2019 Flash Fiction Contest

Judged by Benjamin Percy

CRAFT.

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about

CRAFT

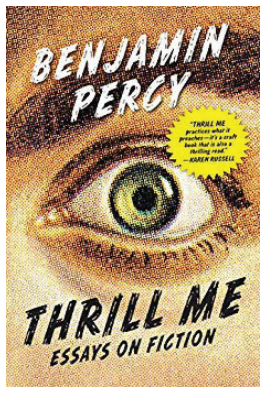
Established in 2017 as a literary magazine for fiction, *CRAFT* has grown in 2020 to include creative nonfiction. We explore how writing works, reading pieces with a focus on the elements of craft, on the art of prose. We feature previously unpublished creative work weekly, with occasional reprints, as well as weekly critical pieces including essays on narrative craft, interviews, book annotations and reviews, and more. Each published creative piece includes an author's note and an editorial introduction that each discuss craft and stylistics in the work.

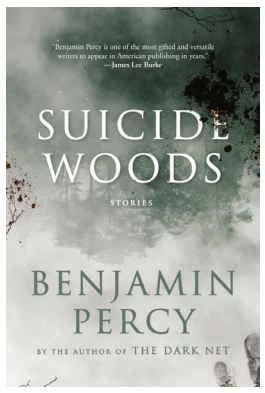
We do not charge fees for our fiction or creative nonfiction submissions, or for our craft categories, and we are a paying market. Our general submissions are open year-round with no capacity limits. We value accessibility—keeping *CRAFT* free to read and free to submit to is our priority. We work with all writers, established as well as emerging.

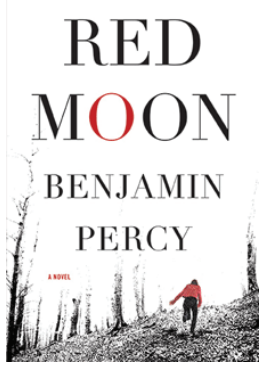
Flash Fiction Contest

Established in 2019 as an annual contest, the CRAFT Flash Fiction Contest is open to original fiction up to 1,000 words. Guest judged in 2019 by Benjamin Percy, we awarded each of the three winners $1,000 and a set of Rose Metal Press Field Guides. Additionally, our editors chose four pieces that showcase some of the range of forms and styles in flash fiction for the editors' choice round. Each of the editors' choice round winners were awarded $150. All winning pieces published in *CRAFT* in March and April, 2020, alongside the writers' craft essays and written introdcutions by the judge or by *CRAFT* editors.

CRAFT.







benjamin percy

Benjamin Percy's most recent collection of short fiction—*SuicideWoods*—released in 2019 with Graywolf Press. He is also the author of four novels, two other story collections, and a book of essays, *Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction*. His fiction and nonfiction have been read on NPR and published in *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Time*, *Outside*, *Men's Journal*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *NewYork Times*, *Tin House*, *Ploughshares*, *McSweeney's*, and *The Paris Review*. He writes for Marvel and DC Comics—and his series *X-Force* launched in fall 2019 as part of the new dawn of X-Men. His honors include an NEA fellowship, a Whiting Award, the Plimpton Prize, two Pushcart Prizes, the iHeartRadio Award for Best Scripted Podcast, and inclusion in *Best American Short Stories* and *Best American Comics*.

with thanks to

Founded in 2006, **Rose Metal Press** is a not-for-profit publisher specializing in the publication of literary work in hybrid genres, including flash fiction and nonfiction; prose poetry; novels-in-verse or book-length linked narrative poems; novellas-in-flash; lyric essays; text and image works; and other literary works that move beyond the traditional genres of poetry, fiction, and essay to find new forms of expression.

results

winners

Carol M. Quinn: “Epilogue”
Steven Simoncic: “Girls’ Weekend”
Hillary Smith: “How to Return Your Child to School”

editors’ choice round

Madeline Anthes “Inheritance”
Stephen Aubrey: “Coyote the Younger”
Virginia Reeves: “Old Girl”
Luke Whisnant: “What They Didn’t Teach Us”

finalists

Heather Aronson: “What You Know”
A.A. Balaskovits: “Mama Had a Baby and Her Head Popped Off”
Kristin Bonilla: “Shy, Solitary Animals”
J.Anne DeStaic: “House, in Order”
Trent England: “The Four Seasons”
Matt Hall: “Apocalypse Now?”
Kira Homsher: “Delete the Ladder”
Melanie J. Malinowski: “Pregnancy Test”
Veronica Montes: “Stone Cold Fox”
Martha Mattingly Payne: “Citrus”
Andrés Reconco: “This Is How It Happens”
Lynn Schmeidler: “\ 'lī \”
Michelle Wright: “Lost”
Stephanie Yu: “The Gorgons”

honorable mention

Madeline Anthes: “What We Bury”
Aramis Calderon: “Butterfly”
Aimee DeGroat: “Before the Split”
Nancy Scott Hanway: “Spite”
Jennifer Julian: “Cat’s Cradle”
Lyndsie Manusos: “Concerning the Power Cord”
Terrie Petree: “Traffic”
Carol M. Quinn: “Changeling”
Luis Garcia Romero: “Cloud People”
Katy Sewall: “Ione and the Boy”
Karen Smyte: “Fugitives, 1980”
Luke Whisnant: “After the Assassination”
Michelle Wright: “From Where They Come”

note from the editor

On behalf of the readers and editors of *CRAFT*, I'd like to thank each writer who entered flash fiction into the 2019 CRAFT Flash Fiction Contest. We are grateful you gave us the chance to read and consider your words.

We're delighted to share this digital compilation with you now, complete with the three winning stories, accompanied by author's notes and judge's introductions; the four winning stories from the editors' choice round, accompanied by author's notes and editorial introductions; excerpts from a few of our favorite craft pieces concerning flash fiction, including essays and interviews; and excerpts from finalist pieces.

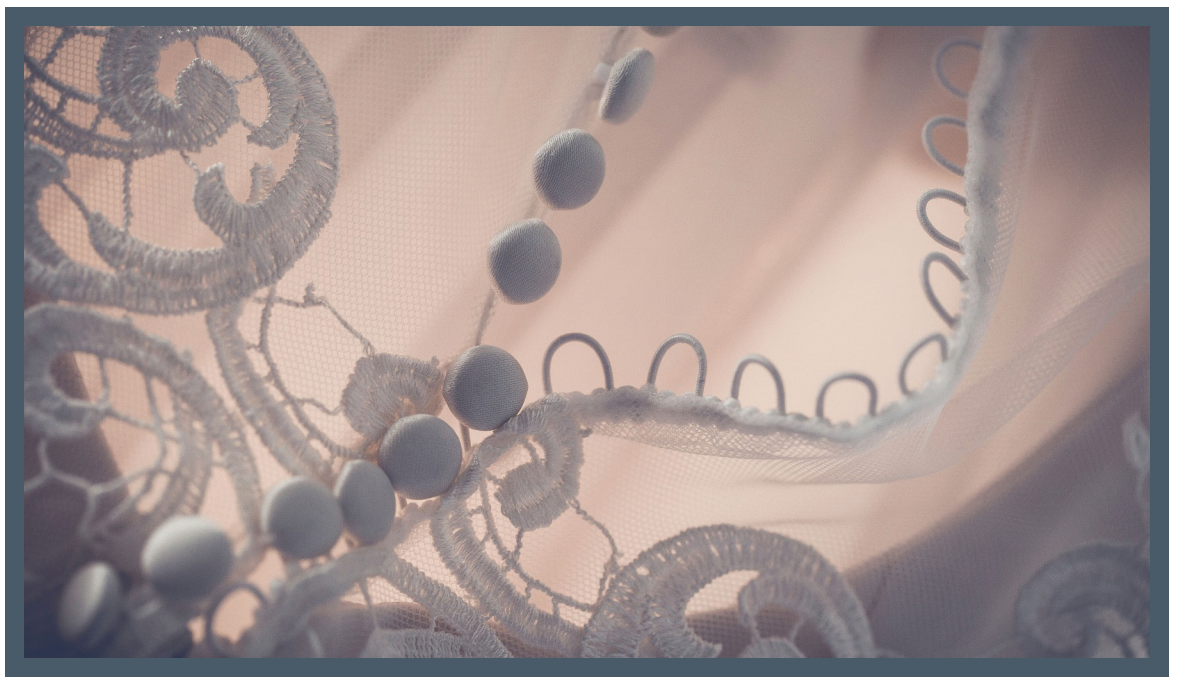
Thank you for your support!

—Katelyn Keating

The 2019 CRAFT Flash Fiction Contest Team

Readers: Andrea Auten, Amy Barnes, Catherine Findorak, Téa Franco, Hannah Jackson, Janice Leagra, Albert Liau, MJ McGinn, Hayley Neiling, Tom Shute, Casey Smith, Kristin Tenor, Kori Wood

Editors: Alex Berge, Tommy Dean, Katelyn Keating

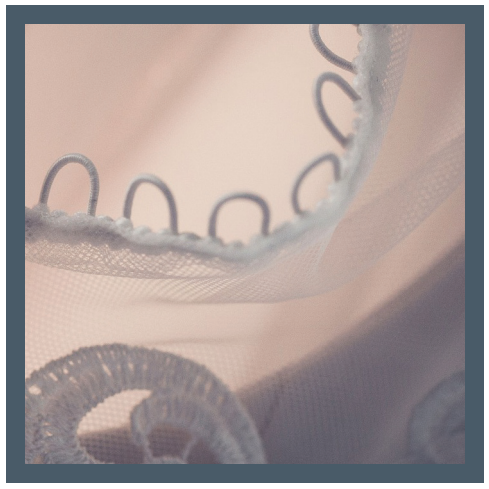


inheritance

Madeline Anthes uses minimalism and white space effectively in "Inheritance" to create a literary horror story. She doesn't over-stage this dystopian world, inviting the reader through the mosaic form and the use of well-timed white space to engage their own imagination to fill in the gaps, to impose their own experience and knowledge of our current world onto the structure of this story (see Anthes's author's note for more on form, revision, and worldbuilding). As is the case with all great horror, the reader will find their own fears peeking around corners as the tension builds.

—CRAFT

content warning—domestic violence



Everyone expected me to take my mother's eyes. I had a right to take what I wanted, and her eyes were legendary. She'd taken them from her mother, and her mother had taken them from her mother.

They were smoky gray with a ring of dark green around the iris. Clear and unusual.

When my mother looked at you, you felt your insides seize. It was hard to say no to her.

She had already picked out a new pair at the Registry—a respectable cool blue. Everyone expected me to take her eyes, but when I turned eighteen, I took something else.

x x x

Not long after I selected my Gift, I met the man who had been chosen for me. He seemed kind. I suppose most men do at first.

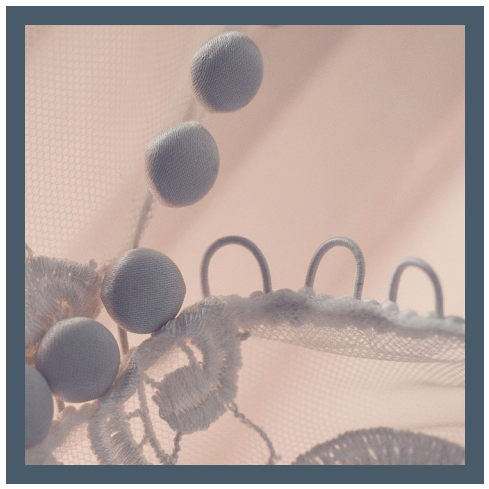
My father nodded in approval as the man told me of a house he'd build for us. A backyard for chickens, a kitchen with white cabinets. He rubbed his thumb across my knuckles and I felt something buzz inside my stomach. He brought me pansies.

I never told him what I'd take from my mother, just that I was taking something I never wanted to use. Something I would bury.

x x x

I was dressed in soft pinks and whites at my Ceremony. My gown billowed along the floor. I felt like a wooden doll.

My mother stood in front of me, hands clenched by her sides. My father was behind her, his hands on her shoulders.



I'd taken my Gift from my mother that morning. She and I had gathered in a small room with the Gift Giver.

"Are you sure?" she asked me. Her voice wavered. The look in her eyes made me doubt myself.

"I won't have to use it. That's why I'm taking it. So it's never used again."

She pressed her lips together. I could tell she wanted to say something, but she didn't.

"It's your choice," she said, and took my hand. She was shaking.

x x x

I thought I knew a lot about bad men. I thought I knew what to look for, how to spot one. I'd heard what a bad man can do.

But not long after the Ceremony, I found out I was wrong. A bad man hides himself well. He only reveals who he is when you're alone.

In the end, even if I had known, what could I do? He'd been given to me. I couldn't return him.

My mother knew, of course. She'd learned something about bad men, too.

x x x

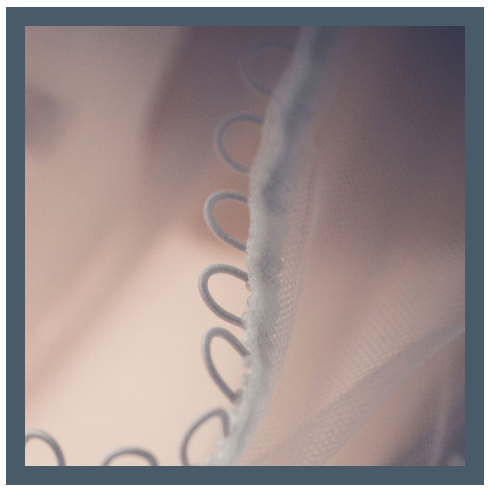
I made the wrong choice; I should have taken her eyes. Maybe beauty would make him hesitate. Be softer.

Maybe not. Probably not.

I think of her eyes every time he shows his true self—in our living room in the glow of the evening news, in our kitchen with dark brown cabinets, in the bedroom with the door shut so our children don't hear.

I shut my own eyes and try to remember those days when he held my hand. I think of pansies and a thumb running along the ridges of my skin.

When I open my mouth, I hear my mother scream.



x x x

MADELINE ANTHES is the Assistant Editor of *Lost Balloon*. Her chapbook, *Now We Haunt This Home Together*, is out now with Bone & Ink Press. You can find her on Twitter at @maddieanthes, and find more of her work at madelineanthes.com.

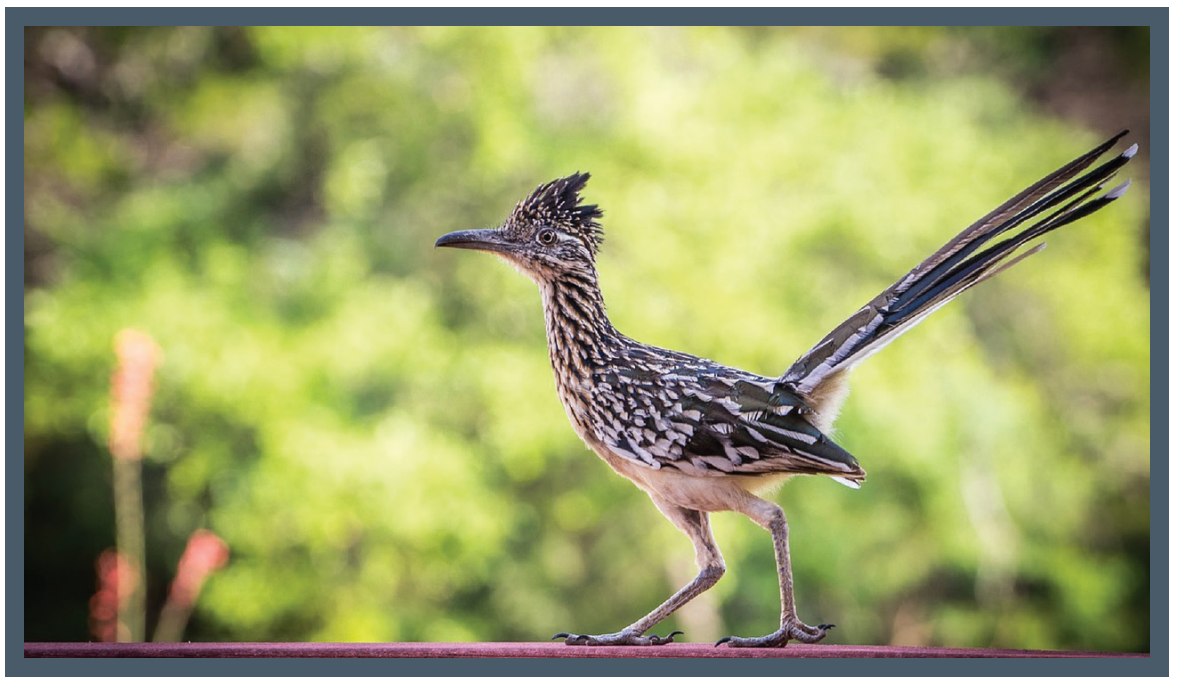
Author's Note

I was several months pregnant when I wrote this, daydreaming about what I wanted my son or daughter to inherit from me. What did I want to pass down to them? I thought about how my sister was always told she had the "Rocca eyes" from my mother's side and how much my brother and father looked identical as children. It made me think of the phrase, "You have your mother's eyes." No one literally has their mother's eyes... but what if they did? How could someone have their mother's eyes, or smile, or sense of humor, or voice, in a literal way?

I'm usually someone who writes a painstaking draft and only revises it two or three times before the story takes its final form. However, this story went through ten or more revisions. Worldbuilding is new to me, and the first few drafts had way too much backstory. As I revised this story, I trimmed out more and more. I took out some of the extra exposition and the story became sparser. I had to be careful not to strip out necessary information that helped maintain internal logic, but I liked the idea of leaving some things vague as well. I want the reader to want more and ask questions, but not be so confused that it pulls them out of the story.

In terms of form, I usually write fragmented stories (or mosaic stories). I tend to think of flash as shards of memories pieced together to form one story. Flash reminds me of those View-Master toys I played with as a kid. Each time you pull the handle, a new photo appears in the viewer, telling a piece of the overall narrative. Each piece of a fragmented story works on its own, and put together it creates a mosaic.

For stories that touch on trauma, I find this form works especially well since it allows for subtly and brevity. I love writing about violence, but I hate writing about fighting. Going back to the things we inherit, I often think about the ugliness that's passed down from generation to generation. The things we see and repeat, the shame we perpetuate. But I don't want to write a scene about a man beating a woman; that's too awful and too on the nose. I like writing about the subtle ways people exert power over each other, and the ways we fail to protect ourselves. By writing about problems that exist in an alternate reality, I hope to bring some truth and honesty to the problems that exist in our own.



coyote the younger

Stephen Aubrey's "Coyote the Younger" mixes a consistent (and delightful) satirical tone with high diction and complex sentence structure to explore the internal struggle of woebegone and misunderstood Wile E. Coyote. Inspired by a workshop challenge (see Aubrey's author's note for backstory on the fifteen years of revision this story has weathered), this piece transcends the shallow humor of the source material, using the allusion to provide a unique entry to the father-son relationship canon and to explore the magic of belief.

—CRAFT

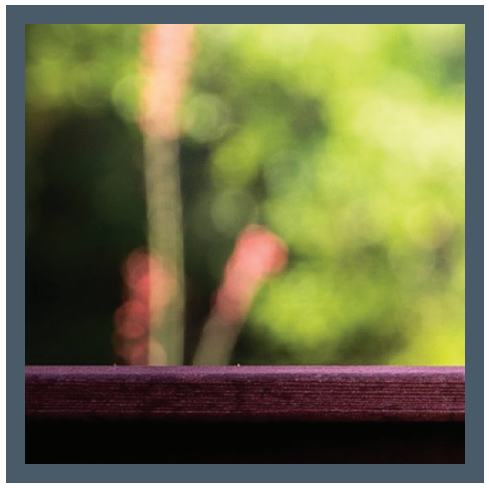
In all those moments after he'd lit the fuse but before the rocket-powered roller skates propelled him across the yellow desert at sublimely sub-sonic speeds, in all those moments what came most vividly to Coyote the Younger were the memories of his father, Coyote the Elder. How he had crept across an inky horizon, quietly and carefully, instinctively. How power and grace were inscribed upon his long muzzle. How he had held the Road Runner's neck almost tenderly under his paw. How the Road Runner would stare back at him, its eyes filled with something almost like love.

Coyote the Elder had been a hunter—the last, and perhaps the greatest of a line that dwindled to an end in Coyote the Younger. The son who had forsaken the ways of his fathers, surrendered instinct and the Old Ways. Traded them for the blueprints and patents of Acme Corporation. Secrets industrial, not ancestral.

As road signs blurred to meaninglessness, as the unfathomable velocity of his rocket-skates peeled at his face, pulling lip from dulling tooth, Coyote the Younger would find himself finally able to think clearly, ensconced in the warm moment before disaster. He would consider the breadth of his betrayal of the ways of the coyote, the ways of the *Eatius birdius*. And for what? A small collection of explosives and improbably backfiring gadgets?

But the skates were already strapped to his feet. There was nowhere to go but forward. No choice but to search for the speeding blur of indigo against an expansive canvas of azure, its meeps thundering across the mesa, harbingers of the irresistible.

As his willowy body propelled through the tight turns of asphalt, he would pass the boulder where Coyote the Elder died moments



after catching his forty-second Road Runner. Cataractous and shivering with tremors, he had stalked by scent alone. And there, below that butte, was the den where Coyote the Younger had been brought when he was but a whelp. The only time he had met his grandfather, Coyote the Proud, the one said to have caught sixty-seven Road Runners (though Road Runners were also said to have been far slower and more abundant in those days, days which Coyote the Younger habitually visualized in black and white). He saw himself in the den again, shivering in the pre-dawn wind of the desert, as he stared at his grandfather's sinewy body. The fragmentary feeling of a wet nose brushing against his passed through the veil.

Growing behind Coyote the Younger was an unbroken path of antecedents—generations who had relied on nothing except their forelegs, their hind legs, and whatever interjections could fit on a single wooden sign; simpler animals, creatures of tradition and ritual, not mail-order merchandise—who haunted the dust beside the never-ending highway that Coyote the Younger flew relentlessly upon, leaving a spiraling trail of smoke in his wake.

But then the crest of the Road Runner would peek over the next knoll and Coyote the Younger would slide his goggles down from his forehead. His vision would narrow, the periphery fade. Nothing except the distance now.

x x x

And then there was that moment before he struck the side of the canyon; that moment when the ruffling tail feathers of the Road Runner would tickle his snout and the odor of his prey's damp sweat would mingle with his own; that moment when Coyote the Younger

would close his eyes and reach forward to seize what was his, forgetting about the hairpin turn ahead, only opening his eyes quickly enough to see all his momentum about to come to an inevitable nothing. Had his father ever felt this way?

x x x

In all those moments afterwards, his broken body several feet deep in a coyote-shaped hole in the side of a canyon, knowing that he had failed in some essential way, that he was the last of his kind and there would be none after him, Coyote the Younger would listen, as he drifted in and out of consciousness, to the double meep of the Road Runner.

As he lies there, the sky stretched taut above him, a shade of his father returns to him. In pantomime, Coyote the Elder explains that the Road Runner is no faster, smarter, or braver than the coyote. What the Road Runner possesses, even the Acme Corporation in all its grandeur cannot provide: faith in the magic of the Fathers. Faith that the road will go on forever without end, faith that one can pass through even the landscapes painted upon the dusty wall of a canyon. A power greater than any giant rocket, any oversized catapult, any bundle of TNT, any Burmese tiger trap.

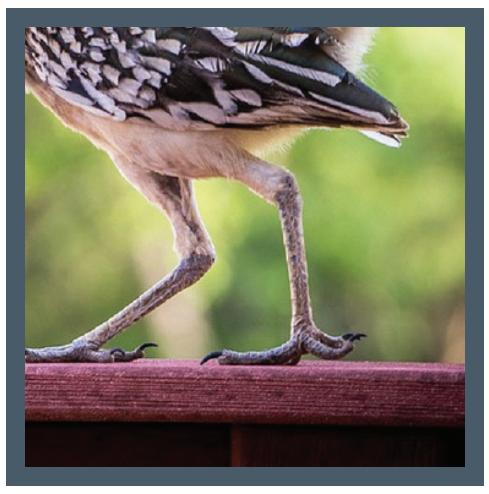
In every of Coyote the Younger's failures, there is the same singular lesson: that he must learn to believe, always. To have perfect faith. For it is only when he looks at his feet, only when he looks for the firmness of the ground he need never doubt, it is only then that the Coyote will find nothing beneath him; only then that he will fall to the earth.

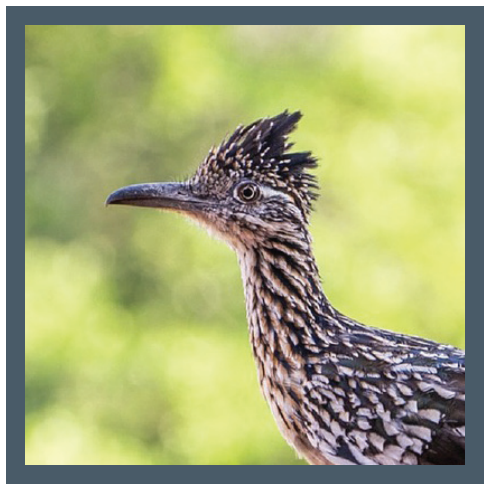
Coyote the Younger can only manage one phrase in response to his father, can hoist only a single placard out from the hole he finds himself in, the same block letters scrawled on both sides.

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO BELIEVE.

x x x

STEPHEN AUBREY is a writer and theater-maker living in Brooklyn, New York. His writing has appeared in *Electric Literature*, *Publishing Genius*, and *The Brooklyn Review*.





Author's Note

"Coyote the Younger" was written as a dare to myself years ago when I was a student. Exasperated by the glut of one-dimensional characters in our stories, a creative writing teacher once gave my entire workshop the assignment to write a one-page character study. You can't write good fiction with cartoon characters, she told us. So, of course, I went home and decided to write about Wile E. Coyote.

I was still an inexperienced writer at this point, and as I struggled to understand the inner thoughts of a cartoon coyote who never spoke, I felt on the cusp of something I struggled to articulate. I worked through drafts, drawing closer to the marrow each time but never quite finding the balance between the absurdity of Wile E. Coyote's quotidian existence and the secret turmoils and joys of his inner life. And so this story sat on my hard drive (and in my head) for nearly fifteen years. As I grew as a writer, I would open the file every so often and work on it, slowly bringing it towards the shape it has now found. I worked with little hope or expectation, but I worked nonetheless.

I don't believe in too many absolute rules about fiction, but here's something I do believe: to do something seemingly stupid over and over again in the hopes that you will get it right this time around, that this time it will be different, is a fundamentally human act. And one necessary to being a writer.

The writing life–we are exhaustively reminded, as if we were unaware or could forget it–can be lonely and without much reward. It is sustained, much like the coyote going over the edge of the cliff, by pure will, by pure belief that we can keep going. We may have our tricks and our superstitions, we may cling animistically to our tools–*this brand of pen*, I say, holding it aloft, *will finally let me tell my story right*–but at the end of the day, it comes down to our willingness to fail. Again and again.

This, ironically, was the lesson Coyote the Younger needed to learn as well: no amount of cleverness can substitute for the work. We're all stumbling blindly as we create, things only revealing themselves to us incrementally. I couldn't have known this fifteen years ago when I started this story; I had to wait–and to work–before "Coyote the Younger" could teach me how to finally finish it.

I should mention that Wile E. Coyote actually catches the Road Runner in the 1980 special "Soup or Sonic?" And while I don't completely condone that creative decision, it is reassuring to remember that if you keep going long enough, something is bound to happen. One day, you'll catch the stupid bird. Or publish the stupid story.

old girl

Virginia Reeves's "Old Girl" is a study in tension. Reeves uses dialogue realistically and effectively to develop her two main characters, and white space to develop subtext and interpersonal tension between this mother and daughter. Laura van den Berg writes in "Object Lessons: An Exploration": "The right object, appearing at the right time, can change a scene, a story." Here, the green dress and the photographs are each objects hard at work, providing structure for a powerful, thematic echo and resonant imagery (see Reeves's author's note for more on the ability of an object to mirror, and on crafting a story "about the discovery of something that isn't yours to see"). This story will crawl under your skin and linger.

—CRAFT

The last time I picked Hallie up at the airport, she was wearing a ratty beige shift that would've been a nightshirt if not for the decorative navy rickrack at the neck.

Instead of hello, she said, "You hate my dress. *You'd never wear such a thing*." She was good at mocking my voice, long practiced in her fifteen years. Even her first word harbored a bite, *Mama* slipping out like an indictment.

"I wouldn't wear it, but it looks nice on you."

"No, it doesn't."

"Why are you wearing it then?"

"Because it only cost a dollar and no one had to die to make it."

Her birthday had been the Thursday before, celebrated with her father and stepmother and two young half-sisters she lived with most of the time. She came to me briefly and infrequently during the school year, then stayed for the summers, long visits that charred us both with their heat and expectations.

No one was surprised when she'd chosen her dad.

Her face was too thin, her cheeks like the mountain ridges around her home where I'd once lived with her father—the three of us in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. She seemed older, too, almost elderly in her disappointment. She squinted her eyes as she looked out the window. "Look at all these roads," I imagined her saying. "All this concrete. I remember when this was pasture, back when this country grew its own goddamned food."

"Stop looking at me," she said, though her head was turned away.

x x x

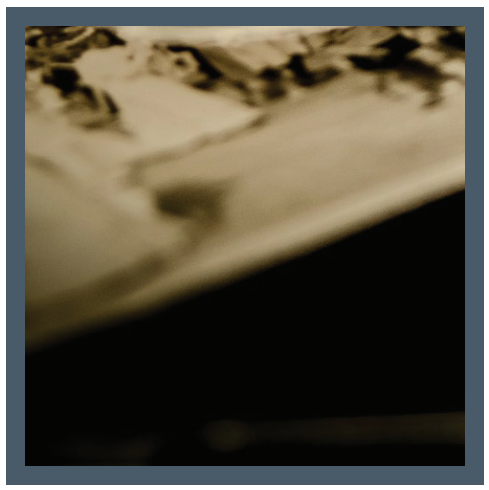
At the house, Hallie let out a disappointed sigh when she saw the presents I'd left on her bed. "I told you I didn't want anything."

"I never listen."

"You don't."

Without the bulk of her backpack, I could see that the rest of her was skinnier too, her body a jumble of sticks inside that ugly sack.

"Are you sick, Hallie?"



"Knock it off, Mom." She shook one of the boxes. "Will I like this one?"

"I think so."

She'd selected my favorite—a knee-length shirt-dress from a vintage consignment shop. It didn't have tags and may have been homemade, its fabric a soft green, its buttons pearly flowers, a sash belt at its waist, deep pockets on the front.

She lifted the dress by its shoulders, pinching it like something filthy or hot.

"How much did you pay for this?"

"I got it at a consignment shop. Used, the way you like them!"

She scowled.

"Try it on?"

She hadn't changed in front of me for years. She stayed covered even

in the summers, her body swathed in light cotton shirts and pants when we went to the beach. She'd quit swimming—water pollution and UV exposure—and I'd wave to her from the surf, though she'd never see, her head tipped to the book in her lap, her body dark in the shadows of the umbrella.

She took the dress to the bathroom.

And she was a different girl when she emerged. The green made her skin look creamy. It brought out her lovely eyes. The fabric hung just right, smoothing out her sharp angles.

"Look at you."

She smiled—the first of the visit—and put her hands in her pockets, shy.

But she was suddenly angry, quicker than I could track.

"What is this?" She shook an envelope at me. "Did you put *money* in the pocket? That's so like you. You get this great used dress—shopping *responsibly* for once—and then you have to ruin it."

She threw the envelope on the ground between us.

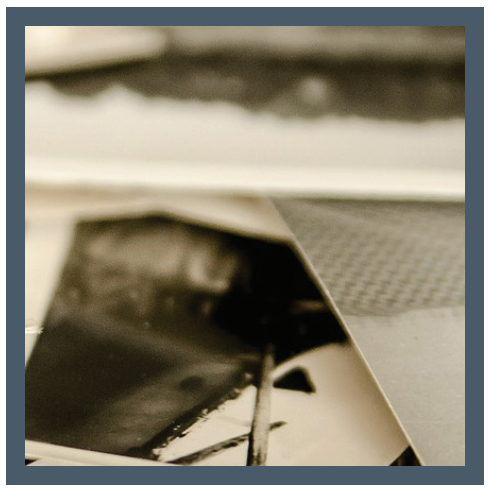
"I don't know what that is."

"Don't lie."

"Hallie, I bought that dress used, like I told you. Responsibly. I didn't check the pockets."

The envelope was the size of a greeting card.

After a moment, Hallie picked it back up.



x x x

I wasn't prepared for the tiny old woman I saw lying on a bed, Hallie's dress fanned out from her hips, the pearly buttons gleaming as bright as the woman's white hair. Her right hand was caught in an incomplete gesture—she may have been preparing to wave or to shoo something away. That was the first photo Hallie pulled from the envelope. In the second, the same woman was curled on her side, her back to the camera, her legs swallowed in the dress's green fabric, only her wrinkled feet poking from the hem.

There was nothing specifically wrong with the photos, but I could feel their indecency. I'm sure Hallie felt it too.

She locked herself in the bathroom, and I knocked tentatively. "Honey?"

When she opened the door, she was back in the shapeless shift.

"Do you think that woman's all right?" she asked.

I looked at her, and then to the photos still in my hand. How was I to know what was all right? I couldn't tell if my daughter was all right, and she was standing in front of me.

x x x

Hallie eventually opened the rest of her presents. She took only a hand-embroidered Guatemalan shirt.

I told her I'd return the dress to the shop and inform them of the photos, but instead I hung it in my closet. It's still there, the photos, too.

Hallie didn't come the next summer, nor the one after, and her visits through the school year dried up, too. She is away at college now, and our relationship exists mostly in generic cards around the holidays. We were never close, but still, I find myself missing her, and I return often to that green dress and its photos. I know the woman well, by now. She is a distant relative—a great aunt, a third cousin, or maybe she's closer than that—a daughter, an elderly daughter I once pretended to know.

x x x

VIRGINIA REEVES is the author of two novels, *Work Like Any Other* (2016) and *The Behavior of Love* (2019). Her first novel was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and the French translation has been adapted into a graphic novel that will be released in early April, 2020. Virginia's short story "Bloodlines" is collected in an anthology from Sasquatch Press called *Pie and Whiskey: Writers Under the Influence of Butter and Booze*. Virginia lives with her husband, daughters, and three-legged pit bull in Helena, Montana, where she teaches writing and speech at Helena College.

Author's Note

In the spring of 2010, I was nearing the end of my first year at the Michener Center for Writers. We had a guest coming to visit for a week-long workshop, and my colleagues were abuzz with excitement. Several of them named this particular writer as one of their all-time favorites.

Already feeling a bit of imposter syndrome at my very admittance to the program, I feigned excitement of my own, even though I was unfamiliar with the name: Who the hell was J.M. Coetzee?

(It's embarrassing, I know. And don't worry—I've since caught up; he's one of my favorites now, too).

Coetzee gave us a prompt at the start: Write a story about the discovery of something that isn't yours to see. There was more to it than that, I'm sure, and it likely stemmed from a story we all read together, but I only remember the idea of voyeurism through random discovery—of the consequences of experiencing a sliver of someone else's life and having that sliver impact you in some unforeseen way.

The challenge, of course, is to find something that reflects your characters' lives, or speaks to their lives, or shapes their lives, but not too obviously. For example, my narrator and her daughter couldn't find photos of an estranged mother-daughter duo (I can hear the workshop criticism even at the suggestion). They needed to find something that simultaneously brought them together *and* drove them further apart.

The woman in the photos came to me through the dress, a dress inspired by one I saw in a vintage clothing shop in South Austin. Anything that passes through multiple hands carries echoes—houses, clothing, cars, land—and most of the time, those echoes are left largely to our imagination. But what if we find concrete evidence of our belongings' past lives? What if those past lives are ugly? What if they're more beautiful than our own? What if they mirror ours in ways we don't want to admit?

The woman in the photos isn't a mirror of Hallie and her mother, yet somehow these images conjure similar feelings. As the narrator says, "There was nothing specifically wrong with the photos, but I could feel their indecency. I'm sure Hallie

felt it too." There is nothing specifically wrong with Hallie and her mother's relationship, but we all feel the distance between them.

The characters in the present moment of the story are echoing something from a past they don't know, and I think that's the power of this particular prompt. Isn't all literature an echo in some way? Isn't this why we use metaphor—to find similarities in disparate moments?

what they didn't teach us

In "What They Didn't Teach Us," Luke Whisnant deploys impeccable collective first-person narration—the reader is complicit in the conflict; there is no "fourth wall" when it comes to the use of military force. This microfiction takes the list form, using repetition and syntax to vacillate the narrative voice from bravado to dread, from pride to disenfranchisement. Whisnant uses language meticulously in this micro, layering meaning and theme and sparing none from this web of collusion (see his author's note for more on language and its misuse, its "debasement").

—CRAFT

They taught us how to kill with assault weapons, bayonets, bare hands. They taught us the lay of the land, how to navigate by rivers and stars, how to use cover to outflank enemy operatives, how to make a surprise attack against a heavily defended position. They taught us the procedure for poisoning the water with coal ash. We learned to napalm the trees, scorch the already blackened earth. We learned how to pour salt in the wounds, how to twist a metaphor, how to dissemble while smiling into the cameras. They taught us corrosion, shock and awe, how to clog the system, how to throw the optimum-sized spanner in the works. They taught us to find the choke points, the system backdoors and vulnerable patches; they taught us black ops, bait and switch, tea-bagging, rat-fucking, denial of service. We unframed the necessary questions. We disseminated fake news. We learned to steal without getting caught: to skim off the top, set up offshore accounts, access off-the-books funds, divert resources; we learned to exploit the dark web, to lift a sleeping hen off her eggs and leave no feather ruffled. They taught us to take it all, every last bit of it. The one thing they didn't teach us was how to put any back when we realized we had more than we needed.

x x x

LUKE WHISNANT's *In the Debris Field* won the 2018 Bath Flash Fiction International Novella-in-Flash Award. His other books include the novel *Watching TV with the Red Chinese* and the short story collection *Down in the Flood*; his latest collection, *The Connor Project*, is forthcoming from Iris Press in 2020. He teaches at East Carolina University, in Greenville, NC, where he also edits the journal *Tar River Poetry*.

Author's Note

Some writers begin with character, some with theme, some with plot. I almost always begin with language. While writing "What They Didn't Teach Us" I had two bits of language in mind: "collateral damage"—since the 1960s a favorite military euphemism for killing civilians—and "enhanced interrogation techniques," a sickening obfuscation used by the Bush administration to disguise torture. Neither of these phrases made it into the story, but they're lurking in the margins.

The first time I read this piece to an audience I unexpectedly found myself almost shaking with anger. As so many people have noted, we're now in a period of Orwellian Newspeak. I hope that "What They Didn't Teach Us" catches some of the current administration's obscene debasement of language, their rapaciousness—taking and destroying and monetizing everything in reach—and their cruelty.

diane williams and a taxonomy of flash fiction endings

In a June 2014 interview with *The White Review*, Diane Williams described one of her writing goals as "to provide some mystery, a place to meditate, where I might be nearing a new insight, if in fact I haven't reached it." In keeping with this, Williams aims to elicit emotional responses from readers at the same time that she refuses to provide easy solutions to her characters' problems. This balancing act is evident in her endings, which risk abruptness in their desire "to provide some mystery." Considered carefully, such endings suggest one distinction between traditional short fiction and its briefer subgenre: where longer stories typically end with some type of resolution, Williams often chooses to conclude before this resolution, at a moment when her characters first glimpse the larger significance of events, leaving readers to fill in the rest for themselves.

Williams's 2016 collection *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine* offers a masterclass in flash-fiction writing. Consisting almost entirely of short-shorts, the book contains numerous works that defy readers' expectations for resolution and closure. Throughout this collection, Williams ends stories before their natural conclusions, leaving readers straining toward insights her characters may never achieve. Two interrelated types of endings are commonly found in *Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine, Fine*: the ominous and the narrative-interruption. These categories highlight the possibilities available to flash-fiction writers and elucidate some of the challenging stories found in this excellent collection.

Like many Williams stories, "Cinch" presents the thoughts, attitudes, and dialogue of a single character, making it a fictional version of a dramatic monologue. While many readers and reviewers often conflate Williams and her (often) female narrators, this one is certainly a distinct, separate character, one who dedicates fewer words to his abuse of

his spouse than to the rec room he's building for their house: "So I slapped her and drilled holes for anchor bolts, used a shim to level bedplates and my half-inch nuts to secure the bedplates." He describes the end of their relationship coming sometime after his wife Tamara "behaved unfavorably toward me, for I had laid my hands on her small-sized, stooped back, or I had prodded her." She is replaced by Hesper, who first notices the gopher hole that has appeared in the yard. "After you catch a gopher," the narrator explains, "you tap it headfirst, dead, right back into the hole! That's good fertilizer."

The relish with which the narrator describes this activity contrasts with the matter-of-fact way he abused Tamara, a contrast that evolves into a conflation at the end of the story, when he asks, "But after I put to death a friendship, a marriage?" Ominously, he offers no straightforward answer to this question, nor does he elaborate on how one "put[s] to death" such a relationship. The story ends with an even more ominous paragraph, quoted in full: "There are people to take their places, who move in from other areas, of course. There are people who are dedicated to the true good, who work toward this goal. There are animals that may not." His version of a friendship—or marriage—with Tamara has ended and been replaced by one with Hesper, who "is so perfectly content to pursue me," a form of "dedicat[ion] to the true good" of building a marriage, and a rec room. Conversely, the gopher—and, by extension, Tamara—is an "animal" whose existence is at odds with this "true good." At the end of "Cinch," readers look back at the seemingly innocuous statement, "By the next May, Tamara had departed" and wonder if she, too, has become "good fertilizer" for the narrator's yard. In this way, Williams leaves us productively struggling to thread together the strands of this story, as we are forced to reconsider all aspects of its brief form in light of the warning contained in its ending.… (*read more in* CRAFT)

x x x

MATTHEW DUFFUS is the author of the novel *Swapping Purples for Yellows* and the story collection *Dunbar's Folly and Other Stories*. He lives in rural North Carolina and can be found online at matthewduffus.com or @DuffusMatthew.

how to return your child to school

When *The Road* released, I was new to fatherhood, constantly worrying over a son who suffered from respiratory issues severe enough that he ended up in the ER and ICU many times over. Maybe this is why the novel terrified me more than any other; because at its heart, it's about a father trying to keep his boy safe. So many years later, "How to Return Your Child to School" triggers me in much the same way. I felt a visceral response—sick down to the marrow. My son is an eighth-grader now. His lungs are fine, but he faces different dangers, ones I'm sick and helpless to protect him from, as the author of this story expertly captures.

—Benjamin Percy

content warning—school shootings

He'll want the Moana one with zippers like cresting waves and straps that glisten blue plastic glitz. He'll cry that Michelle Naylor's mom let her buy that one in purple. You've only met Michelle Naylor's mom once, at family fun night last September. All you remember is a tinny voice and the hot stench of lavender oil.

Be firm. Take his hand, moist and squirming in yours, and pull him down the other aisle. The imposed structure and muted colors of these racks will crumple his flushed cheeks but you'll grab the loudest shade, the green of spring grass, and slip his fingers over the mesh straps. Dance the bag into his arms, show him the secret pockets tucked into the belly of the main pouch and let him feel the cool lips of the zippers, shaped almost like dragon mouths if he looks close enough. When he asks why the back is so hard, tell him there's a special panel to keep him extra safe. It will feel comfy after a little while.

Tell him this backpack is what everyone's getting this year. He'll listen.

x x x

Drive on a Saturday morning through tepid drizzle to the empty lot of his school. Don't worry when you find the main building locked; it's the outside you need to study. All these paths, cement and furrowed grass, snaking among the drab gray buildings and inner courtyards. This is the maddening thing. How exposed it all is. How easy the target.

Follow every path, cradling your notepad inside your jacket and scribbling a rough map with a pencil he once chewed. Note corners and places to tuck into. Scratch Esc, or whatever code works,

over breakaways between buildings leading offsite. Outline one tree whose bulging trunk looks immense enough for shelter.

Bring him here on Monday, two days before he starts. Make it a scavenger hunt with apple caramels.

x x x

In his closet, while he's at Ty Smith's house, stroke the fleece of his shrunken sweatshirts.

Hold the sleeves to your damp forehead and acknowledge the ache.

x x x

In the black of the midnight kitchen, where her ghost still lingers, unwrap a caramel and place it on your tongue. Listen to the hushed wheels of neighbors' cars. The barks of an exasperated dog. Allow the warm tang of apple flavoring to settle your swallows and the wrinkles of caramel to melt into your gums, sticky and slow.

x x x

He has to understand it's an emergency device, so hunt in the electronics section for the ugliest phone: bulky and black, with an old-school keypad. He'll slump when you present it, and remind you about Ty Smith. He'll say Ty's parents bought him an iPhone and now he has apps.

Be firm. Tell him this phone is different. It's only for very, very specific times. It's for when people look really worried and he hears sounds that startle and his teachers make him crawl into strange cramped places and he feels like he's in real, actual danger.

Suddenly his eyes will widen, dark pools trembling, and you'll pull him to your chest, invisible blood in your mouth. Hold the bones in his shoulders, too small against your body.

Breathe his soft stink, cotton sweat over cucumber shampoo, willing the quakes in you to calm.

I'm sorry, you'll say again. I'm sorry.

x x x

The night before the first day, when he accepts slumber, pull his door slowly to you and clutch the cold knob. Your hand will stay there until you breathe.

Sleep alone, as always. Crave her body, as always. Each year of absence has shut off another room of memory. Her measured voice that would once calm yours now only whispers in distant tones as your ear hits the cool pillow.

x x x

The morning of, he'll be quiet. You'll place the bowl of Cheerios on the table. He'll plunge his spoon in silence. As he crunches, cut his sandwich into triangles and drop a caramel in his lunchbox. Turn over your phone as red news alerts scream, run hot water over the dishes and bear the scald with your hands even though the gloves you bought two weeks ago sit under the sink, next to the dusters.

In the car, steer out of the neighborhood. Punch the radio dials until roars of static become an upbeat, poppy song. Watch his left toes jiggle, his face loosen. Notice your grip on the smooth wheel. Let your shoulders sigh down.

As you pull into the parking lot, peer at the grounds teeming with bodies. Don't let him see your hand slip as you shift into park. Step out. Help him fit the hard, green backpack snugly on his back. Choke down the sting that has gathered against your throat, and nudge him along through throngs of squeals and light-up sneakers, down the sidewalk you mapped, past the escape paths you had him scavenge for, past the tree that's good for shelter, to the open yellow door of his classroom.

The room will brim with nervous giggles and boisterous recounts of summer stories. He'll move to the door before looking back at you, face eager, ready. Your skin will bite with the ache. You'll wonder if you've failed. Your eyes will shift to his backpack, straining to confirm a shield you know doesn't exist.

Then you'll nod. Urge him on. Watch him drop his backpack next to Ty Smith. Watch the young teacher greet him with unbound enthusiasm. Unclench your shoulders and step back from the door.

Wait. Breathe.

Turn, and leave him.

x x x

HILLARY SMITH is a native of Washington State, where her fiction has been published in regional and online magazines, including *Poplorish*, *The Corner Club Press*, and *Soundings Review*. She now lives across the country in the other Washington, working in communications at an environmental nonprofit. In the spare time she doesn't spend writing, Hillary enjoys noodling around on her saxophone and keyboard, cooking with too many vegetables, and watching corgis.

Author's Note

This was one of two stories I submitted together, and it wasn't the one I'd rallied myself behind. I'd been working on the other story for months; it had been workshopped by my writers' group, I'd pored over the language, and I genuinely preferred that piece. I had approached it how I typically approach writing any story: I write a draft, let it sit for a while, rework it again, have it read/workshopped, rework it, maybe have it read again, and then rework it for as many months (or years) as it takes for me to be remotely happy with it.

My process for writing "How to Return Your Child" didn't follow my typical pattern at all. This is, I'm sure, why I didn't believe it could truly be up to par. The idea for this piece had been content to percolate in my mind for a few months, occasionally popping up in my head before receding as I worked on other things. It was only when I decided to submit my other story to a couple of contests, including this one, and I saw I was allowed two submissions, that I thought back to the idea behind "How to Return Your Child." I realized how it needed to be written, and I thought, why not go for it now, and then I kind of just sprang into action. I think I had two days or something until the deadline for this contest, so I used both evenings I had to write this and then I submitted it along with the other story, not feeling very hopeful for its chances and certain my other story would be better received.

But when I went back to this piece a few weeks later, with the thought that now I would have time to make it something I was proud of, I realized I didn't want to change it that much. This was a bizarre, abnormal feeling for me to have. Usually I want to change everything in a work in progress, especially one that's only been through a couple of hurriedly composed drafts. But this piece resisted that. I found myself largely content with what was there on the page.

I'm not sure what the lesson here is. I'm still figuring out where I want my writing to go, so it feels odd for me to try to give others advice when I still feel like I'm flailing around. I still believe in multiple drafts and having people read your work and giving a piece the time it needs to breathe and be sharpened. But I guess this particular story has been a reminder that I don't always have to obsess over something for months for me to be happy with it, which is a mildly relieving thing to realize, to be honest. I think what this boils down to is, no matter what your typical process is as a writer, each story will be different. Each story will have its own needs, questions, inclinations. And I think you just have to listen.

hybrid interview: cathy ulrich

The Pieces Left Behind

In Cathy Ulrich's debut flash fiction collection, *Ghosts of You* (Okay Donkey Press, 2019), the murdered lady sets the plot in motion. These forty stories are all named in the same fashion, "Being the Murdered X," and begin with the same line: "The thing about being the murdered X is you set the plot in motion."They are all written in future tense, and they all use second-person perspective to directly address the victim. As such, this is one of the most formally and thematically unified collections I have ever read. The use of future tense—"Your house will become full after your death"—gives these stories the weight of psychic visions, a sense of inevitability. And the repetition of titles, opening lines, images, and language lend the pieces a dream-like quality, particularly if you read this collection compulsively, as I did.

The way Cathy Ulrich talks about writing, you might think she pulled these stories out of dreams. In her mini-interview with Tommy Dean, she said that a lot of her work "goes into the shredder" and "if the words aren't pretty damn close to their final form when I first write them, there's really no way they can be saved." In our email correspondence, she explained her writing process as follows: "The way it works is I hear a voice in my head telling the story. It might be me, it might be the muse, I don't know. But I hear the voice and I write down the words."

In my mind, it's clear to see where this trusty voice comes from: Ulrich engages with the flash form like few other writers do. In addition to single-handedly bringing us the wonder that is *Milk Candy Review*, she also serves as Fiction Editor for *Atlas and Alice* and for Parentheses Journal and shares flash from across the internet on Twitter @loki_writes. That much reading gets under your skin, makes words flow more freely through you.

This is a collection concerned with the pieces left behind in the aftermath of murder, as

communities must go on living around the sudden absence. While this collection highlights the harmful trope of either blaming or romanticizing murdered women, the stories are frequently touching portraits of well-intentioned people trying to go on after the inconceivable has ripped their lives in two—the before and the daunting ever-after….

—Kate Finegan

x x x

Kate Finegan: In your *CRAFT* author's note to "Being the Murdered Extra," you say, "I'm looking for the lost in these stories. I don't know if I will ever find them." I was wondering if you would expand upon that. Have you come closer to finding any of the lost by working through a complete collection?

Cathy Ulrich: I'm not sure I'll ever *completely* find the lost with these stories. I'm finding parts of them, pieces—snippets. Really, pieces are all that's left once a person is gone. I'm finding more and more of the things left behind as I continue writing these stories, but never the entirety of a person. And, of course, what I need to keep in mind as well is that I am creating these found things, these hints. So I'm not really finding anything, or anyone. I'm making them.

KF: I'm interested in how we articulate death as a loss for other people— "Sorry for your loss." Everyone in this collection (including the ever-present "you") is, in some way, navigating a loss. From a craft perspective, how do you approach circling a life-sized loss in such a compact space? Is it similar to how certain memories and gestures take on special magnitude in the face of loss?

CU: These stories focus on moments and pieces (I'm going to be using that word a lot, I think, "pieces") rather than telling the whole story. So rather than dealing with the loss in its entirety—which I'm not sure I could manage, not just as a writer, but as a person—I keep the focus really narrow, really microscopic. Which implies a larger whole, I think, for the reader. So they can fill in the spaces with their own ideas of what exactly has been lost and what exactly it means.

I like that idea of certain memories and gestures taking on a special magnitude—when I think of people I have lost, I definitely re-

member them not in their entirety (or not in the entirety that I *knew*, anyway, because who really knows all of a person?), but in specific moments, specific places. There's one specific person—someone I loved who was killed—and I always remember just this one moment at his apartment, the feel of his chipped front tooth bumping up against mine when we kissed on his leather couch. It's always that moment, it's always that piece of him that I carry with me.

These stories, I think, are just collections of these moments. These little pieces of the people we have lost. (*read more of the essay and Q&A in* CRAFT)

x x x

KATE FINEGAN lives in Toronto. She is Editor-in-Chief of *Longleaf Review*, novel/novella editor for Split/Lip Press, and author of the chapbooks *The Size of Texas* (Penrose Press, 2018) and *Ablaze* (Sonder Press, 2020). She is this year's winner of *PRISM International*'s Jacob Zilber Prize for short fiction, as selected by Kristen Arnett, and was awarded The Fiddlehead's 2017 fiction prize for a story which judge Rabindranath Maharaj called "pitch perfect" in its balance of "humour and pathos." She was runner-up for *The Puritan*'s Thomas Morton Memorial Prize for a story featuring chickens which, according to judge Heather O'Neill, "have the personality and depth of Dickensian characters." She has won *Phoebe*'s creative nonfiction and *Thresholds*' feature essay contests and been named a finalist by *Sewanee Review* and shortlisted for the Cambridge Short Story Prize and *Synaesthesia* flash fiction prize. She lives in Toronto.

x x x

CATHY ULRICH is the founding editor of *Milk Candy Review*, a journal of flash fiction. Her work has been published in various journals, including *Black Warrior Review*, *Passages North*, and *Wigleaf* and can be found in *Best Microfiction* 2019, *Best Small Fictions* 2019, and *Wigleaf*'s Top 50 Very Short Fictions 2017 and 2019. She lives in Montana with her daughter and various small animals.

girls' weekend

This story struck me as profoundly sad. A son and a father have lost the woman they love, and they don't quite know what to do with themselves. The father clumsily takes on the role of nurturer, while the son camouflages his pain by awkwardly performing a display of toxic masculinity. The two characters are armored with fat and muscle and hair and insecurity and bravado that makes them unable to simply say, "I love you." I worry about how they'll manage to make a life when so much will remain unspoken and walled between them.

—Benjamin Percy

content warning—eating disorders

A hunk of butter hits the fry pan. Then two pieces of bologna. Sparks of grease jump and sizzle. My dad's hands—massive, oil-stained, almost old—slash tiny gashes into the bubbles of perfectly pink meat. White bread and yellow mustard sit in silence at the kitchen table. So do I. Bleeding. A stubborn trickle running from my nose to my mouth. I press a wad of spotted toilet paper to my face, trying to remember the details of the fight. How Todd Lorenze called me fat again and how—even though he's an eighth-grader—I bull rushed him into the chain link fence out behind the little gym, and how he sucker punched me on the way down, tagging me right in the nose, and how everybody knew I got the best of his wiry burnout ass, and even though I was the one bleeding, Todd-fucking-Lorenze knows not to fuck with me again. This is the story I told my father. The one that made him smile. The one that is a complete lie.

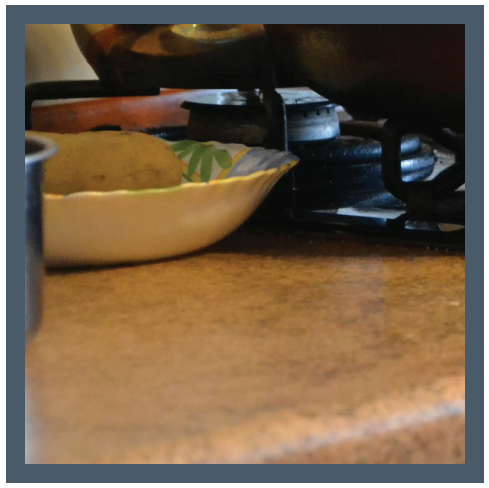
My dad's blue work shirt hangs open. An impossible display of belly hair—dense, dark and matted, and like the fuzzy side of a Velcro strap. It's a man's body. A blue-collar body. An early '80s, smoker, drinker, third-shifter body—a midlife, semi-broken body—with a surgical scar and a belly button that could hold a D battery. A large body that I cannot stop looking at mostly because I know someday it will be mine.

"Tigers," I say.

My dad nods. I don't know baseball. I don't like baseball. I don't understand baseball. But he does.

"Fucking suck."

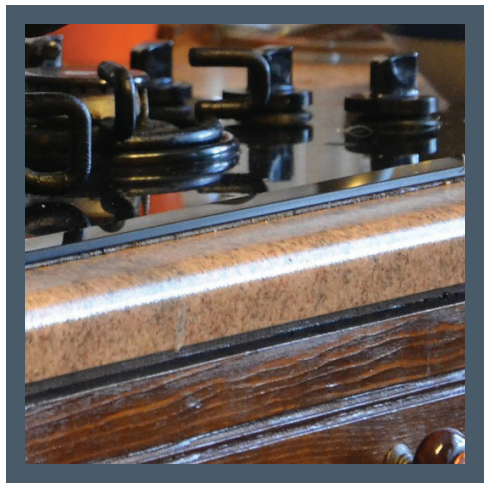
He nods again.



I can swear when my mom's not home. It's an unwritten rule, and she's on a girls' weekend, so I can fucking swear balls all I want. For seven straight nights my dad has made us fried bologna for dinner, and for seven straight nights I have found a way to drop an f-bomb in the kitchen—*fucking Reagan*, *fucking UAW*, *fucking Detroit Diesel cutting their fucking health care benefits*—anything I saw on the news. Anything I thought he'd like to hear me say. And I'd have follow-up things to say. Sometimes I'd write them down on little pieces of paper so that if he said something back, I'd be ready, and that would lead to a conversation, and once we crossed that line, that would *be* what we *do*. We'd talk about everything.

The bologna is bulging off the pan. Meat boobs. At this point I can't stop it. The sandwich will be made, and it will be placed in front of me. Four slices of medium cut supermarket bologna: 480 calories. Two slices of white bread: 165 calories. I know this because the CalorieKing *Vest Pocket Calorie Counter* I stole from Kroger lists every kind of lunchmeat there is and three different types of bread. I've memorized the numbers for my most common meals. As long as I do not drink the glass of whole milk my dad has already poured, it will only be forty-seven minutes of running in place in my room tonight (the CalorieKing *Vest Pocket Calorie Counter* estimates thirteen calories burned per minute based on my weight (162) and age (twelve)). I wish she was here. She would always find a way to make me soup and strawberries. A special dinner from the "Good Stuff" pages of the CalorieKing *Vest Pocket Calorie Counter*. Substitutions. "Swaps," she'd call them. She would do this quietly. Gently. Discretely. Not make a big deal of it. Sometimes I don't think my dad even knew.

Todd Lorenze did call me fat. That part is true. He also called me a



faggot. Said everybody knows why my mom left and that she isn't coming back. He said that's why I come to school dirty. He said that's how white trash smells. I didn't bull rush Todd Lorenze. I didn't tackle him into the chain link fence behind the small gym or teach him to never fuck with me again.

I screamed. As loud as I could. To kill the noise. To drown him out. I screamed until I burned. Until my temples tingled and hot sandpaper filled my throat. I screamed until my eyes danced, my vision pinned, and blood came rushing out of my nose, down my lip, and into my mouth. I screamed to see if she could still hear me. I screamed Mom.

My dad turns off the gas and places the sandwich in front of me. It is hot. Squishy. 645 calories. He sits down and begins to eat. And so do I. And there are no swaps. There are no substitutions. There is no soup. No strawberries. No help. No her.

I get up from the table. Still hungry. Still empty. I walk to the fridge and I grab the bologna and the tub of butter. I walk to the stove, strike a match, and wave it in front of the burner. As my father watches from the kitchen table, I unbutton my blue school shirt. A hunk of butter hits the fry pan.

x x x

STEVEN SIMONCIC's fiction and nonfiction work has appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Drift Magazine*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *New Millennium*, *Conclave*, *Ampersand*, *Hippocampus*, and *Spork Magazine* among others. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, was a finalist for the Susan Atefat Prize, and his creative nonfiction piece, "I Like You,"

was included in *The Best American Essays* 2016, guest-edited by Jonathan Franzen. As a playwright, Steven has had productions in Chicago, LA, NY, and London. He has been a semi-finalist at the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference and a finalist for the Woodward/Newman Drama Award. Steven's play *Toxic Donut* won the NAAA International Playwright Festival in London, and his play *Broken Fences* won an NAACP Theatre Award, eight Los Angeles SCENIE Awards, and was cited as one of *The Chicago Tribune*'s "Best of the Year" productions. Steven's play *Ghost Gardens* won the 2018 Detroit Repertory Theatre Subscribers Award, and his play *The Space Behind Your Heart* was a finalist for the 2018 Heideman Award from the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Steven holds a BBA from the University of Michigan, an MFA from Warren Wilson, and an MLA from the University of Chicago. He lives in Chicago with his wife, two kids, and two dogs. When he is not writing, Steven fronts the roots rock band Trickshooter Social Club.

Author's Note

I think this story is my humble attempt to wrestle and reckon with how, and what, we choose to communicate. What we show, what we hide, and the unknowable lives we shield and bury and obscure from each other, and often ourselves. At least that was the impulse that led me to try to write this story—it was the thing I hoped to explore. I usually start there.

Before I started writing, I had the image of a son and his father in a kitchen. Shipwrecked. Somehow stranded together. Making dinner. Making do. Once I landed that initial image, all the details in the story began to present themselves to me—the frying bologna, the blue work shirt. This story is not autobiographical, but a lot of the details are real. I ate fried bologna; I grew up in that kitchen. So I was able to use those artifacts I carry in my memory to sort of ground me in this fictional scene, and put me dead center in the middle of this imagined moment. That combination of the real and the imagined is how I cobbled and curated the world of my story.

Deeper into writing this piece, I realized that it needed to be a banal exchange, an innocuous moment, an ordinary scene, that ordinary people play out every evening, in every kitchen, in every town. There would be no histrionics over a fry pan. The tension would not be between a son and his father. The tension would be between a son and himself. That led me to the choice of writing in close first person. This enabled me to heighten and distort seemingly banal events so that everything is colored, bent, and refracted through the lens of a twelve-year-old boy desperately trying to figure things out.

As I got to know these characters, I came to believe that these are two guys who do not talk much, so I tried to have them express themselves through action and gesture. A small example: I never wanted my narrator to talk about his weight. Instead he steals a book from Kroger, uses it to count calories, and runs in place in his room to burn them. His dedication to counting calories not only tells us how he feels about his weight, it magnifies and distorts a bologna sandwich and a glass of whole milk to the point of turning them into symbols of everything he has lost since his mom went away.

Finally, lying and inevitability. It was a useful element of craft to have my narrator

be somewhat unreliable. He lies. To us. To his dad. To himself. But I think he comes clean as the story progresses. We see him give up his fictions, lose his delusions, and ultimately not only accept his current situation, but accept his fate, his inevitable conclusion. His final gesture—going to the stove and making another sandwich—is both his most resigned act, and possibly his most honest.

interview: benjamin percy

Benjamin Percy's new book, *Suicide Woods*, released last October with Graywolf Press, is a collection of eerie and visceral short stories that walks an electric tightrope of genre and literary fiction to the pulsing phantoms of boogeyman and creatures that stir in our hearts and minds. These stories exhibit Percy's willingness to pull back the curtain, to show us the underworkings of his own particular Oz. But here there're no gentle frauds, but monsters both animal and human, and with Percy, it's often hard to tell the difference between the fantastical and the suburban, both deadly when it comes to confronting them in the shadows.

—Tommy Dean

x x x

Tommy Dean: Four novels, three short story collections, a book on writing-craft, and numerous comic book series. What's your strategy for finishing a story, comic, or novel before another idea takes over your writing process?

Benjamin Percy: My schedule is pretty boring and basic. I get the kids on the bus every morning at seven. Then I sit down at the desk and hammer the keyboard until they get home at four. If I'm on a strict deadline, I'll open up the laptop again after they're in bed. So my standard is eight to ten hours a day, five days a week. Maybe I'll spend a few additional hours outlining and editing on the weekends.

I have a closet in my office that is tacked and taped full of ideas and blueprints. I'll play around with outlines sometimes for years before I actually begin to scratch out the sentences of a novel or a screenplay, so by then the story is often (mostly) formed in my head. That makes the writing process much swifter.

I'm always juggling multiple projects. But I have deadlines. So I can't not finish something. Or I don't get paid.

This, of course, wasn't always the case. I taught for over a decade. I have two kids

who are now in the double digits but were once squawling babies and crabby toddlers. So though my schedule is stable now, it used to be completely bananas, and I'd write in snatches whenever I could. When I was a visiting professor at Marquette—a thousand years ago—I used to make a pot of coffee at 11:00 p.m. and write until 3:00 a.m. and then wake up at 9:00 a.m. to prep for my classes. I might have deadlines now, but it used to be the case that I wrote without any certainty that I'd earn anything more than a rejection slip for the effort.

I love what I do. But I also work my ass off at it. Every day, even if I'm stressed out and buried with notes, I'm grateful as hell that this is how I'm able to support my family.

TD: Did you set out to write this collection? When did you know it was a book more than just a mass of stories? Was this process different than when you wrote/collected the stories for *The Language of Elk* and *Refresh, Refresh*?

BP: It wasn't a question of having enough stories. Otherwise I would have published another collection years ago. It was a question of having the right stories. The stories that make *SuicideWoods* a book instead of just a random heap of fiction. They're experiments in genre and form, but they're all united by themes of loneliness, fear, identity, the jarring intersections of civilization and wilderness, man in the wild and the wild in man.

TD: Some of the stories in this collection feel more speculative, more open to fabulist characters. Do you feel yourself leaning toward or being more open to the possibility of allegory? Does our murky present demand less realistic storytelling?

BP: Sometimes it's more fun and exciting to put a crack in the mirror of reality. And given how divisive and exhausting and bewildering our world feels right now, a speculative story often feels like a necessary escape hatch. If you look at *Her Body and Other Parties*, at *Friday Black*, at *Suicide Woods*, we're all wrestling with real world issues through a fantastic lens.

TD: I was intrigued by your use of the non-hu-

man point of view in "Heart of a Bear." Did this POV come naturally in the first draft?

BP: I've always loved Frankenstein, especially chapters six–eleven. This is when the creature, lost and afraid in the woods, huddles up next to a cabin. Here, hidden behind a woodpile, he spends the winter. He spies on the family that lives there and learns from them human language and customs and love. When he finally introduces himself to them, they reject him. He's pained and enraged and he destroys them. That's where the germ of this story came from.

TD: Do you think that readers expect a specific reading experience when they come to your work? Do you consider a certain type of reader while you're writing?

BP: A few years ago, I published a book of essays titled *Thrill Me*. It's all about blurring the lines between literary and genre fiction, writing stories that are both artfully told and compulsively readable. I'm trying to practice what I preach in the stories of *SuicideWoods*. I don't think anyone picks up my work thinking they're going to encounter a story about someone drinking tea and staring out the window while debating the meaning of life. I'm going to feed you some mayhem. (*read more in* CRAFT)

x x x

TOMMY DEAN lives in Indiana with his wife and two children. He is the author of a flash fiction chapbook entitled *Special Like the People on TV* from Redbird Chapbooks. He is the editor at *Fractured Lit*, and the former flash fiction section editor at *CRAFT*. He has been previously published in the *BULL Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Lascaux Review*, *New World Writing*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *New Flash Fiction Review*. His story "You've Stopped" was chosen by Dan Chaon to be included in *Best Microfiction* 2019. It will also be included in *Best Small Fictions* 2019. Find him @TommyDeanWriter on Twitter.

His interviews have been previously published in *New Flash Fiction Review*, *The Rumpus*, *CRAFT*, and *The Town Crier* (*The Puritan*).

epilogue

Sometimes the world makes you sick. You read the headlines, you log on to social media, you power on the TV, and feel like your blood is thickening with poison and a scar is worming across your heart. How do you respond—on a daily, personal level—to monstrous events beyond your control? Earthquakes topple cities. Bombs rip apart countries. Leaders threaten democracies. Viruses spread. Waters poison. Ice caps melt. Towers fall. Maybe you fight back. Or maybe you escape with laughter or drink or drugs or sex or sport. How do you carry on as a person when the world seems in ruins? It's a question we face daily, and this story explores it with lyrical beauty.

—Benjamin Percy

They staggered, stunned, into the fall, she and Teddy making giant vats of pasta and vegetarian burrito dinners to feed twenty-five, inviting home everyone they knew to eat, to drink, to stay over, please, we have a futon and warm, inviting beds. Sometimes they changed the sheets. Occasionally there were drugs. Every night a party, plastic cups with first names and last initials scrawled in permanent marker crowding the table, the countertop, the arms of the futon, the bathroom sink. So many parties. A week of parties, a month of parties. Parties that wanted to be last week's parties, last month's, last year's; The Strokes and Weezer and the *Hedwig* soundtrack on the CD player, a towel at the foot of the door to contain the pot, the noise, the desperation. Disorienting, to stand on the roof and smoke cigarettes after midnight, at first in T-shirts, later in hoodies and then jackets and scarves, gloves with the fingers cut off, staring resolutely only to the right and the still-shining Empire State Building, lighted now at all hours to provide such things as hope and inspiration to the men and women a few blocks away who were doing what, exactly? digging? sorting? tagging? "It might be time to quit smoking," Teddy ventured, and Jane gestured with her cigarette. "This," she said, "is cleaner and safer and healthier than that." *That*, the air, the wind, the particles. The streets, the people, the cars, the buildings were no longer covered in that thick layer, but, "The question is," Teddy said, "matter, *energy* being neither created nor destroyed, where did it go?" "We are film majors," Jane answered. "Stop."

Late winter and the parties did stop. Cold, dark, inward, solitary, correct. They fixed each other vodka and cranberry juice in leftover red plastic cups as congratulations for getting through a half day of classes, for riding the subway uptown and then back down, for

not weeping, or for weeping only a little bit, for hearing a truck backfire, for being, well, yes actually, a little thirsty, now that you mention it. New Year's Day, she offered $10 to a woman sitting on a plastic bucket on Canal Street for two turtles, bottlecap-tiny, mottled brown and green, the smallest, the weakest—delusions of rescue—and so she shouldn't have been so surprised, Teddy said, when a week later one, followed swiftly by his brother, succumbed. To what, she didn't know, and spoke darkly about air, atmosphere, poison invisible, inevitable, hanging over the city. Teddy emptied the turtle house down the drain, released the bodies down the garbage chute. He handed her a tissue and made her a drink. No more cooking. They ate brie, thick hunks spread on Carr's water crackers, and Entenmann's chocolate-glazed donuts, and apples dipped in peanut butter, and blueberry bagels from the deli next door, sucking the melted butter out between their teeth and shivering against the wind that swirled up who knew what—they knew what—outside their windows.

Spring in stops and starts, tender Saturdays and yearning Wednesdays. Damp hanging in sidewalk cracks, snaking around cobblestones, settling into old bricks and creaky joints and cold noses. Nevertheless it was time, Teddy announced, for the winter coat wearing to stop. His hair a wild mess of curls, tentacles gently waving. Her Army surplus jacket slumped over the armchair, three sizes too big and Rorschached with dried coffee. "Jane," he continued. "We are reaching the season of flip-flops. Of T-shirts and, for you, the season of the skirt. Bare legs. Beers on terraces. Sangria on the roof." He cracked the windows open and she shivered them closed. "It is still," she said, "indoor sweater weather," she herself wrapped in a

giant pea-soup cardigan, pockets a fire hazard of matches and tissue pieces, dimes and bitten-down pencil nubs. Outside, the particles were no longer but could not possibly have simply disappeared, she had always agreed with Teddy on that point, but the question then remained, where did they go? Teddy standing in the middle of the room, between Jane and their silent TV, stretching his arms up over his head. “What we need,” he said, “is a physics major.”

But even a physics major, Jane thinks, could not stop the summer. She breathes the air, park walks at lunch. Licks chocolate soft-serve off her wrist, crushes the sticky wafer cone between her teeth. Watches stockbrokers slinging suit coats over shoulders. Jugglers at the fountain. Babies. Bubbles. She sits in the grass. Feels the sun, hot, hotter. Summer is strawberries and sangria and sunflowers, Teddy pulling rabbits from his hat and releasing butterflies from his upturned palms, and it will not work, it cannot work, because she cannot let it, because she has yet to pay. For laughing her way up the stairs that morning. For noticing the pigeons swooping and diving, their gray backs silver in the sunlight that was then still reflected off the sides of the buildings, for noticing and for finding them pretty. For all the cigarettes of the day, packs of them, for every breath of her own smoke and the boundaries it delineated. For the moments she’d turned away, hunching her shoulders and cupping her hands to light a match. For finally not turning away, for needing to see, straining to see. For watching. For watching, but not close enough. Because what, finally, had happened? Everything was there and then everything wasn’t, and what did it mean and where did they go? She takes a deep breath, feels ash in her throat. She waits for an answer. How much longer? She waits for years. She’s waiting still.

x x x

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Author's Note

"Epilogue" began more than a decade ago. I sat down intending to write about Teddy and Jane, but instead produced a two-page wall of text describing my own memories and impressions of living in lower Manhattan in the year after 9/11. I was a college sophomore at the time, and, together with friends, watched the attack on the World Trade Center from a dorm room balcony.

I revisited the piece a few years later, this time with enough distance to filter my own experiences through the lens of the characters. The events of the story haven't changed much since that early draft, but I tinkered with the language—sentence by sentence, word by word—for a very long time. I wanted the language to reflect the characters' disorientation as they attempted to understand an experience that was both intensely personally horrifying and also a national tragedy.

"Epilogue" became a piece I would turn to in between working on other projects, make a few changes, save, and put away. For a long time (years), the biggest problem was the ending; I tried concluding the piece in so many different ways, but nothing I tried felt authentic.

There's no great turning point here, just an eventual realization: that the ending was giving me so much trouble because there is no ending. The deaths on 9/11 don't make sense. They never have. They never will. Jane can never find a resolution; she just lives with the lack of it. That realization led me to the final few sentences, and those sentences, at long last, felt like an honest way to close the piece.

And yet, and yet. Even honesty can be slippery. I finished this piece in August 2019. Now it is April 2020, and the world is stumbling through a new tragedy, one both slower moving and wider spread than 9/11. Jane's ending still feels honest to me, but it also feels very much of the time before COVID-19. If I were to write an ending for Jane today, I imagine that she'd be wrestling with a different kind of truth: that we never do know what's going to happen next, and that uncertainty can be terrifying. But if we sit with it for a while, hold it up to the light at just the right angle, maybe there can be some hope in it, too.

what you know

When someone yells "Boom!" on a sailboat, you are about to get hit by a bar at the base of the sail, unless you duck.

"Hard alee" also means something like "duck," but to the side. You never remember whether it's to the right or left.

"The sun is over the yardarm somewhere" means that it's okay for your father to open a beer.

A yardarm isn't a thing you know.

At some point, your father will throw seat cushions, tethered by ropes, into the lake, and you and your older brother will jump overboard to ride them. The cold of the water will be a full-body slap.

Your little sister and brother will stay on the boat with your father.

Your mother will not be on the boat. Your mother is not stupid, no matter what your father tells her, or how often.

You will never hate your mother.

Your father will smoke his Parliaments to the nub and then flick the nubs into the water. The nubs will float past you and your older brother, along with the occasional Slim Jim wrapper and, eventually, beer cans.

Whatever a yardarm might be, you'll believe it must be very low.... (*read more in* CRAFT)

—Heather Aronson

mama had a baby and her head popped off

…and poor Dada had no glue to put her back together again.

He long suspected Mama was, in the kindest way he could think to describe her, a skin bag to hold the lungs and liver inside. The rest of her was a mystery. Her head flying across the room while he was digging into his egg and pepper breakfast only furthered his belief. She was some *thing* that transported guts and goo from the market to the kitchen and back again, like a dancing milkmaid on the wheel of a German clock. Now he knew that she was made up of many different parts, and each one was likely to go flying off with enough pressure. The force of having the baby in the middle of their kitchen must have snapped her head loose.

"It's dusty down here," her head told him. It had rolled behind the couch and, as such, was a little muffled.

Once or twice, he imagined her neck as one big 'ol screw where she would fasten a different head on each morning. Some of her heads were kinder than others. He liked the one that stood behind him and whispered her wishes for his good day before he went to work, the one who licked the skin of his earlobe. He was not as fond of the one who told him she was tired. He, too, was tired. Everyone was tired. It was not worth mentioning.

"I wish I could see you," her head said. "Is that the baby crying?"

There should have been more blood. When he accidentally nicked his neck with a letter opener one winter ago he bled all over their wooden floor. The head she wore that day did not like those stains one bit….

—A.A. Balaskovits

shy, solitary animals

She drove down Cherry Hill Road, far enough away from the spot where that little girl's body was found, naked, dumped by a man who stole her from her bedroom. There was a bend in the road she liked, a turnout with a wide expanse of valley below. The fog was in from the coast, sea-salting the air as it stalked the hills.

She pulled her mother's '57 Corvette into the gravel. The gift a widow gives herself.

"Here?" he asked.

Earlier that day, a school assembly, rows of gawky teenagers seated on the gym floor. They walked a mountain lion onto the stage, chained, a wide metal collar around her neck. They said you had to be aware at all times when out in the hills. Mountain lions are silent killers, they said.

"Why don't they have an assembly about men stealing girls from their bedrooms," the girl next to her had whispered.

Female mountain lions are called queens, they said.

The queen yawned.

In the car, "Morning Dew" on the radio.

She straddled his lap.

"Did you know," she said, "the Grateful Dead didn't write this song? It was written by a woman. Bonnie Dobson. Everyone thinks it's about lovers parting the morning after, but it's not."…

—Kristin Bonilla

house, in order

"Good bones," the agent says. "These old houses. See?"

We don't see bones. We see how the jacaranda haloes purple all around, how tulips cry like tears from out of the soil but upside down. We see how the river at the garden's edge runs silver between the eucalypt trunks, breathing in and out, one long, slow, tidal respiration. We see, this is what we want.

Including this black crow sitting on the jacaranda's rough dark bark, crouching like a cat, crying like a baby, driving the dog crazy. He's just a puppy, needs time to house train, time needed, too, for the house, for our plans to polish floors, screw tight the finials and paint, to get the house in order.

Soon he is a lithe black dog always with a purpose, biting insects from the air, barking at the neighbours, crushing lizards in the liriopes we planted by the jacaranda that is too big now, too full of treachery, its roots crushing pipes as it seeks out water in the heat of unrelenting summers that pass in number while we spend our time walking by the river; while the wind, shifting the leaves of the eucalypts, is sometimes cool but mostly hot enough to the crisp the roses. We cut down the jacaranda. The crow cries.

Then fire comes almost to the door making the air sharp and dangerous. It burns down to the waterline on the other side of the river. Tangerine embers dart over water. We are on the roof blocking the gutters and filling them till they are a waterfall, till the sun rims red and the ash of dead things settles in lungs, on window ledges, on trees. And when it is over we are left grey as dust, sitting on the steps watching lazy coils of smoke slow now in the still air, listening to the house cough, seeing how the garden suffers….

—J.Anne DeStaic

the four seasons

She was sixty-nine, he was seventy. In the kitchen she baked an apple and sprinkled it with cinnamon. He drank iced coffee and did his Sean Connery impression. She watched him pull the Pontiac out of the garage and wash it and wax it and take photos of it. He tapped on his phone and in a few minutes the car was officially for sale, online, a part of their history up for grabs. She got a root canal that cost more than their mortgage payment, back when they had a mortgage. He bought a new phone that cost more than their honeymoon, Niagara Falls. She received another brochure in the mail about twin cemetery plots and headstones. He wondered if when people looked at him they thought he was still in his sixties. She watched the neighborhood kids wait at the curb for the school bus. He scraped the dead skin off his heels. She stopped watering the house plants. He didn't notice. She watched 7 Eyewitness News at Noon while dust particles danced in the light. He stalked his great-niece's Instagram looking for photos of his estranged brother. She bought an old typewriter and displayed it on the mantle. He planted broad beans in the garden. She took the cordless phone into the bathroom and called back interested buyers and said the car was no longer for sale. He voted straight-ticket Democrat. She watched liver spots appear overnight like crop circles. He quit red meat, cold turkey. She read the newspaper and told him she was glad she never had to be a reporter in this economy. He said he kind of wished he were still teaching, just to have something to do. In bed she paused the movie they were watching and said that adult children seemed like the worst, don't they, just the most ungrateful people. He nodded toward the TV and said he liked that Kristen Wiig, and is it pronounced wig or weeg.…

—Trent England

apocalypse now?

The end of the world takes *forever*. People shrug off the threats, turn a blind eye. Like our neighbor, Mr. Easton, who's recently repurposed his bomb shelter into a man cave—a new favorite spot for the neighborhood dads to watch football and down Budweiser. My household's no different. Whenever my mom forgets something from Kroger, she pilfers a can of *whatever* from our locked, in-case-of-an-emergency supply closet. Our stockpile of batteries has dwindled (at last count) to three packs. And, okay, I've had my fair share of visits to the closet, too—most recently for a candle, because my friend Samantha and I are super into séances; we have successfully contacted no less than three spirits, thank you very much.

Also? Apocalypses are annoyingly unpredictable. Will it be a giant meteor? Plague? Nuclear war? To be honest, the end of the world is boring.

On the night before Halloween, Samantha comes over to watch *Nightmare on Elm Street*. We order Dominos. After two slices each, we knock on my brother's door. "Stevie the weenie!" we yell. He opens up, half-asleep and wearing his *Avengers* PJs. We carry him back to my room; I hold him down as Samantha applies the mascara and lipstick. We almost have my old confirmation dress pulled over his shoulders when Dad barges in and rescues him.

"Let's circle up," Samantha says later, pausing the movie.

We sit cross-legged on the carpet. Three candles burn in the middle of our two-person circle. Shadows dance on the walls. We join hands….

—Matt Hall

delete the ladder

God puts the family in the swimming pool. Then he deletes the ladder. The Mommy and Daddy wave their rubbery arms back and forth, emergency thought bubbles sprouting from their scalps. Green diamonds spin overhead, souring to gold as they wade around the perimeter of the pool in search of an exit. They are not imaginative enough to hoist themselves up and out. The children drown in their hot pink bikinis and polka dot swim trunks, shouting gibberish at the sky. They regenerate as ghosts and have free rein over the house even though it's past their bedtime, because they are spirits and the Mommy and Daddy are stuck in the pool. The sky is black and starry.

Someone has ordered pizza. The delivery man rings the doorbell and paces on the doorstep, shrugging every few minutes. No one answers, but he can't leave because four solid walls have materialized around him. He pisses on the ground but does not drop the pizza box. He's here on a job, after all. The Grim Reaper glides to the edge of the pool, extending a long skeletal finger. God presses a few keys and the family is a million dollars richer. The Mommy and Daddy celebrate as they drown, and the Reaper claims the Daddy.

God places a new ladder in the swimming pool and the Mommy rushes out, a red diamond churning atop her head. Her thoughts bubble with internal conflict; she can't decide whether to grieve her family or celebrate her newfound wealth. The children's ghosts float across their old bedroom, unable to pick up their own toys. A door appears in one of the walls that enclose the Pizza Man. The Mommy stumbles through, babbling some nonsense about the Grim Reaper. The Pizza Man turns to the Mommy and observes that she is wearing a black bikini. The Mommy observes that the Pizza Man has pissed on the floor. . . .

—Kira Homsher

pregnancy test

Multiple Choice: Please select and circle the best possible response.

1. You suspect you are pregnant when
   a. the baby exits your vagina
   b. your period is late
   c. a slight breeze against your shirt causes your boobs to scream
   d. you crave a sleeve of Original Pringles speared onto a Twizzler whip

2. Peeing on a plastic stick
   a. feels weird
   b. feels liberating
   c. oh my God
   d. + or -, pink oval or white, the placental hormone does not lie

3. Solve the analogy: *your sister's abortions in high school:yours :: mortal sins:forgiveness*
   a. 6:0 :: 6:0
   b. ?:? :: dog:baby
   c. too many:judgment :: murder:redemption
   d. I wish we still shared a room, played Barbies

4. Your boyfriend Jesse
   a. wants a baby
   b. 's name ornaments the margins of your notebooks in elaborate doodles
   c. is a baby
   d. broke up with you last week…

—Melanie J. Malinowski

stone cold fox

I don't know the scientific names of plants and flowers, she says. But I can tell you how to ride the bus from, let's say, Hunter's Point to Stonestown Mall. She breathes in and out three times, but he only stares at her, so she points at his backpack on the ground and tries again. She says: I probably can't fill in the blanks on your quiz about Greek gods or the food pyramid, but I have private deities and secret snacks from my cousins in the Philippines, and I will share both with you, if you ask.

He's not sure what to make of her, this fellow eleven-year-old whose vocabulary includes the word "deities" and whose mother lets her wear gigantic gold hoop earrings and T-shirts that say things like "stone cold fox." He wants to touch the tip of her nose with his own, wants to trace the lines on her palms. He stares at a spot in the sky just above her head. He understands that she is waiting for him to speak. He manages: I already have a best friend.

Oh? I don't remember asking if you do or if you don't, she says. She flips her hair over her shoulders and considers him, her gaze level and sincere. He can barely stand it. She's like an X-ray machine; she sees the white of his bones, the rush of his blood. You sure about this? she says at last. I'm thinking this could be the start of something epic. She makes her big eyes extra big; she raises her dark brows.

Yeah, I'm sure, he says. He's not really sure at all, only desperate to free himself from her scrutiny. He picks up his backpack and swings it over his shoulder.

What was that you said?

I said I'm sure….

—Veronica Montes

citrus

Trent wakes to the sound of Rosie in the kitchen, shuffling flatware, banging pots. Wind howls in the chimney. Sleet pings the window. He rolls over, pulls up the quilt. To sleep again would be best but now the neighbor's boy Jeb is out, splitting logs in the feeble light. This brings Smithy to mind, the way his cheeks used to flame with the cold. Funny, back home it was never really cold, not like this.

"She's done it again!" Rosie cries, pitching through the bedroom door. "The kitchen's a fucking fruit stand!"

She tosses a key lime on the quilt. Trent sits up to see behind her. Sure enough, the big speckled bowl on the linoleum table teems with lemons. On the countertop lie kumquats in green netting, a flat of clementines, a sack of Ruby Reds and three jars of marmalade, twelve ounce. Their taste of Florida sunshine, courtesy of Trent's sister Lila. And why not? Lila drove north from Daytona through the night, the foul weather. Would've brought the whole damn orchard if she could manage a truck. Lila figures they're homesick. In a way she's right but Rosie is bad to lay blame in all the wrong places. She forgets Lila knew the Smithy the world knew, charming and carefree 'til the day he vanished.

Her eyes restless, Rosie searches for her boots, the lined ones Trent cleaned last night under a bright bitter moon. She finds them in the closet, touching toe-to-heel the way she likes.

"For God's sake, tell her I won't have it," she says, lacing up by the bedpost.

"It's Christmas," Trent says, shrugging. "Lila don't mean nothing."…

—Martha Mattingly Payne

this is how it happens

At night, the houses around the estuary all glow with the pale yellow light of candles. Inside them, shadows move against plastic curtains and wooden walls. Tall palm trees surround everything and everywhere there is the excited chitter chatter of nighttime creatures. I look for Bladimir's older sister, Xiomara, in the darkness of his house. I can see her faint outline moving inside, like a ghost.

Bladimir is already swimming inside the dirty water, floating lazily on his back. A short distance from him, dark waste empties into the estuary from a large sewer pipe. Everything smells like shit, but I strip down to my underwear anyway and jump in. The full moon is in the water next to me, rippling.

He and I play for a long time before Xiomara calls us inside.

She is so pretty. Whenever she looks at me, the green of her eyes swallows me, traps me. "Hola," she says when I come out of the water. I can't help but smile.

"Come with me," she says. "You need to rinse your body. Let me help you find the well." The clouds have begun to cover the moon. The night has darkened.

"Take your underwear off," she says. When I don't move she reaches toward me.

"You're little," she says. "It doesn't matter."

She grabs my wrist. The estuary is in her hair, inside her clothes.

No," I say. "I can do it. I can do it myself."…

—Andrés Reconco

to assume a horizontal position
to have sexual intercourse
to remain inactive
to be in a helpless or defenseless state
to have a place

It happens on a Thursday. We are watching the news on the television in the women's changing room at the Y, after I've swum my laps.

Today as I swam, I imagined a gunman slipping through the door and shooting all of us.

We were sitting ducks. Almost, because… not sitting, and not ducks. In the shower, I soaped over the chlorine and fear.

Now I'm dressed and my hair is wet, and I'm balanced on the arm of the couch in the changing room. Next to me, also facing the screen, is a woman with a baby in a stroller. There is an older woman sitting on the armchair next to her. We are all watching the news. The woman making the accusation is believable, say the experts. In the changing room, the three of us exhale.

Then the man speaks into the microphone. He is enraged. He is offended. His name has been totally and permanently destroyed. His family is in pain. His family has suffered. The man's face is red. He spits when he speaks. This is when it happens.

A small, dark something escapes his lips. A poppy seed? I watch it spray, then float straight toward the camera. It grows closer, and I see it is L-shaped, like the first letter of my name. With the sound of a small puncture, (the baby lets out a cry) it sails, finger-sized, right through the screen and hovers an inch from my lips….

—Lynn Schmeidler

lost

"You're lost, aren't you?" That's what Tony would be saying now. And then he'd say, "I'm right, aren't I. Admit it." And most of the time he would be. That's what he does. He sets you up. And you always follow his lead.

You say it to yourself. *Lost*. Not aloud. And yet your tongue forms the hollow shape of the word. Feels the weight of its emptiness, like a stone inside your mouth.

The kids are oblivious of course, as only kids can be. They find a termite mound and then they're playing hide and seek; their faces red and sweaty. They'll want a drink soon and maybe they'll see there's not much left and ask how far it is back to the car. But probably they won't. They'll carry on – unconcerned and heedless. Effortlessly so.

They'll leave you alone in your growing doubt. They won't have seen your hesitation half an hour back when the trail went left as well as right. You'd stood there at the forking path while they ran rings around the thick trunk of an old red gum. You'd looked up at a heavy bough, hoping for a grinning cat to answer all your questions; to tell you which way you ought to go from here. But you know the cat would have asked you where you want to head, and you know what you would have answered. That you don't really care. Not any more than Alice did. So it doesn't much matter which way you go. You're bound to end up somewhere.

That's what gives Tony the shits about you. Your aimlessness. The way you wander off, but then keep coming back for more. He's even said it.

"Have some pride!" he said one morning when you came around to his new flat. He can't respect a woman who doesn't respect herself, he said….

—Michelle Wright

the gorgons

We do it for the cameras. They film us everywhere we go. They film where we get drinks, where we work out, where we fuck. We let the cameras roll when we get our faces put on, our hair dyed, our skin spliced and stretched tightly behind our ears. They even film us where we shit, but that content is paid-subscription only.

When you have seven beautiful sisters, men are both paramount and ancillary. We tell each other, find someone rich, find someone famous, find someone who will elevate the family. But don't lose yourself in the men. The men are just foils to show the world that we are desirable. That we are less so objects of affection, than of desire, infatuation, and deep obsession. That is all the men do.

We were born several years apart with completely different bodies and faces.

Slowly, though, they have all come to resemble that of our eldest sister, Kali. She is, after all, the "hot" one. Klarissa, unfortunately, was born with small tits, a beak nose, and a weak chin. It took years for her to get to where she is today, but we hear everyone say that she looks just like Kali now, except younger.

We create empires from nothing—fortified smoothies, jade tummy rollers, pay-to-play apps that teach children how to gamble. The men enable us to produce beautiful heirs. Their births are filmed so the world can witness the power that we have and keep reproducing, over and over. A terrifying cycle that is breathtaking to behold….

—Stephanie Yu

about the finalists

HEATHER ARONSON earned her MFA in Fiction from the University of Arizona, and was a Fellow in Fiction at the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Creative Writing. Her short stories have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Witness*, as well as in other journals. She lives in Pittsburgh, PA.

A.A. BALASKOVITS is the author of *Magic For Unlucky Girls* (SFWP) and the forthcoming *Strange Folk You'll Never Meet* (SFWP). Her stories and essays have appeared in *Story*, *The Missouri Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Okay Donkey*, and others. She is the Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Cartridge Lit*. On Twitter @aabalaskovits

KRISTIN BONILLA is a fiction writer living in Houston, TX. Her work has been nominated for *Best Small Fictions*, Best of the Net, and the *Wigleaf* 2019 Top 50 Longlist. She is a Flash Fiction Editor at *JMWW*. Follow her @kbonilla and read more at kristinbonilla.com.

J.ANNE DESTAIC is a writer living in Sydney Australia by the Georges River. She has published short stories and poetry in literary journals and anthologies and is working on her first novel. J.Anne is a Paediatrician and the stories she writes reflect her experience in working with children.

TRENT ENGLAND's short fiction has been appearing here and there since 2009. He is a Pushcart nominee and a *Best Microfiction* 2020 winner. He lives in Boston, where he is also a stay-at-home dad. He can be found online at tengland.com and on Twitter at @papermotel.

MATT HALL holds an MFA in Fiction from Virginia Tech. His fiction has appeared in *Redivider*, *The McNeese Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, and is forthcoming from *Sequestrum*. He teaches at Monmouth University, and is currently working on a horror/suspense novel.

A Philadelphia native, KIRA HOMSHER is currently an MFA candidate at Virginia Tech, where she has worked for *the minnesota review*. She won *Phoebe* Journal's 2020 Nonfiction Contest and her writing also appears in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Ghost City Review*, *Unbroken Journal*, and others. You can find her at kirahomsher.com.

about the finalists

MELANIE J. MALINOWSKI earned a PhD in Creative Writing and Literature—University of Houston; an MA in English—University of New Mexico; and a BA in English—Pennsylvania State University. Her essay "Stone Cold Fox" was published in *Hippocampus Magazine*. Her essay "Arena Rock" won the Non-Fiction Prize for the Don't Talk To Me About Love contest. A native Delawarean, Melanie lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband, Andy, daughter, Echo Mariposa, and dog, Egypt.

VERONICA MONTES is the author of the chapbook *The Conquered Sits at the Bus Stop, Waiting* (Black Lawrence Press, 2020) and the collection *Benedicta Takes Wing & Other Stories* (Philippine American Literary House, 2018). Find her flash fiction at *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *CHEAP POP*, *Lost Balloon*, and elsewhere.

Author of the blog, "My Mother's Attic," and a graduate of the Sewanee Writers' Workshop, MARTHA MATTINGLY PAYNE's work has been published in *Snake Nation Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, and *Women on Writing*. She's thrilled that "Citrus" was named a finalist in *CRAFT*'s Flash Fiction Contest. A mother of four, she lives in Atlanta with her husband.

ANDRÉS RECONCO is originally from El Salvador. He immigrated to The United States when he was twelve and has lived in Los Angeles ever since. He is a High School English teacher for a local public school in the center of Korea Town.

LYNN SCHMEIDLER's fiction has appeared in *KR Online*, *Conjunctions*, the *Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, among other places. She is the recipient of a Sewanee Writers' Conference Tennessee Williams scholarship in fiction and has been awarded residencies at Vermont Studio Center and Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Schmeidler is currently completing a short story collection.

MICHELLE WRIGHT lives in Melbourne, Australia. Her short stories and flash fiction have won many awards and been widely published in Australia, the UK, and the US. Her short story collection, *Fine*, was published in 2016. Her first novel, *Small Acts of Defiance*, is due out in March 2021.

STEPHANIE YU lives in Los Angeles with her husband Nate. She is a lawyer for the State of California.

flash fiction contest

Thank you to every writer who entered and congratulations
to our winners and finalists!

The CRAFT Flash Fiction Contest is an annual contest,
returning each year in September.

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