ago, she had come bursting in, bringing with her the smell of an oncoming cold snap. She didn't bother glancing over. Her heels punctured the crust of the carpet in rapid, rhythmic notes, like the exclamation point on the end of a very short sentence. They heard a door slam, water running, and an hour later she re-emerged, a designer bag slung over one bony shoulder. The shoes had been replaced by fashionable sneakers and the scarf in her

hair was worn in a way that would look old fashioned and dowdy on someone else, but, with her hair, it was sleek and vintage.

She slammed the door so hard that the white card was lifted from its resting place. It fluttered only a few inches, but it was enough for the hydrangea to read the letters in a soft, halting voice: "Compliments of your Lexus dealer. Congratulations on finding the car that's right for you."

"Shush!" snapped a tiger lily, and she obliged, settling into her failing plumage. What was a Lexus anyhow?

The days passed. The frost lashed the windows at three a.m.; by four, it had faded. At eight, the door opened again, this time much more softly. The flowers took a long time to wake up. Their stores were gone. They were being watered by borrowed time instead. Normally sharp, their senses had been dulled by the fading days, the loneliness, so it wasn't until she was right up against them that they smelled the cinnamon and cloves that mottled her skin. When the hydrangea opened her eyes, she thought she was hallucinating, for in front of her was a wall of brown, and, in a terrifying moment, she thought the darkening of her petals had spread, expanded, taken up the entire room.

The voice that washed over them, saturated with love and surprise and, best of all, carbon dioxide was saying something. The baby's breath came to and began reaching, peeping for attention like nestlings.

"Ah, you poor, lovely things would probably like some water, si? It isn't every day that we have flowers!"

Their ears piqued as they heard the footsteps walking away, towards the kitchen.

For three nights, she had taken refuge at a motel just ten minutes from Matt's facility. She felt like a coward, crouching under the starchy sheets, crunching peppermints. Her phone had

rang and rang, and then it had died. She ignored the charger in her bag but took the lotion out instead. She rubbed it into her temples until the headaches lessened; then she slept, and dreamed of hands on her face, hands so small and soft and perfumed that she swore later they were petals. The fourth morning, she took a shower, the first since she had left, shaving her legs and underarms while her phone slowly charged beside her on the sink.

The orderlies that greeted her were quite nice, despite her sudden absence. "We were getting worried," said one of the few males, who was large and rather imposing despite his sea foam scrubs. "Sometimes people drive right off the side of the ravine."

"I did, in a way," she said, then scolded herself for being pathetic. The orderly gave her a knowing smile and brought her to Matt. He had a new room, all to himself. The curtains were different than she remembered. He was the same - dark circles like rings, cowlicks like a third grader. He wore very soft-looking slippers.

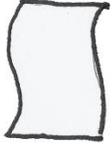
"Hey, Margaret. I thought you'd never get here," he said, and his smile wasn't all there, but, finally, she was. She sat next to him on the bed and touched his hand as if she could transmit something through the skin. The orderly left. She looked up as the door shut and saw a Styrofoam cup filled with dandelions on the window sill.

The footsteps returned. The flowers breathed a collective sigh of relief, thinking they had imagined her after all - this warm, cinnamon wall who noticed them, but no; the white, cheap-leather shoes she wore simply softened her gait to distant thuds. They smelled the water as it lay, cool and dark, in the green plastic watering can.

"I found this under the sink, muchachas. Never thought our lady was the gardening kind, eh?" She chuckled as she tipped the can. The rush of water startled the dry soil from the cracks it had fallen inside. A second later, the stems were drinking thirstily, reviving themselves as best as possible. The hydrangea was the last one to draw the fluid up. She could taste the purifier and rolled her eyes to gratefully thank this woman, this unlikely hero who came out of nowhere, but she was already walking away, hauling a vacuum behind her. They could hear her singing over her shoes.

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**Ariel Glasman** is currently in her senior year at Cornell College. As a self-confessed hater of small children and other people, she is slightly surprised to find herself pursuing a double major in elementary education and sociology. She pursues creative writing - a lifelong craft she has embraced with no reservations.



**Alan Britt**

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## WOULDN'T IT BE TERRIBLE IF EARTH TURNED OUT TO BE A REALITY SHOW FOR ALIENS?

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What if earth is merely a dumping ground,  
you know, like a cosmic dump  
off some county road in our universe?

Explains the aberrant behavior  
of Genghis Khan, Count Vlad, Hitler,  
Stalin, Jack the Ripper and sundry  
mad men roaming the halls of Congress.

Explains diseases, to some extent,  
biological aberrations, perhaps.

Explains abject greed  
and Freud's man without a Super Ego  
who loves to rule,  
(see René Char).

Explains a lot of things,  
a veritable grocery list  
of human sins over millennia;  
yet, the problem remains,  
how to overcome our DNA defects?

Well, I say let's have a serious talk  
with those aliens next time we get the chance.

I'd say they have some *'splainin' to do,*  
as Ricky said, long before reality shows  
blossomed soft tumors  
inside our brains.

But, what if?  
What if we are a godforsaken reality show  
for the sport of various aliens  
light years ahead of us  
in the travel department  
but not so enlightened  
in that all important department  
of wisdom, patience, and empathy?

## A POEM FOR MOTHERS

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Launch me.

Sea.

Clouds the savior.

Dominican cigar smoke,  
fathers, weather vanes  
returned to sheep, goats,  
bullet toenails of roosters..  
...virgin grandmothers from Missouri  
dying like Civil War brothers,  
uncles, cousins two times removed.

Virgin grandmothers twitching  
to satellite TV.

Heh.

Souls like flour sacks  
suffering on the backs  
of dark women  
living dark lives.

And you thought a corporate raise  
could deliver you  
from the terror  
that nature has to offer?

Just ask women  
if an hour is equal to an hour,  
a day to a day,  
or a year ground into soy meal  
for the next confirmation.

Ask granny.

Ask your daughters  
crawling from one frozen star to another  
in a universe you never  
even knew existed.

## HIT AND RUN

---

Inviting whole a fun-sized Snickers,  
he urges the accelerator  
over a large thump,  
a steroid bar bouncer,  
a Neanderthal speed bump, of sorts.

Curious, he almost idles  
the lamp lit curb to inspect  
for bone and bits of jellied flesh  
but remembers, alas, that caution  
remains the better part of valor.

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Alan Britt's recent books are *Greatest Hits* (2010), *Vegetable Love* (2009), *Vermilion* (2006), *Infinite Days* (2003), *Amnesia Tango* (1998) and *Bodies of Lightning* (1995). Britt's work also appears in the new anthologies, *American Poets Against the War*, Metropolitan Arts Press, 2009 and *Vapor transatlántico (Transatlantic Steamer)*, a bi-lingual anthology of Latin American and North American poets, Hofstra University Press/Fondo de Cultura Económica de Mexico/Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos de Peru, 2008.

Politically speaking, Alan has started the Commonsense Party, which ironically to some sounds radical. He believes the US should stop invading other countries to relieve them of their natural resources including tin, copper, bananas, diamonds and oil. He is quite fond of animals both wild and domestic and supports prosecuting animal abusers. As a member of PETA, he is disgusted by factory farming and decorative fur. Alan currently teaches English/Creative Writing at Towson University and lives in Reisterstown, Maryland with his wife, daughter, two Bouviers des Flandres, one Bichon Frise, and two formally feral cats.



**Stacey Bryan**

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## Hello Kitty

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I'm already in a heightened state of paranoia when I find the Hello Kitty lunch pail because I think someone has been following me. A man. I'm walking my usual route home from the North Hollywood library when I see it lying in the middle of the sidewalk, bright pink and shiny, lost or discarded. *Or placed.* I stop beside it. *Placed.* When I reach for it, alarms clamor somewhere inside my head. But I pick it up anyway. Once I'm holding it, an ever-increasing sense of emerging panic tightens across my diaphragm. I stand squinting under the sun, gripping the lunchbox tightly, wondering what's wrong. Am I having a heart attack? I'm too young to have a heart attack, aren't I? Above me, leaves rustle in the wind, scratching, whispering. A sparrow wings past, surfing the invisible current, and my head whips around, following the flash of gray until it's out of sight. Unexpectedly, saliva shoots into my mouth. *Get you,* I think, staring after the bird. And then right after that, *What? Get you?*

Unnerved, I tuck the metal pail beneath my arm and start walking again. There's nobody in front of me, nobody behind me. I don't see the man. The wind blows through the trees, and the limbs sigh and moan. It occurs to me that I'm having a stroke, and the stroke is triggering weird thoughts and feelings as parts of my brain misfire and/or shut down. Do strokes run in my

family? I don't remember. I can't remember. Is memory loss a symptom of stroke? Yeah! I'm pretty sure it is!

The pail slips from beneath my arm and bounces on the sidewalk, bringing me back to my senses. I'm okay. Everything is okay. Calm down. I only saw the guy a few times. In the store. Just now, in the library. Something familiar about him. Probably lives in the neighborhood. Calm down. The day is still beautiful; the wind is still beautiful; North Hollywood, Los Angeles, is still beautiful. I can see the bigger picture, appreciate its considerable options. Fear is not the only choice. I just need some food, some lunch. I had skipped it, after all, gotten caught up in my reading at the library. I am especially fond of Margery Wilkes Bianco. "Real isn't how you're made. It's the thing that happens to you." *The Velveteen Rabbit*. I want to know more about her, why she said that, where she got that. I want to know more about others like her, writers, inventors, philosophers, who stood under the blazing stars, separately or together, mutely acknowledging their vast distance, bowing beneath the staggering weight of duration.

When I bend for the lunchbox again I feel better, but, in the back, still there, a certain angst stirs and strains, stirs and strains. Where has this crazy paranoia come from? I don't remember being psychic. Is anybody in my family psychic? No idea!

I study the box. What's the deal? Is a demon superimposed over the Hello Kitty design somehow, visible only in black light? Is there a pound of cocaine inside? Hesitantly, I open it. Tucked neatly within is a box of milk, unopened, half of a tuna fish sandwich, and a sprig of watercress. There. See? No coke, no heroin. Although, the watercress is odd. Do children, as a rule, enjoy watercress? Something leaps in my guts and clenches. An almost-thought. I close the box, turn it over. On

the back, a name and address is taped to one corner: Lucy, 9 Betty Way. Curiously, I watch as the tin box moves, suddenly rattling as if an animal inside is trying to claw its way out and I think, *I just looked inside. There's no animal in there.* And then I realize it's my hand, shaking uncontrollably.

I observe the lunchbox as it plummets to the sidewalk once more. It clatters jarringly. A feeling invades my consciousness, some questing memory. A moment later my hand is still, and I have no idea what has happened. The address is just an address. Lucy (though, curiously, my name is Lucy, too) is just a little girl. But now it is obvious that I have some kind of neurological disease that's just starting to show symptoms. I decide I'd better get home. Now.

My aunt isn't home when I get there. However, I'm feeling better, despite my dire self-diagnosis ten minutes earlier, and stand searching through the refrigerator, Hello Kitty still tucked, forgotten, beneath my arm. I'm not there more than thirty seconds before the doorbell rings. I freeze, hoping they'll go away. In this strange state, I feel vulnerable. I just want to stay here, curled up and safe in some corner, waiting for my aunt to reappear. Outside, the wind continues to bluster but the doorbell remains silent. I pad to the front window and peer out from behind the curtain, expecting anything at this point. What I don't expect is to see him, *him*, stuffing a flyer into the mailbox, then moving on to the apartment building next door. The wind grabs at his clothes, yanks them in every direction. My blood freezes. The hair on the back of my neck spikes straight up. What are the odds? He's stalking me. And there's something else, a familiarity, a warm feeling obliterating terror, like a mild sedative working its way through my nervous system.

I whirl around and, against my better judgment, yank open the front door and spring outside. The man is nowhere in sight now, yet I strain after him, feeling my guts pull in the direction he has gone, as if an invisible string is attached between us. What the hell? Was I going to turn out to be one of those women who were drawn to violent, unstable men? I approach the mailbox and yank out the mail, grapple at the flyer as it threatens to kite off into the wind, slap it flat on top of Hello Kitty. A mimeographed color photo of an animal stares back at me: glossy black fur, sleepy green eyes, beneath which are the words: *Lost cat. If found, please call 818-555-1212.* The wind tears some coupons from my hands and sends them pinwheeling across the gleaming grass. *Lost cat. Lost.* Suddenly sick to my stomach, I eye the lawn in glassy-eyed contemplation as if throwing myself to my hands and knees and chewing on that soft rug of green would somehow make me feel better.

But I can't puke now because there's no time for that. From the corner of my eye, I catch movement and see him, the man, now across the street, walking away. The unaccountable tug at my innards happens again, the unwarranted pull in his direction. I don't know what that's about, being drawn to a strange man who's stalking me. What I do know is I want to stay home, safe and warm, so I can't do that. I have to do more than be warm and safe at home. Something tells me this. So I follow the man, my potential stalker. I shove the remaining mail, including the flyer, back into the box and clutch Hello Kitty as if it's little Lucy herself, and I'm leading her by the hand safely across the street. Only it feels distinctly as if Hello Kitty is leading *me* somewhere. I raise the hoodie on my sweatshirt. I am going. The day, my life, the world, is demanding this from me somehow. The burning stars are demanding this of me.

The man is not difficult to follow. He's big without being fat, wearing a bright red t-shirt. If I was a bull, I would be enraged at the sight of him. He meanders down the sidewalk, and I trail him as casually as possible from across the street until he makes an abrupt left turn, disappearing behind a large gray building. By the time I cross the street, I'm panicked that I've lost him. But as I round the large building myself, I see him up ahead, still striding forward with a nonchalant air, the rest of the flyers now stuffed into his back pocket.

He stops three-fourths of the way down the sidewalk in front of an aging motel-style apartment building. From the other direction, a blonde middle-aged woman wearing a vivid purple tracksuit seems to appear out of nowhere and approaches him strangely, almost mincing-like. He throws his arms out and she throws out hers. She hurls herself at him like a long lost lover, tunneling her face into his chest. They rock back and forth, writhing around almost like they're wrestling. I'm simultaneously fascinated and repelled by the display. I've never missed anybody *that* much.

Finally, the long, flamboyant embrace ends. He thrusts out one arm as if to say, "After you." The woman immediately bounds up the stairs with him close behind. He doesn't appear to be forcing her in any way, but I can't shake the feeling that something strange is going on, something illicit. They reach the top of the stairs and disappear into the dark doorway of the corner apartment. I turn my head and read the street sign. After a beat, it registers. I'm standing on Betty Way. The doorway of the stalker's apartment closes. I don't even have to look, really. But I do anyway. The number 9 gleams dully on the door's faded light blue façade, emblazoning itself into my retinas.

I bend forward and set the lunchbox onto the grass. I lean against a tree, staring at the apartment. I'm done with being

caught off-guard, bewildered, frightened. The world teems with more extravagant emotions balanced within a diversified palette. I could choose galvanized, electrified, astounded. And I do. I choose electrified. Of course little Lucy lives here, in this apartment, the apartment of a man who either lives a parallel life to mine, showing up in all the same places, or a man who is stalking me. It fits in, makes sense somehow, in the context of this day. Lucy the child, with half a tuna fish sandwich inside her and half of it sitting at my feet, has a stalker for a father. Or an uncle. Or a big brother. *I am not surprised. I am not scared.* They have lost a cat with black silky fur or perhaps *they have not lost a cat with black silky fur.* At some point I went through the looking glass, but I don't remember how or when. *I don't remember entering the portal...*

Now I recall seeing the lunchbox on the sidewalk, the sensation I had of it being *placed* there. The limbs above me shift in the wind and a butterfly flutters by, drawing my attention. Before I can stop myself, I'm chasing after it, trying to swat it out of the sky. Then I halt mid-step, one hand pressed lightly against my temple as if a fascinating theorem has just occurred to me. Except it hasn't. There is only the wind pushing the distant butterfly that just narrowly escaped the looming violence of my balled-up fists. Since when did I want to hurt things, kill things? What was it I had thought earlier as the bird had flown by? Get you? Yes. *Get you.* I had thought that, hadn't I? And yet it felt right somehow, fine, acceptable. "Real isn't how you're made," I whisper out loud, over and over under my breath like a mantra. "Real isn't how you're made." I bend forward and retrieve Hello Kitty, staring at the address to confirm that I've read it right. "It's the thing that happens to you. It's the thing that happens."

Across the street, the door of number 9 bounces open and my stalker emerges, sans the woman, but now with a large golden Labrador bounding and leaping at his feet. I slide behind the tree. My hoodie scrapes back, the rough bark bites into my cheek. I hear my stalker trotting down the stairs then see him jogging down the sidewalk back the way we had come. The Labrador, tail wagging crazily, tongue lolling, races off at full speed in the opposite direction. I frown, confused. Once they're both out of sight, I'm up and moving, before I even realize it, like chasing the butterfly. I'm across the street, I'm running up the stairs. If I stop, I won't keep going. So I keep going, keep going. I knock at the door of number 9, hard enough to jar my bones. There's no response. No footsteps, no sounds whatsoever. I throw a quick glance around, then try the doorknob. It's open. I mutter a silent "I'm sorry" to my aunt, in case this turns out to be the dumbest thing I ever did. In case I never see her again. I step inside.

The blinds are drawn and the room is semi-dark. I rip the hoodie off my head, impatient for an unobstructed view. It's a small studio apartment. My footsteps are muffled by a worn beige carpet, and I almost walk into a small bed jutting out from the corner. I step around it and move toward a miniscule nook where the "kitchen" is, little more than an island counter containing a toaster, a small juicer. Behind it, against the wall, a mini-fridge. It takes one glance to show that nobody's back there, crouching down or tied up. A cursory examination of the entire apartment reveals no children's toys, clothes, or otherwise. Daughter shifts to niece. There is nothing else in the room except the bed in the corner, a wooden chair in the other, and the three kitchen appliances. I set Hello Kitty down on the counter and tread lightly toward what I imagine is the bathroom, heart thundering, legs unsteady. I brace myself to find the

woman in the bathroom, tied up in the bathtub, because there's nowhere else she could be, and there's no other way out of here except the front door. I brace myself for the terrified eyes, the muffled sobs issuing from beneath the gag. Had she really bounded so eagerly up the stairs to her probable doom? She had no idea she was hugging a monster? But after I inch open the door, the bathroom, too, is revealed to be empty.

I return to the middle of the studio, baffled. Gradually, the unthinkable dawns on me. If the woman never left and I can't find her, it means he must have killed her and stuffed her somewhere. The only explanation is that her corpse--*probably still warm*--is under the bed or crammed into the tiny closet by the front door. But how? How? There hadn't been enough time for that! I notice my rigid body, poised for flight. Leave now, it's telling me. Leave. Now. But instead, I find myself approaching the tiny closet. I watch my hand reaching out. *Leave. Run.* Instead of running, I jerk open the closet door. Empty hangers clatter in the suck of air. The rest are filled with clothes. There are stacks of clothes on the floor also, piled in neat rows. But no body. I'm about to close the door when two things happen simultaneously. I spot the purple tracksuit hanging from a hanger just as I hear a voice and footsteps approaching outside. I stare into the closet, frozen. Then somehow I move. I'm at the side of the door. The wooden chair appears in my hands. My aunt's face flashes before me, no one else's. My life flashes before me, an abbreviated series of perplexing images: fire, the tail of a rat disappearing beneath a hedge, a mangy barking dog, fire again, fire, sunlight slanting across a pillow, three perfect quivering droplets of white, white milk. The door swings open. A smallish black and white dog trots into the room. My arms twitch, holding the chair. The man steps in next and immediately spots Hello Kitty on the kitchen counter.

Oh, God, Hello Kitty! Up close, he's even bigger and taller than I thought. He starts to turn as the chair hurtles down toward his head. His arm jerks up, deflecting full impact. A leg snaps off with a satisfying crack as it meets his forearm. He staggers while I leap for the door. Weirdly, he yells out, "Lucy!" as my sweaty hands grapple at the knob. I'm yanked back by my hoodie. My legs fly out and I land on my back, hard. I see stars.

"Lucy!" he yells again. He's calling his kid! Or his demented, murderous niece to come out from wherever she's been hiding and join him in the mayhem. Because I don't know this guy. He can't be calling me. With no conscious thought, I roll over, grab at his legs, heave. He slams down to the floor. His head whacks the wall. He grunts. Yes! I'm clambering to my feet but he's already there, pulling me back. The black and white dog hovers, dancing nearby. His shrill bark pierces my eardrums. I inhale sharply, my breath compressing into a hiss.

The man has both arms wrapped around me and we're rolling around on the carpet, grunting and groaning. Our feet kick, scattering broken chair parts. I roll over the shattered wooden leg. It gouges my back. I jerk free an arm and whisk my hand toward his face in a vicious arc. Blood blooms in four streaks across his cheek. I draw my legs up between us then jam both feet into his knees. He says, "UhhPotnia," and his grip falters. The queer word drums in my head: potnia potnia potnia. I wiggle away, stagger to my feet. A thought flies at me from nowhere: *Fear will disassemble you.*

But I don't have time to feel anything else.

The man's still on the ground, writhing around. I lift my foot, aiming directly at his heart. He rolls away as my foot lands with a dull thud where his breastbone used to be. I turn once more for the door but step sideways on an errant piece of wood. My ankle twists. I screech, arms akimbo. He grabs my pant

leg, pulls. I fly sideways toward the bed. My head grazes the edge of the metal frame. Lightheaded, my thoughts scramble. For my aunt, I think, for my aunt. I think of the stars, how long it takes the light to reach earth.

"Lucy!" he cries again, still gripping my ankle. Dizzy, I draw the other leg back, preparing to smash him in the face with my heel, but something happens. As if a filter has lifted, something penetrates--a tone, an undercurrent. The feeling from earlier returns as I'm engulfed by a warm, soft calm, like slipping into a bath and a silk robe simultaneously. I lay on my side panting, fingers clawed into the ugly worn carpet. My leg is still lifted, a potential battering ram. I look at his face. His eyes find mine. Blood pours down his cheek in ragged runnels. But he's smiling. *Smiling*. I should be scared. But I'm not. The smile is sweet somehow, not deranged. He chuckles, a deep rumbling sound like a waterfall. The black and white prances over and licks his face joyfully. Something somewhere deep inside me wants to get up, crawl over, lick his face too. "Lucy!" he bellows. He releases my ankle and rolls onto his back, throws his arms wide, laughing. "Do you hear her?" he shouts toward the ceiling, "Do you see her?" As I stare at him in my warm befuddled state, the claw marks on his face begin to disappear. I blink. Then black and white licks the blood away. There's nothing left but smooth, unblemished skin. The bloody gouges are gone. I blink again. "That's what she's made of! So she fights, she fights!" I take this in evenly from my new warm place. Without warning, he grabs the dog up off the floor. It yelps in surprise. Then the tail whirls, propeller-like. The man lifts one of its floppy ears and whispers into it. Then he sets it back down gently. Staring, I roll over onto my butt as the air seems to shimmer and the room grows warm. Everything fuzzes around the edges like a fog has blown in from somewhere. I think

of a gassy drug pouring into the room from the vents. The dog vacillates then expands, engaged in a chimerical transformation. He rises up, up, up, stretches out, elongates, transmutes, until he is now a teenaged boy, a naked boy with darkish skin and inky black curls streaked with white standing in the middle of the studio. The air clears; the edges sharpen back into focus. I sit on the carpet, listening to my heart pound.

The man bounds to his feet, opens the closet door. He burrows into the piles for a moment, then turns and offers a stack of clothes to the boy who begins dressing without hesitation. Once the kid's clad in jeans and a T-shirt, the man says, "Go on, buddy. Go on. See you later." The boy stares wordlessly around at the room, down at me, back at him. Then he seems to make some decision and takes one long-legged step over my prone body to the door. He goes out, and we listen to his energetic galloping down the stairs and footsteps running off into the distance. I am still assembled, not blown apart.

I am trying to remember when I entered the portal. I am cool and serene, acknowledging a silky void where fear once stood. Outside, the wind has soothed itself into a fitful murmur.

"Holy crap," says the man, smiling. He stands there, rubbing his cheek where the claw marks no longer are. He has a wild, admiring look on his face, like someone who has bumped unexpectedly into a beloved celebrity. Up close, I notice how big his hands are. He could have smashed me, battered my bones. But he had actually been very restrained during the skirmish. His hair is brownish, streaked with gold, as if he's out in the sun a lot. It curls down just past his ears. We're quiet while I sit there, panting. He is not panting. If his face sustains no wounds, neither will his lungs run out of air. Slowly my breathing evens out.

"I turned her back to Labrador," comes his voice. I look up. His skin seems to glow in the gathering gloom. "The woman," he says. "I know you want to know. Even though you know." He smiles. "She was done. Turned her back. She ran home."

*Back to Labrador. She ran home.* If the words were heat, they'd scorch this room, burn the world. I think of the stars, of standing on two legs. The man gazes steadily at me. His eyes are luminous, mirror-like. I know this man. I know him. Suddenly he addresses the ceiling again, performing for the invisible audience. "You saw the fire," he yells, craning his head up to the ceiling. I look up too. There's nothing there. "We all saw!" Back at me now. "The same way you fought me, you fought the fire! For your aunt. Who isn't your aunt. Mrs. Johnson," he repeats softly, "who isn't your aunt." I know him. I know this, what he's saying. "You ran into her room. You cried and cried, little Lucy, and sprang upon her. She woke. Your love pierced the sky. The vibration drew focus upon you. Your love and awareness leaped out toward the reeling cosmos. Yearning will make you human soon. The pull is strong."

Oh...yeah. As if the black, billowing smoke, sound like papers rustling, billions of papers, sound preceding immense heat, had been stoppable. *Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Johnson. As if her furry paws, burning, her tiny cries could do anything for herself, for Mrs. Johnson. But they had, they had...*

I blink. I come back.

The murky room gets gloomier as the day grows older. The man takes a step closer. My stalker. My would-be killer. But none of these things. Something else entirely, something no one in this world could even guess. Not even I, until a moment ago. Fire. A rat's tail. Yeah. Yeah. He looms above me gigantically, teeth flashing. He holds out his hands. I place mine in his, and he hauls me to my feet. A warm pulsing current flows from his

skin. Perhaps he hears the pieces locking into place and wants to help me along. He throws his arms around me. I stiffen. He says into the side of my hair, "Think about it this way."

I wait, wrapped in his arms, prepared to think.

"You're as real as I am. Border Collie is as real as his caretaker." He gestures toward the door where the boy had recently departed. "When Border Collie stops at the corner and looks both ways before crossing the street, a supernal call flies out because the rhythm of the world has jittered. Fraction of an inch with him. But still. Enough. More with you. The bigger the stone, the larger the ripple. It can be crow, it can be squirrel. You're granted the test, the chance to taste the upright life, to see if it registers. For many it doesn't, and that's fine. Animal is real. Human is real. They're just different. Very different. We give you a chance to see."

A chance, a taste. There it is at last. The milk, the slanting sunlight. The portal yawns, and we step through it. And then return to Labrador, or Border Collie, and run home. As I will turn back to Persian and run home. Not as fast as dog can run, but as fast as cat. A fast cat trotting beneath the teeming stars, unaware that the stars are there. A fast cat that knows nothing of what is real or what it becomes, because it will be nothing but a fast cat swatting bugs from the sky, chasing swallows, rough tongue lapping milk. The thought weighs me down, drags at my heart.

The man releases me from his embrace and backs away. "Lucy," he says, "come with me. Come outside." He says this as if it's a grand invitation, a doorway leading to untold bliss. He opens the door and we step out onto the landing. The sun is setting, the world is orange. He clasps one of my hands between his gigantic palms and gazes out at the sky. Passion spills from him, a veiled stream of electric magnetism rippling with

consciousness. The energy penetrates, assails my being, packs my cells with knowledge, spinning out vivid images that unfurl like a movie on the inside of my head. I watch him extending the fleeting legerdemain that shreds our animal, shifts to us human, lends us a tale. People think Persian is a niece. Or Labrador's a daughter. Or Border Collie's a son. After one returns to animal, the story remains but diminishes slowly, until everyone simply forgets. The vision knits together, a temporary pattern inhabiting the center of my cerebral cortex. I know that no one will remember. I will not remember. His eyes are pale brown, lightening to gold around the edges. I will not remember. They all usually come back. But when I don't return he assembles a scrumptious feline menu, tuna, milk and watercress, basted heavily in magic. Amplifies the tug between us, creating an urge to follow that supercedes all else, even self-preservation. Throws in the Hello Kitty pail for a touch of light humor. I guess he has the right to entertain himself. Then pulls me in. Pulls me in. Because I've ignored the call and I haven't come back. My fighting nature won't let me go back. The mystery of the stars proves more compelling than the life of cat. But there are rules that can't be broken. The hint, the taste, now back, back. Don't try to remember the family, the medical history of strokes or preternatural psychic ability. There is no family. Not that kind, anyway. There's only a fleeting suggestion of tiny warm bodies pressed together, mouths questing, furry paws kneading, kneading. That's what this is all about. I never could have guessed in a million years what I was, what had happened. But unlike Labrador, I'm not done. Why no choice? Don't wanna go back.

The man reaches up and touches my cheek. When I turn toward him, I find our faces inches apart. Our eyes lock. My mind races with possibility. I am beautiful, after all. Black hair and

green eyes. Persian translated well into this form. *I can use this. I can get what I want. Tell him. Tell him. Don't wanna go back.* His eyes are ablaze with love, but not the kind that succumbs to fleeting seduction. The thought of temptation immediately melts away, and I wilt, relieved, purged of the plan. He pets my cheek, one, two, three times. "We'll meet again." Something ancient like starlight shines out from within him, burning hot, burning away the stony heart weight as if it were made of tissue.

"Now, come here," he says. He wiggles a puckish finger at me. "Come here."

My heart lightens, soars. There is a choice. I made my choice. The yearning spirals outward, after all, puncturing earth and sky. They felt it. It burned. They heard it. It bellowed. They'll pluck my longing from the stars, tremendous and vast, wrap it up safe. I close my eyes, bowing beneath the enigma of existence, the immense gravity of being.

"Out here?" I ask him.

"Anywhere."

One last quick human thought. "Hurts?" I swallow. My throat is a little dry.

Softly: "Doesn't hurt." Warlock bends forward, whispers into my ear.

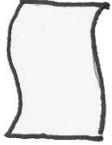
Raises an enormous hand dripping with alchemy.

No blinding light, no searing pain, just as he says. Just shimmering air, edges melting, sense of benign heat and penetration, clothes falling away. And then no memory of talk or worries or anything, anything. Lucy cat returns to herself, all four paws connecting with earth, black fur shiny bright, waving in the slight breeze. Before she runs away from the man, she rubs her cheek luxuriously along his blue-jeaned calf, awash with kitty love. Doesn't know why. Seems familiar. Then she runs

and runs away from the man, a fast blissful cat bolting beneath the tumbling stars, home to Mrs. Johnson, whom she loves, home, home to warmth and pillows and milky white milk. Her kitty brain and kitty soul tenderly snuggle a nugget, a potent dream of becoming that is locked away, safe for later. And this goes with her, even in the midst of cat in her domain, low to the ground, loving the orange heat of the shrinking sun, no past or future, just now, just now, birds, bugs, warm, soft, old woman at home calling, here, kitty, here, kitty, kitty, here, Lucy kitty.

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**Stacey Bryan** was born the love child of a mixed race couple in Haight Ashbury. This might have made her a more interesting person had she not been raised by a different family in the San Fernando Valley. She is not a Valley Girl per se, but she does sometimes talk like one. She did manage to earn a Literature degree at UCLA where she was lucky enough to study under prize-winning Irish author Brian Moore. Her stuff has appeared in UCLA's Journal of the Arts, the Brownstone Review, and an upcoming issue of Ginosko. She struggles every day not to let the Valley murder my initiative.



**Subhakar Das**

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## The Bomb in the Suitcase

My dad told me  
peace is like glass  
strong but brittle  
not difficult to shatter  
with a well directed blow  
all it will take is an  
old suitcase  
some paper and a pen,  
an empty threat.  
Trust and treachery, he says  
goes hand in hand  
much like peace  
sold over a  
conference table  
for profit and gain.  
I said,  
how can you even think it  
after so much pain  
so much strife  
what of the dead,  
all their sacrifices  
those that endured  
all those years.  
He said,  
I can't speak for fools

but all of it will be in vain  
all rebellion is for profit  
all agreements are  
meant to be broken  
one way or the other  
when all along the trade  
was mere barter.  
To prove his point  
he took the empty suitcase  
and left it by a busy road  
inside it, a simple note.  
It said, next time  
it'll be for real.  
There was much hullabaloo  
afterwards, talks of betrayal and  
sabotage, broken promises.  
My father doesn't seem perturbed  
by the mischief he caused.  
What good is such peace, he says,  
as brittle as glass, shattered  
by an empty suitcase.

## For no particular reason

I dreamt of peace last night-  
there were people dancing on the streets  
mad revelers in cars honking horns  
politicians hugging each other;  
there was joy on people's faces  
sighs of relief, much laughter  
so much happiness,

a land having a windfall  
together.

Then morning came  
with the sun came fierce heat  
dust and disease;  
the papers brought more news -  
cut up bodies washing up by the river  
skirmishes in the mountains, settlers  
lined up and shot, bodies dumped by  
the road, women raped and houses  
set alight, and not even children spared.

On my way to work, a procession  
men, women and children pleading for peace,  
an end to the killings, all saying 'Enough!'  
watched by policemen armed  
with guns and canes and a steely gaze.

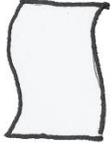
Suddenly, an explosion  
shouts of terror, people running  
a pall of smoke rising above a crowded street  
filled with scattered limbs and  
discarded sandals and bags, placards  
with appeals for harmony;  
all around the cries of those injured  
trying to rise to their feet, burnt bodies and  
blood everywhere, so many dead.

It was late when I reached home,  
plaster on my arm to cover a wound  
from shrapnel. The streets were dark,  
empty and silent, no noisy bedlam of a place  
bristling with people  
except for the odd police whistle  
even the street mongrels seeking succor

underneath leftover plastic and awkwardly  
hanging awnings of hurriedly shuttered shops.  
The city was in a pensive mood  
hurt, angry, and disillusioned  
and all was eerily quiet  
in the dim moon's light.

---

**Subhakar Das** writes from Guwahati, India where Brahmaputra blesses or corrupts its faithful depending on its many moods. His work, mostly poetry and fiction, has appeared in various e-zines, anthologies, print magazines and newspapers.



Marika von Zellen

---

## Waiting To Die

He flung the newspaper onto my bed and stood in the doorway, hands on his hips. The age in his skin seemed to creep out of him and flutter around the air, but in his face there was a hint, an almost transparent sheen of something--childlike humor, I suppose, or plain immaturity.

"Thanks, Dad," I said as I went for the newspaper. He kept standing there, uttering that gruff noise in the back of his throat, the noise that I knew meant he was in need of attention.

"I saw the mail truck just down the street," Dad said earnestly. "He's here early; I almost didn't believe it."

Nodding, I silently sifted through the paper--a picture in the Obituaries caught my eye: a young woman of fifty-seven, younger than me. And somehow she'd died. Of cancer, or cardiac arrest.

I glanced up at Dad.

He was still here. Still around. Still, still, still.

"Yesterday he didn't come until eleven o'clock," Dad went on. "And by that time I've had lunch and am ready for my nap. It's about time he came a little earlier."

"Who?" I asked.

Dad blinked. "The *mailman*, honey." He hissed out the words. He added "honey" as though it would make up for his tone.

"Oh, okay."

Silence.

I waited for him to interrupt me further, but Dad just swayed his wrinkled, pinkish arms, turned around and left the room.

My eyes, so full of exhaustion, of being kept open all night long, stared down at the Obituaries. I couldn't help but wonder . . . how much time still? How long? And why did I care so much?

\* \* \*

I didn't like that she wouldn't let me cook. I was there to help, I was *there*, I was with *them*. Dad understood the situation. He wanted my help. He wanted me to do everything for him. Mom was bitter. She had her kitchen, and her metal spoons. I bought her wooden spoons and she threw them out the next day. And that damn glass cutting board; the noise, like a hundred beheadings in half an hour, the severe *snap* as the knife went through the carrot and struck the glass.

I told her to get a wooden cutting board, that it would be quieter. She said she liked glass and that wood would take too much time to clean. "And I don't like all the marks from the knife," she added.

One day I decided to take the initiative and help Mom. I opened the door of the dishwasher and began loading in her blue chinaware. The next second I felt her small presence at my side, and her hand grabbing a wet cup from my hand.

"Stop that," she said. "I know the right way to do the dishes. I have my own secret for loading and unloading that makes it easy for me."

"Mom, I know how to load dishes. Let me help you. I'll do it right."

Her round hip jabbed against my leg as she moved me out of the way and began loading the rest of the cups. Her hands shook so much.

The sharp, piercing feedback from her hearing aid stung my eardrum. I thought about telling her; but her face was set, and her hands were soapy. I couldn't ruin the one moment in the day that she could exist solely by herself, in her own world. A world where maybe she hadn't married him, and hadn't believed him when he'd said he had a college degree.

\* \* \*

For a relatively big house, it felt much too small, like a choker leash wrapped around my neck, constantly tightening and loosening depending on which room I happened to be in, and if either of them happened to be in the room with me.

I liked Mom's office. It had the desktop computer, my little escape machine; the light of the screen seemed brighter than the daylight coming in through the two heavily-blinded windows. I rested my back against the chair and scanned through my e-mails: one from my husband, one from my son, and two from my cousin. I skipped the one from my husband and read my son's. He told me he loved working and that his girlfriend said hello. He said he needed money for rent. I wrote him back that I had to wait for my social security check, and that I wished I could send him a million dollars.

"Be careful with your money," I typed. "We only have so much--"

My fingers paused on the keyboard as I heard that familiar sound of shuffling slippers making their way down the hall. *Shuffle . . . shuffle . . . shuffle*. So slow. The choker leash tightened around my neck, and my pulse rate rose. I stared at the computer and waited.

Dad came in and shuffled toward the loveseat by the desk. He sat down; he was still in his flannel robe, the old grey one that I'd tried to discard a dozen times. I hardly turned my head as I said, "Hey, Dad. How are you feeling?"

"I'm *fine*, honey."

Silence.

I knew he was looking at the computer screen. I knew he was reading my e-mail. But what could I do? Tell him to leave me be? Tell him he irritated me? Ask him why he was still around?

Hesitating, I finished the e-mail to my son. I dared not open the one from my husband with Dad sitting so close by--if my husband wrote to me saying he lost his job yet again . . . I could just hear that gruff noise reverberate, casually masked as a cough or a throat-clearing.

Dad spoke again: "Do you think I should call Marge after eleven or before eleven? I mean, I don't know when she's going to be at lunch. Could be until one o'clock--some offices have long lunches. I called her twice yesterday already, and I thought I got through, but there was just this weird ringing sound on the other end. I don't know what happened. I called again and the *same* thing. Maybe there's something wrong with her phone."

"Dad," I said, opening one of the e-mails from my cousin. "You got her answering machine. You know how to use an answering machine. You just wait for the beep and then you leave your message."

"Well, it wasn't an answering machine, I can tell you that. There was this weird noise. I didn't know what to do. Hopefully that doesn't happen again when I call today."

"If you want me to call her, I can."

"Well, if you want to, by all means go ahead."

"But I think you should do it, Dad. It's good for you."

"Alright, if that's what you think, that's *fine*."

I could hardly concentrate on my cousin's e-mail. Something about her doctor giving her more medications--for depression, for sleeping, for whatever. I had a terrible thought

that if she wasn't careful, she might end up in the Obituary of her local newspaper much sooner than necessary.

"I'm going to go see what Mom's doing," Dad told me, and he stood and shuffled away.

Without replying to my cousin, I opened my husband's e-mail.

The pets were good. It'd snowed a lot. His contract hadn't been renewed.

\* \* \*

I couldn't say I wasn't lucky that my sister, Lilah, lived three minutes away. Oh, how she loved to visit us. She would fly through the front door and greet Mom and Dad as though seeing them for the first time in five years. And their faces. So bright, so pink, with huge smiles and glinting, watery eyes.

I loved my sister. Of course I did.

Sometimes I just felt she had it better.

We were sitting in the living room, the formal living room, with no television and a working fireplace; Dad was sunk deep into his big La-Z Boy chair, and Lilah and I were on the sofa. Mom, as always, was in the kitchen beheading things on her glass cutting board. It was near lunchtime.

"So how is everything?" asked Lilah with her wonderfully peppy voice. Even I couldn't pretend not to enjoy it.

"Everything's *fine*, dear," Dad said. He had his legs tossed over the armrest, and his left hand fidgeted with his black suspenders. "How are you, Lilah? Everything okay at home? How's Tom and the kids?"

Lilah gave me and Dad a look. "Oh, everything's great," she said with sarcasm. "Pete's an asshole as usual. Sammi is sick with the flu and Jenny's off studying for her BAR exam."

The conversation continued in that way for a while, each of us talking about the things we wished were not true about our

lives. At one point Mom edged into the room and declared, "I hate the snow," and before we could answer she disappeared again into the kitchen. To her credit, it'd been snowing for four days straight. I thought the outside world looked beautiful and elegant, covered in snow, as though gallons upon gallons of sugar had been dumped into the yard.

We had coffee. Mom made us lunch. Mom yelled at Lilah for trying to load the dishwasher.

After Lilah and her dog left, the house sounded too quiet. Her cheery voice echoed in our ears like loud Christmas bells, only we all knew Christmas was now over. Every visit this happened. And every time, after the door had shut and we'd all watched Lilah drive away, Dad would say to me, "Isn't she a breath of fresh air?"

Every time I'd nod and agree.

This time I reacted a bit differently.

"And what am I then, Dad?"

He stared at me, his small, blue, pink-rimmed eyes sharpening. "Well, I don't mean you aren't a breath of fresh air, I just mean that Lilah is really cheerful. She's just always really cheerful."

Mom suddenly appeared next to us. "Did you move my spatula?" she asked us both. "I've been looking for it everywhere."

I opened my mouth but Dad was faster. "No, honey--did you look in the drawer where you always keep it? You probably just didn't see it."

"I looked there!" Mom yelled. "It's *not* there!"

"Okay, okay!" Dad yelled back. "My God, aren't you touchy today? Every time something is misplaced it's always *my* fault, isn't it? My God what a temper!"

I ignored Dad and said to Mom, "Did you check the drawer next to the stove? I'm pretty sure it was there yesterday."

"I hate this house," Mom growled. "I can never find *anything*--everything always disappears. It's just too big for me. At least at the condo in Phoenix I knew where everything was. And I hate this cold weather."

"Oh, just be quiet," Dad said. "All you do is complain about this and complain about that. You can't appreciate what you have, you just want what you don't have."

"Dad, that's enough--" I started.

"I wasn't saying anything! I'm just saying that Mom needs to lighten up a little! My God, I can't stand all the crap that comes out of her mouth. I love this house, and I love Rockford, and we have Lilah nearby--I just don't see any reason to complain."

"Oh, you wouldn't know because everything's always about *you*," Mom said. "You wouldn't understand because you can't put yourself in other people's shoes."

"Well," Dad said, making his gruff noise. "I'm just saying that you have it pretty damn good here and you should learn to appreciate it."

Mom looked at Dad for a long time, her lips bunched up like a closed drawstring. I stood silent, hoping they could resolve it without my help. After a moment, Dad blinked and shuffled over to his chair, where he sat down and gazed at the window. Mom slowly turned around and went back into the kitchen; I followed, I talked, comforted, showed her compassion. We found the spatula in its usual drawer, underneath a ladle.

\* \* \*

It wasn't always a struggle to smile.

When Dad shuffled over to me as I was watching Wheel of Fortune, dressed in his button-down shirt, suspenders and slippers, he said, "Mom made a good lunch today, I thought."

"Yes, she did," I answered.

"I could've made it just as good, you know."

I smiled. "Quiet, I'm watching the show."

On TV, Pat said, "There are *four* r's. Spin or solve?"

The grinning Asian lady standing between two other, less pleased-looking contenders said, "I'd like to solve. 'A bird in the hand costs two in the bush.'"

"A bird in the hand costs two in the bush," said Dad.

"Well, aren't I clever! I got that one right away."

I shook my head. "Why don't you sit down, Dad?"

He sat.

We watched for a while, watched as the Asian lady won the Bonus round and \$25,000.

"Would you look at that," Dad said. "Those Asians are really sharp. They know what they're talking about. The children in Asia have to learn *everything*--the whole culture is centered around knowledge and honoring one's parents by being successful."

I said nothing, but nodded my head.

"I called Marge today," said Dad. "I got her answering machine, so I left her a message. I told her that if we didn't hear from her in the next week, that we'd have to reconsider our agreement. I really don't think she knows how to rent property; she does sales mainly. I think she's worried she's not going to do her part properly."

"Just take it one day at a time, Dad," I said, trying to slip my attention between the TV and him. "You don't have to make all of the decisions in one day. Wait and see what happens. It's the holidays and she might not--"

"I know that, honey," he said. "I'm just saying that she might not be a good match for Mom and me, that's all."

In my head I started going over all the things that I had done that day, things that were time-consuming and so draining: calling this or that place, going over paperwork that Dad didn't understand, going out to get Mom's new hearing aid. . . it never stopped. It was endless. The same thing, every day. I missed my husband. I missed my children. I missed my life. How could I be at my age, over sixty, and be stuck in such a miserable place? I should be like Lilah--have my own place nearby, not *living* with them. I was so tired.

The moments of humor lasted a few moments and were gone.

\* \* \*

*Caroline Myers, 68 years old, died last Thursday from cardiac arrest. She lived in Rockford and taught Spanish at Rockford High for sixteen years. The memorial service will be held at ---- on Friday, December 15th at 4:00pm.*

Sixty-eight. Seventy-one. Fifty-five. Sixty-two.

All these people had died too soon. Or perhaps they'd gone at the right moment. I had this idea that everyone had a time, not necessarily a predestined time, but a time that, when it came down to it, made changes in the world that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

Putting down the newspaper, I reached up and rubbed the back of my neck and my shoulders; the muscles felt so taut, so hard, like long rocks underneath my skin.

Four months. I'd been with them for four entire months. It was like my childhood all over again, except maybe a bit worse--when I could just sneak away and live a life completely disconnected from them as a child, now I had to be surrounded at all times, like a fortress seized by armed forces.

I remembered when I was young, how Mom and Dad never told me they loved me. They probably figured it was a given and that I didn't need to hear it. I could remember hiding my feelings, especially my sadness, because if I ever cried, Dad would immediately say, "Shut up, or I'll give you something to cry about." A cliché phrase in American society now, but kids nowadays didn't realize that it came from somewhere--from parents who actually used it frequently.

I used to fight with my siblings, fight over the silliest things; I still could hear the cracking sound as my younger brother Will threw a hairbrush through my bedroom door. Back then, doors were hollow, and flimsy enough that if a hairbrush was thrown with enough force, it would go through--Will had been a skinny, lanky boy, but anger could make someone much stronger.

"Get up! Get up and help me clean! Now!" I could still hear Mom's screeching voice, the one she used on Saturday mornings when all us kids wanted to do was sleep. The moment a hand towel had been used once, Mom had to scurry into the bathroom and put up a clean one. The sheets had to be washed every week, and we had to help Mom wash them.

And then there were Dad's comments. No matter how much I'd wanted to contradict him, or tell him off, or talk back, I had to keep quiet. Otherwise I would've gotten a hard slap and a good scream in my ear.

I remembered something my Dad had said in the car as me, Mom, him, and Lilah were driving home from the hospital the day my older sister died. On the shoulder of the highway was a beautiful Cadillac, midnight black with chrome fenders--the hood was up, and a young African-American man was bent over the exposed engine trying to fix the problem. Glancing at the Cadillac and its owner, Dad guffawed and said, "Well, they can afford to buy a Cadillac but they can't afford to keep it up."

On the day my sister died. He said that *minutes* after her death.

By that time I was an adult, and I yelled at him for speaking in such a way. I couldn't believe he'd had the guts to be so superficial, so arrogant, when all our minds were hovering in the realm of death and devastation.

Then there was another memory, one of the few good memories I had of Dad. It was late in the evening, and us kids had had our baths and were already in our pajamas when Dad offered to drive us to the ice cream shop to get ice cream. We were so excited. We piled into the car, watching the streaks of light from the street lamps as we rode by. At that moment life seemed somewhat magical to me.

If only there had been more moments like that.

\* \* \*

"You know," Mom said. "So many people have asked me over the years why I stayed married to him. Why I didn't just leave."

"And why didn't you?" I asked quietly.

Mom looked at me. Her dark blue eyes were seeing something else, probably Dad's young, smirking face.

"I didn't realize it until Pastor Michael told me what your Dad's childhood had been like," she continued. "It made me think a lot about Dad's character. You know, he's the way he is because of his childhood."

"I only know bits and pieces of it," I said. "I know his father gave him to another family when he was two, and took him back when Dad was five."

Mom nodded. "Yes. Your Grandma was a very ill woman; she went into a mental institution right after Dad was born, and your Grandpa couldn't afford to keep Dad. So Grandpa gave Dad to the neighbors--Dad grew up with them. They were the only family

he really knew as a child, and even their reputation wasn't that good, either. Apparently they were strange, strange people.

"Then Grandpa wanted Dad back. So Dad was ripped from the neighbors and had to adjust to living with his real father--but soon after Dad was put into the orphanage. I think he was eight years old. Can you imagine that? Being torn from so many people and placed in strange, foreign places? Pastor Michael said that Dad grew up believing that loved ones could not be trusted, that loyalty did not exist."

"So Dad tests us," I said. "He drives us to the edge to see if we'll break and abandon him."

"That's what I think."

We were silent for a while, staring down at our hands.

"Dad never talked about his childhood with me," I said. "I never knew any of the details."

"Well," Mom sighed. "I was on the verge of divorcing him. I wanted to get away from him because he drove me crazy. He made me so angry. He was like living with a child, and I had to constantly monitor everything he did. I still have to do that, sixty-five years later. But then I just . . . I just realized that Dad doesn't *know* any better. He doesn't understand how he is. He'll never change. And I couldn't abandon him--I couldn't encourage his idea that loved ones couldn't be trusted. I had to show him that there were people out there who would stick with him forever, despite all the bad things."

As always, Dad couldn't stand being alone for too long, and he came into the living room. Immediately the connection between Mom and me vanished, that rare, fragile thread that could make us understand each other. Mom's head hung, as though she were falling asleep.

"You know what's coming on in five minutes?" he asked.

"What's that, Dad?" I said.

"Rachel Maddow. Boy, that gal is sharp. She doesn't let anyone get off easy."

"She's something else," I said.

Mom patted my thigh and stood up shakily. "I'm going to make dinner," she said, and, without looking at Dad, disappeared into the kitchen.

"Boy," Dad said. "I feel great. I slept six hours last night. Was out like a light in twenty minutes."

"I'm glad," I said.

He was ninety-three years old.

\* \* \*

I drove Dad to the doctor's. He was doing well. The carotid artery in Dad's neck had a large plaque blockage sitting there, but the doctor said as long as it didn't move he would be just fine.

I drove Mom to the eye doctor. Her left eye was basically blind, but after her eye surgery last year the right eye was seeing a little better. We went to the grocery store afterward, and Rockford suddenly decided to have a power outage. Mom was so afraid--she couldn't see where she was going, and I had to calm her down and guide her with the shopping cart. She couldn't read the labels on soup cans or even what brand of milk she was picking up.

When we got home, Dad asked her if she'd remembered to get Lorna Doones, his favorite shortbread cookies. Mom and I had forgotten.

Dad complained, and stood in our way as we were trying to put the groceries in the pantry.

"You need to leave," Mom said to him. "You're just in the way. You don't always have to be in the center of everything."

He put his hands up, as if Mom were aiming a gun at him. "*Fine*," he said. "I wasn't doing anything. I was just trying to

understand why you didn't get the Lorna Doones. I'm just glad you're both *okay*."

Shuffling off to the family room, Dad turned his head and gazed at Mom and I for a second, as if waiting to see if we'd apologize and tell him he didn't have to leave the kitchen. I was busy stuffing boxes of pre-cut peaches into the fridge and decided to let Dad be disappointed.

\* \* \*

On every wall and every flat surface in the house were photographs of the grandchildren. My two kids, Lilah's kids, my older sister's kids, my brother's kids. Most elderly people had family pictures displayed like a professional museum exhibits, and Dad and Mom were no exception. But somehow the pictures seemed a touch haunting to me.

The still faces of all the grandchildren, and of my siblings, stared out at me, and I couldn't help but think about our family; who we'd been, who we were, who we'd become. When I became a grandmother, would I ever see my grandkids? Would I have the privilege of helping raise them?

One word circulated in my head as day after day passed.

*Waiting.*

What was I waiting for, exactly? I had no idea, although I knew that's all I was doing. I was standing still, like my family in their cheap gold picture frames. Where had *my* life gone? I'd once been a mother, I'd once been a wife, an active woman with hobbies and a love of travel. I loved jigsaw puzzles but didn't get to put them together. I loved quilting but didn't get to sew a single stitch. I loved reading books, but every time I sat down to read, Dad showed up wanting to know who to call about the mistake in the latest utility bill.

I was waiting for something to happen, I guess. An event--good or bad--it didn't matter. Some part of me thought that

perhaps I was waiting to see my parents' names in the Obituary section of the newspaper.

But I could never want that. They were Mom and Dad, for God's sake. They brought me into the world, they gave me the resources to get by until I made it on my own. I never went hungry, I always had a place to sleep.

So why, when I laid my head down onto my pillow, sniffing the pasty scent of mothballs in the pillowcase, did I think about the freedom I could have if they were gone?

\* \* \*

Dad came into my bedroom and tossed the newspaper onto the end of my bed.

"Thanks," I said.

I couldn't even manage a weak smile. In my hands was a book of crossword puzzles, all half-finished, all waiting for the day when they'd finally be complete. The pen in my hand twitched. Dad's face, with his small eyes and hanging jowls, peered down at me wearing an expression of expectation.

"How're you feeling, Dad?" I asked him. "You look tired."

"I feel just *fine*," he said. His mouth turned upward into a smile. "Lilah's on her way over. She's bringing some food. Mom's going to make lunch for all of us."

"Oh, what's she making?"

"I don't *know*, honey. Some sort of beef soup or *something-honey*, if you want to know go ask Mom."

Today I didn't think I could let him get away with his snide tone. The slipperiness of it trickled into my ears and made me shiver, and I opened my mouth to speak but there was a sudden banging sound from down the hall that halted my words.

Dad spun around. "What the *hell* was that?"

Jumping out of bed, the crossword book flying, I hurried toward the noise. I spotted Mom standing by the glass front

door, rubbing her hands, and my sister Lilah on the other side of the door about to come inside.

"Mom, what happened? What was that noise?" I asked; Dad appeared right behind me and added, "Hon, let Lilah in! She's freezing out there!"

Mom glared at Dad, still rubbing her hands. "Well, if you hadn't been so damn careless I wouldn't have fallen like that!"

Lilah opened the front door and wedged herself inside the narrow entrance hallway, two bags of groceries stuffed in her arms.

"Hey guys!" she said cheerfully. Lilah's bright expression vanished as she saw Mom march up to Dad and stare at him menacingly. "What's going on?"

"You're so *stupid* sometimes that I just can't believe it!" Mom shouted at Dad. "Why can't you just *think*? Why can't you just see that putting your shoes in the middle of the hallway is dangerous? You don't even have any clue! I tripped right over them and fell into the front door, and I would have hit the floor if I hadn't held myself up by my hands!"

"Hey, I didn't do anything!" Dad shouted. "How could you trip over something so easily? It wasn't *my* fault you didn't look where you were going!"

"How can you be so stupid?"

"Jesus Christ!" Dad looked at Lilah and me for support. "Can you believe her tone? Why is she yelling at me?" He said to Mom, "You don't have to yell and have the whole neighborhood hear you!"

"I hate this place," Mom said. "I hate the snow and I hate how I can't see anything. I try so hard to have everything in its proper place, and *you* don't even care if you leave your shoes in the middle of the floor where someone can trip over them."

Lilah suddenly took hold of Mom and stroked her shoulders. "Mom, are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?"

"She's *fine*," Dad answered.

I glared at him. "Lilah asked Mom, not you."

He threw his hands up in the air and backed up. "Hey, I'm the victim here! I didn't do a damn thing wrong! She's just yelling like a banshee for no reason at all! She didn't get hurt!"

"Dad, just be quiet," I said. "Go watch TV or something. You're just making Mom feel worse."

I heard the gruff noise come out of his throat, and Dad whirled around and lumbered away; he was in too much of a hurry to shuffle.

Lilah had put the grocery bags down next to the wall. I bent down, picked them up, and the three of us went into the kitchen and began putting them away.

After ten minutes or so of very little conversation, Lilah shot me her famous sarcastic look. "Well, that was a great start to the day, huh?"

We couldn't help but chuckle, and even Mom, when she heard us, flashed a half-smile and shook her head back and forth, like a pendulum inside an old grandfather clock.

\* \* \*

All I could think about was age. How old I was. How old Mom and Dad were. How old my kids were, and how much I wanted to see them.

Another young death in the Obituaries, this time a thirty-nine year old accountant. He had four children, and worked with many charities and community organizations to help the needy during his lifetime. Jeff was his name.

Jeff had lived such a rewarding life already; though he'd gone too soon, at least his family could tell the world what a good person he was and how much he gave back.

I thought about Dad, and how, at ninety-three, he hadn't really done anything in his life to be proud of. Dad never created anything original or contributed to society in any way; the only thing Dad could do well was act, and perhaps argue about politics.

What had I done in my life? Was I like Jeff, or was I like Dad?

I scared myself, asking those questions. As a young woman I'd graduated from college, I'd studied in France, I'd traveled the world working as an agent for an airline, I'd met famous, powerful people, I'd made good money . . . all the things Dad valued in life.

But then there was my family. I'd gotten married at thirty-eight and had kids at forty. That was all that really mattered to me; the memories of my children and my husband, our small unit, our many pets and funny stories. How my daughter Noelle, at four, had stapled together construction paper, written and illustrated her own storybooks; how my son Peter, at five, had looked so cute in his shiny blue soccer uniform, and instead of participating in the game, stood by and watched the action, overwhelmed by a sense of peacefulness rather than competition.

Did my parents ever go back and remember moments like these? Did they ever think about what talented, silly, wonderful children they had?

I realized it right then.

It took me four months to realize it, but now I saw how it wasn't a matter of age at all. It didn't occur to Mom and Dad how old they were, but somehow I thought about it day and night.

While Mom and Dad lived in the present, fighting over the most inconsequential things, and pouring over current news and current problems, I was doing the exact opposite. I was living in a split world--half of my world was set in the past, and half was set in the future. I couldn't even think about the present, because I knew if I did that everything would come tumbling down onto me, and then where would I be?

It was Christmas day, and Dad had given me a bag full of mail-order presents: black plastic alarm clocks, a monocular, a desk organizer complete with sticky-notes, and a fake leather wallet--"You can give that one to Peter or whomever," Dad had said.

There I was, sitting in the living room alone, wondering how long I'd have to wait. How long still, I thought, before it all ended? Before I could resume being myself?

Yet even though I silently wondered about when they'd go, I wasn't so cold that I couldn't imagine my sadness at their passing. They'd always been around, my entire life; if I ever needed to hear their voices, I'd always been able to pick up a phone and call. I'd been so used to receiving monthly letters from Mom, and Christmas cards from Dad.

*You'll just have to keep waiting,* I thought to myself as I gazed at the five inch high light-up Christmas tree in front of the living room fireplace.

*You don't know how you'll feel when it's actually over.*

In the corner of my eye I saw movement--Dad entered the room, his feet in white ankle socks and his body covered in his ugly grey robe.

"Isn't the snow pretty out there?" he said. "I just love being able to see out these huge windows."

"Yeah, it's really beautiful."

"I love it here," he went on, sinking down into his La-Z Boy.

"I'm glad you do," I said. "I think Mom will come around sooner or later. It might take some time."

"I *know* that, honey. I don't hold it against her."

I wanted to counter him, but I resisted.

Dad let out a large sigh and looked at me. "You know, hon, I don't know what we'd do without you."

The words bounced around in my head but didn't register for a few seconds.

"Thanks, Dad," I said finally.

"You're such a help. I just don't know what we'd do without you here. It's so great to have you around. It's just so great."

For a long, drawn-out moment, we just gazed at each other, and I felt the choker leash loosen around my neck, and I felt the rocks in my shoulders slacken, and I felt the stinging of tears in both my eyes.

"Merry Christmas, Dad," I said.

He just smiled.

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**Marika von Zellen** is an English major at Cornell College and has been writing fiction since she could properly hold a pen. She enjoys creating humorous comics based on literary works and historical figures. She's had an essay published in a book called "Voice of the Future," and plans on getting her first two historical novels published in the near future. To read her sometimes funny, sometimes serious blog, go to [www.thinkology3.blogspot.com](http://www.thinkology3.blogspot.com).

The editors would like to thank everyone who submitted their work to Temporary Infinity. We are open for submissions all year long and will be publishing our next issue in June 2011. So writers, poets, artists and photographers, bring it.

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Special thanks to Kat Urice for her contribution of cover art.  
Visit her website at [www.msurice.com](http://www.msurice.com).



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