



WESTWIND

JOURNAL OF THE ARTS

HORROR ZINE

FALL 2023

CONTENT WARNING

***The Fall 2023 Horror Zine contains
fictional mentions and descriptions of
gore and violence that may be
upsetting to some readers.***

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POETRY

Apologies

Alyssa Murray

**My sincerest sorries
to those I made lose
while I selfishly loved.
Who I trapped behind a one-way mirror
while I, alone,
screamed for them from the other side.**

**Whose open arms I teased
and whose cheeks burned for me,
the very one smirking as their tears grew hotter.**

**My lies were spun of silk
entreating your entrance then binding your
limbs suspended, motionless,
as my crimson hourglass came out of hiding.**

**No longer do I climb through air
leaving an adhesive path.
I walk for me, with you,
the mirror turned to glass.**

Are You Afraid of my Pen?

Katie Chung

Are you afraid of my pen?

Black ink indents on ghostly pages

The scribble of words and messages slowly tainting once neat edges.

My mind's flood is pooling now

As it flows and ebbs with time

And soon it will be rectified into Times New Roman size.

The skin around my chipped nail polish

Beings to turn white and pale

As I devotedly gnaw on my pencil's end, and keep spinning my tale.

My hair is tucked behind my ears

As I haunt the same wooden desk

The letters surround me like a shroud—sincere, nonetheless.

I write in the mornings and in the dark

Scrawling constantly

Swirling over and over till the paper begins to bleed.

Blotting highs and smearing lows

All our history written in rows

I pace corridors and slam shutters, lingering always just in case.

All the doors I leave unopened

And the shadows left unaddressed

I will keep writing in this notebook until the poems repeat to death.

***Are you afraid of my pen?* I write**

In the pale and ruthless night

***Are you afraid of my pen?* I write, immortalizing what was once mine.**

Breaths Above the Ground

Rina Serapu

The boards creak open The dirt gives way
My fingers broken Beyond decay
My bleached eyes shutter To see the day
I softly mutter Go live today

I crawl to the sunlight Inhaling the air
I taste vaporous blight In its disrepair
Had I rested beneath A world without care
For whether they bequeath Misery to share

The riddle of roads Beyond the gates
The handsome abodes Without rebates
I see these riches They sealed their fates
The age of switches Annihilates

A paint splattered cross walk Protects me from harm
I walk for a town block They raise no alarm
They pay no attention To my rotten arm
From their glass dimension With hypnotic charm

Manor of casements I stumble thus
Imagine basements Luxurious
A people dazed by Things spurious
My dwelling razed I Am furious

Centennial knuckles Knock metal and squish
My ancient bone buckles A man heeds my wish
He smells like a fragrance A delicious dish
He screams at my dead trance Horror I relish

**Despite their glass walls I breach their home
A family falls I dribble foam
My lips are fizzling To eat this Rome
A child's brain sizzling Beneath its dome**

**Skulls crack on the table As thence in my tribe
Grab necks and a cable I then circumscribe
The deathly stare chosen To me they ascribe
All this bleary poison Prepare to imbibe**

The Dagger

Eric Sican

The morning birds are screaming as I shatter
skeletal bodies staining stone scarlet.

A burning red dagger suddenly appears
dragging me dear and near all I fear-

Unto a pyre without a fire

my last-night's clothes were cleaned with gasoline.

The shining dagger it points upon the sea-

I dreamt last night, that I was a farer

the rarer of my phantasies.

Behind me are suffocation, persuasion, and tragedy.

But perhaps the screeching birds are simply singing

the ringing in my ear

that will lead me away

from all that appears in the mist

of my fear.

Deep down the foggy trail

damned to my unease

the dark red dagger dwells

casting spells,

anticipating its release.

Lunch and Regret

Erik Moyer

**I am the spider, a freckle-eyed freak
Nobody loves me and I eat my mate
Poop what material scientists dream
Spinning my gold, Rumpelstiltskin of graves**

**Frank has his corner and I have my own
Dry-humored widow with succulent ass
Babies ahoy but a kidney stone's throw
No, I respect him too much for a snack**

**After two lifetimes of lunch and regret
Frank polkas onto my silk stage of life
Sandwich old skins then we smoke cigarettes
Fanging his neck and caressing my thighs**

**Frank is the one, fit to father my kin
Till the bastard breaks faith, is devoured by sin**

Moving as a Body

Zoë Benaissa

Does a body have skin?

Does it have eyes to see you and ears to hear You

And a mouth to espouse its love to You

Does a body move as one?

Are its parts bodies too?

Is a body part of something more?

Does a body ever belong to You?!

**A body is a boundary between you and
me a body is something i live in like a**

house but not a home a body is

how i can touch you and know i am a body.

my body my body! my body is sick!

Out of phase with a dance I cannot do

With words I cannot know! All under the guise

Of the shadow in the shape of You.

if being is a shell then there must be

shells galore. shells in shells in shells

plucked from a sediment cemetery and served to You

on a Mother of Pearl plate with Lacquered inlays.

Inside like an aquarium it sloshes around

And it will never touch the outside. It held

Onto me so strong and now I am here

and not

There.

Salem Style

Dahlia Kirov

**a witch may suspend at the surface of a river
her limbs balancing
between
sink and swim**

**a witch may stutter
when reciting a prayer
and a perfect delivery
might be misinterpreted
as a satanic trick
even though
the devil doesn't talk to witches
(he only moves his tongue)***

**a witch may offer no resistance
to touching a supposed bewitched
hoping to witness
a non-reaction
indicative of her innocence**

**a witch
may be baked into a cake
and fed to a familiar**

**a witch may attempt to sever
a birthmark from her body
or burn a scar off of her skin
and shriek in frustration
when the subsequent wounds
are grouped within the same category
as hellish marks**

**a witch may bleed
at the dulled needle of a conman
or at the fingernails of a villager**

**a woman will suffer
as she attempts to convince the world
of her humanity
the finding of evidence
simultaneously her torture**

***This line is lifted from Elizabeth Willis' poem "The Witch".**



FICTION

The Call

Abbie Doll

Lucy, Lucy! Have you heard?

What, dear?

I'm just beside myself. Can't hardly believe it. Belinda. She—she...

She what?

Oh, it's too awful. I can't bring myself to say. The paramedics just left.

Maureen, you called me. Tell me what happened already!

Okay, okay, you're right, you're right. Let me just catch my breath.

[]

Maureen, are you still there? Listen, I have to hang up soon. Frank's in need of the phone.

Yes, sorry, I'm here, I'm here. Look. Belinda was found unconscious, draped over her kitchen island like some wrinkled shirt waiting to be ironed.

Wait, what? What on earth happened?

They don't know yet. Can you come over? I'm too worked up to be alone.

I don't know, Maureen. You remember what happened last time.

Yes, and I promise not to be such a clingy wreck. I just need some company tonight. If something like this ever happened to me, I'd be rotting on the counter for months before anyone came looking.

Nonsense. I would notice.

Sure, you say so now, but I know Frank keeps you busy, plenty preoccupied.

You promise to keep your hands to yourself?

Yes, Lucy. I'll even swear on it. I just don't know what I'll do if left alone tonight. This whole thing's got me in such a frenzy. Belinda of all people!

I'll admit it's strange. You really don't know what happened?

Really. I saw the flashing lights out my window and a minute later they pulled her out on a stretcher. Please, just get over here.

Maureen, take a deep breath. Everything's okay. I'll be there soon, give me twenty minutes.

Lucy? I think I just heard a window break.

Oh my god, where are you now?

In the bedroom upstairs.

Get in the closet. Call the cops.

Wait, wait, don't hang up. Please. Someone's here.

Maureen, have you got a gun?

No.

What about a bat? Any kind of weapon?

No, nothing.

Alright, grab your curtain rod if you have to. Scissors from the bathroom.

Whatever you got. Then get in the closet and keep quiet.

Lucy, wait a minute. What's Frank doing here? Did you send him over?

No, Maureen, no. Frank's right here. Maureen?!

[dial tone]

Critical Feedback

Binyamin Moryosef

“Now anyone can make these same mistakes, so pay attention to why you never will.”

Seth’s mind was groggy, he could barely tell a present feeling from a distant memory. There could’ve been a strong smell of sanitizer, though that may have been from the last memory he had of his eyes being open. A blurred stream of increasing and decreasing light, his ability to hear declining and emerging, following the same tempo. “...one iS REAL DAMAGED GOods he.....orth THE TROUBLE to ke.....ey’ll get THEIR FIX from hi...”. What was left faded out alongside the dimming of his sight. Seth could only assume he was now where they would fix that trouble. And any doubt he could’ve had as to why he’d be conscious for said fixing was silenced in inferno by a searing burn.

“It seems just trying to peer into the failure has forced us to face its first grotesque facet.”

The burning ache clouding Seth’s mind couldn’t stop him from noticing a shift in his balance. Seth was always hyper-conscious of how his weight pulled on his body, for what little good it did him. It felt as if two weights had been hung from his shoulders, conjuring a mental impression of his greatest fear. Seth’s body had always been kind enough to pile his weight into a jutting pouch, allowing him to maintain the illusion he had never lost the slim build he had as a child. Of course, any time he passed by a mirror he’d be forced to face the reality that everyone walking by saw the same sort of fat lazy man Seth himself would look down on as a below-average loser. Still, the shame was never enough motivation to change his ways, anymore than the sudden feeling that his stomach was wide enough to touch his outstretched limbs could motivate him to open his eyes.

“Now this is a mark you should all recognize well, pure weakness incarnate dealt justly to those foolish enough to deserve it.”

The pain surging through Seth’s mind wouldn’t be half as unbearable if his lungs could still bear the impact. Smoking was actually one of the few things Seth wasn’t ashamed of, though hardly by choice. If he hadn’t committed to smoking a pack every time his mother found him and beat him till he had a healthy fear of the devil’s smoke, then she would’ve won. Of course, losing your life in the process was the part of this vengeance that never made much sense to Seth, but the smooth taste of a cigarette made every doubt go by easier—and boy, if he couldn’t use more of that in his life. Even now, between every weak cough, Seth couldn’t help but fantasize the feeling of a 30-minute escape between his lips. Sure would help wash out the taste of iron in his throat.

“Now feel this in your hands. How would you describe it? Lumpy? Diminutive? Pulpous? I suppose its disgrace could be explained by having this to combat waste.”

Numbness was the only way Seth’s mind could handle being subjected to this cacophony of agony. Finally though, a familiar spike of pain struck through the din to fully capture Seth’s attention. A gurgling, acidic sting that the linings of his innards groaned at, despite being accustomed to it. Seth had spent many a day at its mercy, yet refused to ever change his diet. The pain was never present in his mind to deter him when the food was available. His mind was wired to encourage this form of eternal contrition, always depriving him of the association between mistake and consequence till he had suffered enough to earn it. Only by then, it was always too late. The surge of boiling acid fumes singing the back of his palate was enough to shock Seth’s eyes open. He immediately looked down

to see what stomach problems ailed him now, only to follow his stomach out of his chest and into the professor's hands.

“Never neglect any little fault; it is in the totality of their infirmities that we understand why the weak fail. Even if their mere biology resembles the worst of medical fanfiction.”

Seth saw before him an entire lecture hall full of students, young adults in expensive uniforms clearly belonging to a prestigious university. A few talked amongst themselves, peppering the inaudible lashings of their tongues with prickling giggles. An even smaller amount seemed to actually struggle to look, closing their eyes before turning away and shaking their heads. He'd experienced that treatment before. It was the same way his mother shook her head when he cried to his counselor, trying to explain why he couldn't keep up with the workload of his classes after she found him up at 2 am on his computer three nights before. The shake gave off the appearance of pity, but she would never meet his gaze with those concerned eyes. Studying these observers' faces was the only thing helping Seth not stare down at the bloody abyss just inches below his neck.

“Now I'd say we've extended this pitiful creature's expiration date far too long.”

Seth's vision again began to wane. He desperately tried to think of some way to fight this, something to say, some proper way to react. But his hands were bound, pinned to the display board with a thick needle through each digit. His consciousness faded from loss of feeling, taste, sound, and then sight following the clip of each squishy weight being snipped off from his chest cavity. The last thought to ever pass his mind was his inept rage being silenced by the shine of the white teeth in each of his tormentor's smiles, prompting him to reflexively close his lips to cover his yellow stains

before losing all control.

“Now, I hope we’ve learned from this train wreck why you are all here, and he is not. Bring in the next specimen for feedback.”

Erosion

Roman Bieliaieva

I love my family. That man in the corner, do you see him? He does not love, he only wants to hurt them. At the edge of my vision, he smiles at me, dark red lips twitching, as if he knows. But he cannot *know*. No one can understand the things I have done, the lengths I have gone to please them. How much I pretend.

I pretend even now, as I sit, confined to the chair he tied me to. I love my family. He cannot take that from me. *"Doctor Hastings."* My throat is lodged with cotton as I thrash against my bonds; I cannot scream. *"Tell me where they are. Tell me where I should kill your family."*

"No."

He steps forward. *"Tell me where you sentence them to die."*

"NO!"

"Alright." The man grins. *"That is just alright, Doctor Hastings!"*

He approaches me, and when I think he will strike me from anger, he disappears from sight. Frantically, I twist my body, but it is futile. He evades my notice completely, like the wife who locked doors to escape *me*.

The room falls silent; my ragged breathing echoes off the empty walls. A drop of water lands on my head and I shiver. Another. And another. The droplets are irregular; I don't know when the next one will fall. I try to hold my daughter's image in my head—*young, scared Clara*. I forget her face quickly. My wife—*beautiful, resistant Alex*.

Drip— a simple mistake.

Drip— she ran away.

Drip— she tried to take custody of the child.

Drip— and I struck her.

Drip— and I enjoyed the blood that I drew from her cheek.

The inexplicable, unpredictable *drip, drip, boom!* erodes my mind. Like a rock, my skull caves in with each drop. Dripping towards my brain, where it will invariably bury a tunnel to the center of my body. Closer and closer, the burning sensation increases. Through the hair and the skin tissue, and the hard bone of my frontal lobe. Carving me, inside of me. He is everywhere. But I won't tell him. Nothing is worse than losing... losing...

Something warm trickles down my forehead. Thick and sticky, it runs down my cheeks. I shake my head in vain, and it passes to my mouth. I taste my blood. Salt, mineral, iron. Hot and wet, like the thoughts churning out of my skull.

I laugh, harder, louder than I ever have before, till my lungs stick in pieces in my throat. I know more than my family's location. I know who I am. The horrible, gut-wrenching, sickening nature of what I am! He can see me through the hole in my head, he can see all the way down to my core.

A drop lands into the pit, and it sings through my will. Through their memories. *He* cannot love them like I can; *he* cannot love them at all. Love is pain, pain is pleasure, as I hurt and hurt them with the unbearable weight of my *love*.

"Alright!" I wail as I wait for the next. "I'll tell you where they are, you terrible thing!"

"What did you say?"

"I'll tell you where I hid them, and we will kill them all!"

A Gulley of Rats

Lila N. Ly

Every night, I play a game where I dance around the prison cell jumping over the rats, and in turn, the rats kindly do not eat holes into my feet.

True, there are raw spots, half of them leaking pus, from nights I was tired or inattentive, but on the whole, my feet are intact, there is at least no damage to the bone, and I am otherwise alive and well.

Tonight per usual, the guards watch with thinly veiled amusement. I give them a sweeping bow before skirting away from a rat gnashing its teeth.

It is for the best - blessings to our king - that I am given such a lively pastime. Instead of wasting away in a lone tower, emaciating in darkness and filth, I am made of muscle, sweat, and running blood. The rats here are like small sharks thrown into a barrel of fish. It keeps the fish flashing in the waters, it keeps flesh firm.

I leap over one who leaps in tandem with me, and strike another with my foot. Yes, there is blood coursing through my veins.

Half the prison is empty, cries ring through the night and new bones appear some mornings or sometimes half men. Half like a slab of meat, bones protruding from one end, muscle red. They are meat that is sentient - screaming or pallid in horror.

When I feel myself tire, when the rats lunge quicker than I move and I gain a few new spots of raw, I scramble up the prison bars and hang there, letting the rats rage their hunger from below.

I have built the strength to hang through the night, finding rest in stretched limbs while my fingers hold tight. If I didn't, I'd be a pile of bones.

Licked clean.

Morning comes, then late afternoon. I spend it whiling away asleep on hay-covered ground. The rats only come out during sun down. Days are the time to sleep and build up strength for the nighttime dance.

There are a few more precious hours when the guards stomp in and yank open the metal grate. It screeches.

"Get up," they say.

"I'm napping." I squint one eye up at them.

"Impudence, the king is calling for you." They cuff me in the head and haul me out. On the way out, some prisoners laugh black spittle at me, some plead with me to take them too, others are still pallid with horror, too injured to get up, waiting for the coming night inevitably for the rats to finish them off.

I laugh back at them all unequivocally, and sweep them a bow.

They bring me before the old king - blessings to him - seated on his golden throne. Behind him on one side is the princess, on the other side is the man who wants to be her prince, who captured me to be her prince. And one day he wants to be king. I can already see it in his eyes- the way they flash towards the throne, though I can't quite see why. The old king - blessings to him - looks no better than a slob, like a limp slab of meat, ready to slough off the throne at any minute. The princess looks no better herself, pinched and wary, and drowned in carnelian pink silk.

The sun is dropping down upon them, casting them in dark gold. I bow, with my nose almost to the ground.

"Are you a Largemouth?" The old king squints at me.

I measure the width of my mouth with my fingers. "What do you, sire, consider large for a mouth?"

"Impudence!" The guards cuff me.

The man who wants to be prince nods to the guards - I can't see why he is already in charge - and the guards throw me into a

deep gulley with steep walls that is built into the center of the throne room.

There is something behind the walls. Many somethings, skittering and scabbering. I cannot see but I sense it, like how predator and prey can sense each other in the waters. In the throne room, a new evening has just come. The sky has only just become purple, and the sun has just dropped beneath the horizon.

The blood drums in my veins.

"Just wait a moment." I step forward carefully. "I heard men have mercy."

"To men. You are a monster," the man who wants to be prince says.

I shrug unequivocally.

"Well, survive this, and I'll let you live," the old king says tiredly. He waves his hand. "Release the rats."

A bell sounds, incessant and high, and little grates at the bottom of the gulley open. There is a high pitched keening, like a hundred hungry cries, a flash of a whisker, a gleaming eye. Then the horde spills into the gulley. The rats are raging and hungry, squealing, screaming, and surging towards me.

But I am smiling, I have been smiling this whole time. For the predator does not fear the prey.

I drop to all fours and the second the rats are on me, my mouth gapes open and snaps a dozen of them. They claw the inside of my mouth, trying to take the tongue, but I shove them down my gullet.

"Horror!" the prince says, "They're going to split her from inside."

But he is wrong, I've swallowed them all. After the last one slides down my gullet, there is not a single sound, struggle, or movement. My belly holds them firm.

They chain my arms and haul me back in front of the king. It is just me, the guards, the royal family, and the man who wants to join the royal family. There is nowhere to run, if certain creatures go scuttling about.

"That was disgusting," the princess says, "behead it anyway."

"That is wise." The old king turns to me.

"Any last words?"

I nod. My eyes turn black, my mouth peels open, and from my gullet leap out the rats.

THE END

Hungry Child

Keanu Hua

The wind dawdled around the mother and son, and it carried the aroma of ghosts. The little incense stick in the son's small hands quivered.

"Aren't you going to pray for your brother?"

"Mom." He turned away, voice just a whispering gust. "I'm trying."

She sighed. "Why can't you be more like him? An honors student, instead of wasting your time with... whatever it is you do online."

Silence.

Max scraped the bark of the bodhi tree that shaded the little altar at their home that contained an empty urn, decorated with awards, but all he could think about was how hungry he was. At his feet was a plate filled with rotten fruit - papayas, mangos. His offerings, now worming with maggots and flies and mold.

"Lorenz." Max reached out to his brother, only a few years younger, still in middle school, and stroked his hair, but his translucent hand passed through. Kneeling down, he stared at his brother's aged eyes and quivering incense stick, at the childlike face worn away by their mother, what he couldn't protect anymore. What they learned of him, of who he was online, where people really cared for him and his singing.

He could feel his heart still beating, but next to it was the gnawing hunger of his stomach. Max's eyes flitted between the rotting fruit and his brother.

The fruit was his mother's love. She brought it so long ago, let it stay, and Max was supposed to eat it. That was how these offerings were supposed to go, how her love and his dad's love was, even as Max covered his bruises, his hunger with his decaying hand.

He heard his brother snuffle, drowned out when Max's stomach growled. At least his brother was still alive. At least he could still be loved. Love had to be punishment when children were bad, as he

was, as with every little mistake of Lorenz – an open cabinet, a misplaced knife, a bright screen in their broom closet of a room when they were supposed to be asleep – which Max took upon himself.

Max reached down to the rotten apple, pulling it close to his mouth. His stomach roared.

“Max?” Lorenz said. “Max, are you–”

Hunger. It was starting to devour him. He needed his offerings, food, anything to satisfy himself, but his brother was there, still hurt. His hand dropped the apple.

A glance down at it, where the mold created an earth in miniature.

Max reached towards his brother again. “I’m here, Lorenz.”

Their eyes met, Lorenz’s facing up, and for a moment, Max thought Lorenz say him,

“You’re supposed to pray, Lorenz.” Their mother leaned down, pushing his head close to the incense. “Maybe if you pray a bit, maybe Max will care about you and you’ll be more like him.”

The same worn-out words, the same ones that gave Max the wounds on his ghostly form as he hurried his brother away from their mom or whoever it was she brought home that night.

“Then why don’t you give him better food?”

“Well, I thought he’d help you more, but I guess not.”

“He did help me.” Lorenz breathed in. “He’s helped me more than you or the guys you’ve met ever did, because at least he loved me more than you ever could!”

Her frown poisoned the air as Max’s stomach roared, and his eyes wavered as they fell on the moldy fruit, her offerings from so long ago. Her love. It had to be love to keep feeding him, worthless as he was, wasn’t he?

Max watched as Lorenz flew to the side, lying limply on the grass, a reddish imprint on his face.

But all he could think of was his hunger.

That was her love. Uniquely hers, how she raised them, punishing them for every little thing because they had to be better than her, better than the filthy woman she was, and wasn't Max better than her, but wasn't Max not better enough, and didn't Max not do enough even when he barely got sleep, and wasn't Max dead now because he couldn't take it anymore and couldn't see the car coming, and wasn't it Max's fault that Lorenz was this way, was a silly little performer dreaming of stardom instead of someone like Max, someone responsible and amazing and honor and smart and who would save the family but who was long gone now?

His eyes were stuck on the moldy fruit, at the feast that would poison him.

Hungry. He needed to eat, he needed her love.

"Max!" Lorenz was calling for him - a memory or now? He couldn't tell.

His hands dove to the moldy fruit, the earth, the bugs, the detritus and all the filthy things that had crawled onto it and called it home.

"Max."

His brother's voice was next to him, but it was muffled.

He bit into a mango, tasted the earthy fluff of mold, but he was still hungry for her offerings, for her love.

He couldn't stop himself from eating each and every piece of fruit, even as he heard his brother running on the grass, then into the house, his mother's footsteps pounding on the ground next to them.

Irresponsible

Catherine Lange

The doctor and the commander talked it over while the patient was strapped to the electric chair, a relic which miraculously still worked in the basement of the military barracks. Normally, they would have used a lethal injection, but no one wanted to get that close.

"In his defense," the doctor said, pulling up a grey slide on the projector of the man's brain, "The parasitic worm has latched onto a significant portion of his prefrontal cortex." The doctor pointed to the left part of the slide, where in the middle of the wrinkly white and grey folds, a large black mass sat twisted, occluding the regular pattern of striated grey and white, caught in the middle of its writhing passage.

The commander crossed his arms against the starchy folds of his grey uniform. "We simply cannot let a threat like that persist in the public." The commander brought up on the touchscreen pictures of the victims: a body spilling intestines, a face ripped open, the patient sucking the blood from the arteries of a still beating heart, the patient hunched over a woman, mercifully occluding the patient's fingernails and the corner of the woman's eye. The brain and the photos sat side by side, as if drawing a causal link between the two. "Did he show any signs of psychopathy before yesterday morning?" the doctor asked in a measured tone.

"Some PTSD from previous service, but not this." The commander felt he was watching a B-movie horror film from his childhood, one with particularly life-like special effects and an imagination for random violence that was beyond human. "It was as if a switch flipped. He was doing drills in the yard yesterday. Then, the night," the commander gestured vaguely to the upsetting images that burned on the screen, "and when I reprimanded him today he was incoherent." So incoherent the patient had, halfway through the interview, leaned in and bitten the commander on the back of his

hand. That was when they gave up on the idea of keeping him lucid for the interview.

The doctor pressed her pointer finger to her lips and rested her thumb underneath her chin. The commander couldn't read her.

"Did anyone else come in close contact with the patient?" the doctor asked. The commander thought, "Other than his victims? Some of the men reprimanded him, but other than my interview and your examination, no one."

Beyond the one way glass, the patient, happily sedated, chased rainbows and sparks in his vision through a thick wall of fog.

"Hey doctor, if you think this thing is contagious—"

"Probably not casually. Probably only through close contact or bodily fluids." The commander rubbed the bandaid over the stinging wound on his hand. The room was dark, reverberating a mechanical hum.

"What should we do?"

"Epidemiologically?" The doctor said, "Quarantine. Or line up behind Patient Zero." The patient's head rolled in the electric chair. His finger twitched to some unknown music. His wrist strained against the straps.

"Hm." The commander said.

"Hm." Agreed the doctor.

"Let's get on with it then," the commander said. "Too dangerous to try to study, and there's no sense in letting that threat persist in the public."

The doctor nodded. The lever was pulled. Electricity surged through the patient's body til he lay limp, and as the acrid smell cleared and the corpse cooled, the doctor and the commander went their separate ways.

Material Decomposition

Christine Kim

The denim jacket fell to the ground with a dull thud. So did the black knit top, and finally the new slacks I'd bought for myself recently. They were creased beyond retail recognition, the way clothes never seemed to fit quite the same after they'd left the store.

Staring into the full length mirror, I held my reflection in similar regard. Skin never sat on my bones the same way as they had in the morning. Pulled taut here, stretched loose there, the boundaries defining how much space I took were inconsistent. Pinching the areas that needed attention would usually do the trick, but today, nothing seemed to work well enough. Every adjustment was an overcorrection.

Agitation sunk in. My own ragged breaths were the only sound filling my ears, heightening my paranoia and tunnel vision. I could have sworn that my kneecaps used to crease more evenly. They didn't look symmetrical if I stared at them for long enough. Did I even remember what I'd looked like before? The mirror became the arbiter of a truth I no longer had the power to accept; tearing myself away from it would mean rejecting its image of how I was expected to exist, a reference I lacked.

No matter how I rearranged the skin, a stubborn excess collected between my palms. I could only think of detaching it from the rest of my body. It was a pain-free process, the bunched handfuls crumbling away like some sandy dough. I knew I would never look the same again, but morbid curiosity drove my nails deeper into flesh.

Soft clumps grew into mounds at my feet. I clawed away at the lines outlining myself, blurring my corporeal image in a process as dissociative as it felt familiar.

When it was over, I had no fingers left to grasp anything with. I didn't need eyes to catch a glimpse of the reflection that had borne witness to its transformation. Here I was, laid bare in my most recognizable form.

Screen Test

Julianne Estur

Her head arrives in the mail on a Friday evening.

I'm buzzed off two glasses of a sweet red wine that made my face scrunch every time I took a sip of it when I get the delivery text. I unpeel myself from the couch and pull on a gray hoodie I bought at a garage sale a couple of months ago. It had been on a summer day where the lurid sky was starved for clouds and the air was still. Evidently, nothing wanted to show up. The sale was run by a woman who four years prior found her son in the bathroom with fissured wrists. His pupils were pulled wide and his lips had been slightly parted, like he was letting something in. I remember saying that everything was always in the eyes. She gave me the hoodie at a discounted price. I hope it was once his.

Downstairs in the lobby of the apartment complex, I open the mailbox and then immediately go to my bedroom. As always, I avoid the gaze of my neighbors. I'm unable to even tell who is down there too. The package is identical to how the rest of her came, in a yellow mail envelope, the inside padded with a crucial layer of bubble wrap.

I fish out the contents. It's an unmarred CD that glimmers even in the cheap ceiling light. I couldn't tell if this dealer was some eccentric artist type or simply greedy. The practice of distributing a person in parcels was unusual, even in this world, though it appears to have worked on me. When he, in an encrypted chat room two months ago, offered me an arm first, I initially thought he was joking. Even two years into being a collector, I lamented my own inability to read tone online. However, I decided to try something new, and was pleased with the results.

I boot up my desktop and switch off the singular light in the room. I wait until I'm as situated as I can be sitting on this hard plastic imitation of a chair before I feed the CD to my computer. Sometimes the videos started suddenly, as if they had a life of their

own. Once, I left to get a glass of water after inserting one, only to return and see it had been playing for nearly half a minute. That one was of a thirteen-year-old boy, a cancer patient who still had the fight in his eyes. When the person filming him told him to turn to the side, he had to be told twice before he relented. It's remarkable how much of a person can be preserved, without them saying or doing anything of note. I hadn't understood the appeal of this footage at first. Now I had a shelf full.

It's only when I see her doe eyes staring back at me that my fists unclench in my lap. I've been waiting to look at her for so long. I know the camera won't move away from her face, and I don't wish for it to. It's as if it knows what I want to see and only sees that. Her face is kissed with freckles just like the rest of her. Her hair is a thicket of red waves that disappear below the shot. I know already that it reaches her waistline.

When she blinks, her left eye closes a split second after her right one. It feels like an open secret. It makes my heart squeeze, the blistering truth of this imperfection, as sobering as life. It reminds me of the chewed up nails I saw of her first and the bodiless arms they were attached to. In that one, she raised her arm up and down, slow and strong, like moving through molasses. She had a soft bend to her elbow, and when her arm went up, her hand lifted last and stayed as the highest point all the way down. She was always holding onto the last hope of reaching for something. Her thumb was pressed lightly against her palm, her index finger higher than the rest of her fingers, a stance that made me remember a video of ballet dancers from somewhere in the past.

Even though her face is relaxed, she looks like she's smiling. Her eyes stand resilient atop her dark circles. Yes, I see her clearly now, awake and yet still dreaming. I don't wonder how it happened, or why it happened. It doesn't matter that she's dead, that she was probably already dying when she stepped in front of the camera. She's been distilled here. And she would be. Forever.

I suddenly wish I had more screens. I want to lay them all out and reassemble her. If I time it right maybe I could see how she moved in tandem with herself.

The right corner of her mouth quirks up and divulges another one of her secrets: a shallow dimple. The beauty of it is that nothing prompts it. I touch my finger to it through the cold glass.

Her head tips to the right. I could imagine her leaning into the touch, her being aware of me. And it's so easy when she has that lucid look in her eyes. I wonder if it's like that at the end.

The colors are suddenly bright enough to sting. I look down at myself, drenched in the spectral light of the screen. Without me noticing, it has crawled to the other end of the room.

I pull my hand away. She doesn't blink.

The monitor flickers off. The computer spews out the CD.

I go to my shelf and store her head next to her torso. All in all, she is five discs. She takes up the most space, and there is not much room left. But if she has to, I'm glad it will be here.

What Hilary Brought

Cosmo Sher

Alan sensed something in his periphery during a night walk through his neighborhood. His heart sped as he cooled down from his evening's exercises. A dread spread over his forehead and sent an iciness down his neck and arms. His street was well lit and it sometimes made long and tendril-like shadows at night. Alan, a grown man, long gone from (but never totally out of reach of) childhood, felt his fear of the dark come rushing on. What unseen specter was watching him? The need to hurry and run away from whatever monster lurked around the corner overtook him and he ran, but only for two seconds. As he approached the corner of Victory Boulevard and Louise Avenue, the peripheral something took on a more familiar form.

He had been scared of his own shadow, apparently. But that wasn't to be taken for granted. His shadow had built itself a reputation of stalking, and even possessing Alan. Alan had been walking a road of atonement. Walking, sometimes running. It had been many years since a true malevolence had possessed him and even longer since he had been grabbed by such a primal fear of the dark. He was glad no one was around to witness his display of fright. He feared not only the ornamental dark and the imaginary ghouls living in the corners of his vision but the possibility of more tangible agents of vengeance, too. He had hurt many people who weren't willing to let him make amends. He never meant to fulfill the abuses his father had inflicted upon him and his mother.

Alan's dining room and kitchen were littered with various plastic take-out and food delivery bags. Maintenance was never a talent of Alan's. His ex-girlfriend, Amy, was a talented cook. She left him six months ago. The silence in her wake was loud. The lingering ghost of her words screamed from the kitchen. The dining room. The bedroom. Alan could hear words she had spoken to him that had once been muffled by drink. And even though Amy bore witness to

Alan pouring the whiskey down the drain, and subsequently staying sober for a time, the damage was too great.

Hurricane Hilary was the first tempest of its magnitude to visit Los Angeles in nearly a century. It was expected to pass through Los Angeles the next day. As it continued its northbound trajectory along Baja California, it diminished to a tropical storm. Flash flood and power blackout warnings. Alan hadn't expended too much energy on taking these alerts seriously. He assumed that he would be unscathed. With childish selfishness, Alan was deaf to Amy's concerns and suggestions on how he could better keep house and keep his home livable. All Amy wanted was to be heard, even if her ideas were to be rejected, that would still be a conversation had. But Alan was incapable while in his cups to accomplish the bare minimum needed to help that relationship thrive. And so the past catches up to bite us regardless of whether effort is put in or not to make right on our wrongs. The blaring notes of redemption that Alan tried to sing by forcing himself to clean himself up by tidying his house was still coursed through with rageful currents of self sabotage. He literally swept things under the rug.

On the night of the storm, Alan skipped his walk and ate dinner at seven o'clock. The wind caused the rain to flap like sheets of tarpaulin on his roof. It seemed like mere heavy rain to Alan. Very withstandable. He had hired a guy a month prior to patch up the roof around his living room skylight; a few spots were missed.

Alan was on a seafood kick and had leftover fried squid from his favorite dining establishment, Evergreen Restaurant. He put the calamari in a pan with some brussels sprouts and sweet potatoes. The old olive oil came out like cough syrup onto a blackened, deeply encrusted and chipping cast iron. His house reeked. If his kitchen was a restaurant he would be about to receive a C rating from the latest inspection report of the food and drug administration. Alan didn't mind the wafting stench. He kind of liked it. A stronger mind might have

heeded an inner voice warning him against his rotted meal. But Alan's conscience was muted to this particular point.

Alan's power had gone out a couple of hours after finishing his dinner. His ceiling was dripping and soaking his couch in the living room and making his floors slick in some areas. He was navigating in pitch dark. Alan didn't think to take any of the authorities' suggestions of preparation. His phone was dead and he didn't have a flashlight handy and never liked candles. He was feeling his way along his dining room wall; the hard plaster and paint were damp. Alan was discomforted by his palms feeling wetness where it shouldn't be. If not for the lingering funk of the evening's cooking, Alan might have sensed an alert to something not quite right. But his conscience wasn't the only thing that was dimmed, let alone completely darkened that night.

All of a sudden he felt someone (a... thing) brush by his right shoulder. Scrambling blindly for safety, Alan felt a hand grab his wrist. Only it wasn't a hand. Too gelatinous, too... ropey. Alan felt it shake, tighten, snap, crack his wrist. Breaking his wrist. Alan's scream was gagged and muffled. He felt the tentacles slick down his throat. The power came back on and there was no sign that Alan struggled or was even in his house. Something had taken him away.



CONTRIBUTORS

Author Bios

Zoë Benaissa is a senior at UCLA studying Biophysics and Philosophy. Her work reflects a staggering discomfort with having to maintain and live inside a body, in a world made of nothing more. In her free time, she likes to use her body to swing from curtains and light sticks on fire and dance with them. But it's all very above ground, promise.

Roman Bieliaieva is currently a first year at UCLA, double majoring in Psychology and English. They have enjoyed writing since the fifth grade, and are actively dabbling in the horror and mystery genres, with a primary focus in historical fiction. Their mystery novel, *Paper Kingfisher*, was recently published in the summer of this year.

Katie Chung is a 2nd year cognitive science major at UCLA. She began writing poetry when she was 8, and especially loves writing off of simple observations and instances. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, and running.

Abbie Doll is a writer residing in Columbus, OH, with an MFA from Lindenwood University and is a fiction editor at Identity Theory. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Door Is a Jar Magazine*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and *Occulum*, among others. Connect on socials @AbbieDollWrites.

Julianne Estur (she/her) is a fourth-year English major at UCLA. She believes in leaving offerings of sweets for local spirits and having empathy for haunted houses.

Keanu Hua, although an applied statistics and economics major at CSULB, attributes that choice to his interest in writing, to the way that it enables him to investigate distant shores of life. His wild ambitions continue to compel him to continue his writing well into university.

Christine Kim (they/them) is a fourth-year Computer Science and Linguistics undergraduate working as the Managing Editor and a copy editor at *OutWrite*. They are minoring in Film and Television and like to fantasize about the tattoos they swear they'll get one day in their spare time.

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Catherine Lange is a fourth year Biophysics major and Comparative literature minor. While she's fascinated by the science of sleep and loves a good physics puzzle, it's stories that keep her up at night. She's a writer, director, filmmaker, producer, performer, and improviser. Her work has previously appeared in *Westwind*, and you can watch her comedy sketches like *Arm Day* at the UCLA Shenanigans comedy youtube, and her audio drama *Drive* at the UCLA Film and Photography youtube.

Lila N. Ly grew up in Bay Area, California but now lives in Arizona to go to graduate school. Her favorite color is yellow and she loves macaroni and cheese.

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Alyssa Murray is a psychology student at UCLA that is passionate about creative writing and writes both fiction and poetry. She is from San Diego, California, and her writing typically centers around the intersections between mental illness, relationships, and personal identity. She is currently querying for the publication of her first novel, *The A-Word*.

Erik Moyer is a writer and engineer from Hillsborough, New Jersey. He holds a BS from the University of Virginia and an MFA from the University of California, Irvine. He is currently a creative writing PhD student and teaching fellow at the University of North Texas. His work has been featured in *Constellations*, *Euphony*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, and *Tipton Poetry Journal*, among others, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Outside of school, he works as a data engineer.

Rina J. Serapu is a 2nd year Philosophy major at UCLA. She enjoys writing numbers as digits rather than words and burning books in her spare time. Her favorite author is Thomas Hobbes.

Cosmo Sher was born, raised and currently resides in the San Fernando Valley, California. He walked away from a career in acting to pursue writing and academia. He is a writer of fiction and a voracious reader. He collects vintage horror paperbacks and has been curating a personal library for many years now. He works as a freelance private tutor, working with elementary and middle school aged students. He does his best to impress the gravity of both recreational and critical reading to his students. He is currently enrolled in Los Angeles Valley College, aimed toward advanced degrees in creative writing and 20th century American literature. He wishes to one day teach writing and literature at the undergraduate and graduate levels. This is his first excursion into flash fiction. He is soft at work on his first novel.

Eric Sican is a second-year English student with hopes of pursuing the creative writing minor at UCLA. He is an aspiring young poet who wants to bring a change to the literary community being a first-generation Latinx college student. Eric is unfamiliar with the familiar yet always in the know.



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