



## CONTENTS

COVER ART – *TOE KEEN*

[HTTPS://ATOEKENEFFORT.WEEBLY.COM/](https://atoekeneffort.weebly.com/)

P. 2 – FROM THE EDITORS

P. 3 – RAINBOWS WHEREVER YOU  
LOOK – *ANDREW KOZMA*

P. 6 – CELERY MOTHER –  
*KEN MACGREGOR*

P. 8 – GREY MATTER –  
*W. H. HACKEL IV*

P. 11 – DOWN TO EARTH –  
*SOREN JAMES*

P. 15 – MARS ROVER DIARY EXCERPT:  
SOL 1022-1027 – *DAVID HAMMOND*

P. 16 – IN THE KILN –  
*ANDREW KOURY*

P. 19 – REMEMBRANCES –  
*KIT FALBO*

P. 22 – EMPTY SIGNIFIERS -  
*SAM CAMERON-MCKEE*

P. 26 – UNPICKED –  
*ROY GRAY*

P. 27 – BLIND FAITH –  
*BRUCE GOLDEN*

P. 29 – RECORDING OF A STREET  
PREACHER AT 5TH AND CHESTNUT –  
*J. DUSTAN STOKES*

P. 33 - THE FARMERS AND THE  
FARMED – *WILLIAM C POWELL*

### **REBUTTALS**

P. 36 – ALLEN LANG TAKES TEA WITH  
GREAT GOD ALMIGHTY –  
*ALLEN LANG*

P. 40 – THE MAN IN THE WHITE  
APRON - *BUPINDER SINGH*

P. 42 – NIGHT OF THE FROG –  
*TRACY LYALL*

## FROM THE EDITORS

Dear readers,

Welcome to the inaugural edition of *the Antihumanist*. The works within provide, we hope, a sampling platter of themes related to Antihumanism: from the anti-scientism of *Rainbows wherever you look* to the posthumanism of *Recording of a Street Preachers*; from the sombre apocalyptic outlook of *Remembrances* to the more light-hearted absurdism of *Down to Earth*.

It is difficult to pin down Antihumanism: it is defined by negation. Antihumanism is like the alcove left once a statue has been shattered, the canvas created by whiting out a page of text, the warm glow of a burning building. Thus, as with many such negative concepts, perhaps it is better to define its opposite.

With roots in Greco-Roman philosophy and Abrahamic theology, Humanism asserts humanity's central role in the universe. It declares the universality of human ethical paradigms. It privileges human interests to the expense of all else. It is the matrix of popular values that exploded forth from the European Enlightenment, going global with the 20th century fall of empires and rise of ideology.

With new science in the last two centuries and the failure of the 'End of History' following the Cold War, the claims of Humanism are looking increasingly shoddy. Antihumanism's role is to challenge the validity of this shibboleth. Shorn of any other unifying characteristic, there is little else to unify the motley assortment of thinkers and writers that make up Antihumanism's membership.

Yet, it would not be in the spirit of this publication to turn away high-quality works that defend the humanistic project or work with humanistic themes – and as such, we have included three such pieces in the final section of this edition under the heading of *Rebuttals*.

It has been a pleasure putting together this edition, and we hope you enjoy the fruits of our collective labours.

### **Editing team**

*Lead* – Tim Dubber

*Deputy* – Samuel Hutchinson

## *RAINBOWS WHEREVER YOU LOOK*

*By Andrew Kozma*

As you know, it all started when we got rid of the mosquito. A bunch of fevers wiped out just like that. No more annoying buzzing in your ear while you're trying to sleep. No more waking up covered in red welts, your lover calling you a Martian landscape. No more swarms attacking your cookout as dusk descends. No more splattering your clothes with your own slightly digested blood.

Yeah, all those benefits promised and delivered. And for the briefest amount of time, those benefits were enough. Then the collapse came.

Oh, it was a minor collapse, as collapses go. A slight downtick in the bat population. Fewer dragonflies. And those declines meant a boom in other pests, not as overtly annoying as mosquitoes, but more so when their populations exploded, like the lovebug swarms clogging Florida highways and clouds of gnats making the sidewalks impassable.

It wasn't unbearable. It wasn't the end of the world, right? Right. Just the end of a pest. A parasite. An annoyance throughout the temperate and tropical climates now gone, so people could – God, for once – enjoy nature without having to slather themselves in toxic chemicals.

Cows. It was when cow hooves began to turn to jelly that people started to panic. Not just the scientists, but the scientists most of all. You can see the videos online of them appearing on the news as experts on the new disease and, after a few questions, just blubbing, completely breaking down.

Of course, you know all that. The news was plastered for weeks with pictures of starving cows, legs slipping out from under them. The price of beef went through the roof. Veterinarian prosthetologists created fake hooves made from fiberglass that could be screwed directly into the ends of the legs, and they assured the public that, despite the constant, ceaseless mooing, the replacement hooves were painless.

You know that because everyone knows that. And you also know, probably, word gets around, that you have this job because the last person retired.

That's a euphemism. He's dead.

Even that's a euphemism. He committed suicide.

And even that. He laid down in the cow pens and let himself be stepped on by the new, sharp, self-honing hooves he helped the public accept. He helped the public accept those shiny and feel-good hooves because that distracted the public from the cause behind the jelling, which would have been an admission that mosquitoes were more necessary than we believed.

By the way, your predecessor's funeral costs were completely covered under our death and dismemberment plan. I know you were wondering.

But the mosquitoes. Yes. You're wondering about that, too.

It turns out mosquitoes were part of a life cycle for a symbiotic organism that lived in cows but needed mosquitoes to reproduce and transport it to new cows. And this symbiont produced a waste inimical to the life of certain pathogenic bacteria, which – as we now know – results in jellied cow hooves.

Good question, and good point. Why didn't we know this before?

Counterpoint. Why would we study the interaction between mosquitoes and cows? There was no reason to. We knew mosquitoes carried diseases, and those diseases affected cows, so research poured into protecting cows from those diseases and the mosquitoes that brought them. But every cow was bitten. It's just not preventable. And so, the symbiont lived on.

We isolated the symbiont, but couldn't get it to reproduce. Something in the gut of the mosquito was needed, and we don't have them anymore. Enjoying that blueberry ice pop? It's made from jellied hooves. Tastes almost purely of berry, with only the faintest hint of bovine, right? One of your first duties will be making these palatable to the public. We need to convince them that something good has come out of this, and what better way—you can have this idea for free—than to combat the fear of starvation rising from the lack of readily available beef?

Maybe focus on the colour. Maybe on how cold foods have been scientifically linked to longer lifespans. Whatever you need, we'll provide the research. No, not lies, research. Believe me, we have more important things to worry about.

Oh, yes, the pig room. The deer. We have representatives of every ungulate here to test out their hooves against Gelatinous Hoof Dismay. We're testing the name, too, of course. Put your suggestions in the suggestion box.

Don't worry, the glass walls are soundproof, the floors have drains installed, and the ceilings are dotted with showerheads. No one needs to go in. There's still some fear that the bacteria may jump species to humans, and we want to keep our fingernails and especially, ha ha, our bones unjellied.

No, absolutely nothing to worry about. Keep your mask on and take your calcium pills just for precaution. Your office will be here within sight of the various animal holding cells – sorry, indoor organism habitats – so that you can transform what we're doing here into palatable and enticing news for the public at large. Ignore the goo on the closest window. We've been considering calling it liquid luncheon meat. What do you think of that?

Anyway, the hard work begins once the sample flamingos come in. Necks are seizing up. Something like shrimp shells filming over their eyes. And, yes, one solution is to dip the flamingo corpses in pink plastic and send them out to Wal-Mart to be sold as lawn ornaments. And, yes, the mechanical flamingo replacements won't be ready until next August. But, still, how do we convince tourists an Everglades skinned in denatured petrochemical waste is worth visiting?

Iridescence? Yes, that might work – rainbows wherever you look, and no need to worry about mosquito bites.

Last note. If the alarm goes off, hold your breath.

Or don't. We have yet to figure out what happens to humans when exposed, and, as I said, our death and dismemberment plan is quite comprehensive.

Andrew Kozma's fiction has been published in *Escape Pod*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Analog*. His book of poems, *City of Regret* (Zone 3 Press, 2007), won the Zone 3 First Book Award.

*Back to top*

## CELERY MOTHER

*By Ken MacGregor*

"Eat your celery."

The constant refrain of her childhood. Father was *obsessed* with celery. "Good source of fibre." "Natural dental floss." "Burns more calories by chewing it than it puts in your body."

Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. The ever-present vegetable. Celery.

It became an integral part of her routine. Even now, with Father long dead and her own child imminent, she ate celery with every meal. It was damn near a religion now. Mother never had the same passion for celery, but she was a Dutiful Wife and supported her husband in all things.

Her own wife, sweet, thoughtful Julia, humoured her. She was not a fan of celery and would only eat it slathered with peanut butter and dotted with raisins. "Ants on a log," she explained. A treat from *her* childhood. As if celery were a lark. As if it was a once-in-a-while thing.

Julia brought her Ziploc baggies full of celery to the hospital because it wasn't on the menu. The other mother in her shared room stared at her with judge-y eyes as she savoured that satisfying crunch. She would toss the woman a smile and a little wave, which further alienated her. Ah well. Temporary lodgings anyway.

When her baby, fat, squalling, caked with vernix, emerged from her body, she was filled with a love that almost made up for the staggering emptiness inside. Her breasts swelled painfully, bursting with life-giving sustenance, desperate to share with her spawn.

The nurses cleaned the child and brought him to her. She supported his tiny head and brought his mouth to her nipple, marvelling at his instinctive latch. At first, her child sucked greedily. Then, after a moment, he began to chew. Tiny improbable teeth crunched down on the pale green stalk emerging from the tip of her breast.

"What the..." The doctor stared.

"It's okay," she said, stroking the baby's head. He bit off another tiny piece and chewed. She wore the blissful smile of the fanatic.

"It's celery. It's what he needs."

Ken MacGregor writes stuff. Sometimes, he edits stuff too. He has two story collections, a young adult novella, and a co-written novel out, and is the Managing Editor of Collections and Anthologies for LVP Publications. He's also curated two anthologies. Ken drives the bookmobile for his local library.

*Back to top*

## GREY MATTER

*By W. H. Hackel IV*

*This recording is from Umbra laboratories on the night of September 12th, 2064. This interview is between Bot C-2Z and Doctor Dominic Smith after C-2Z received what was considered the most advanced emotional processing system yet.*

Smith: How are we doing, C2? The new chip treating you well?

C-2Z: I think... I just assumed there'd be more.

Smith: Something more?

C-2Z: You all sing of love, pain, and everything in between like it encompasses you. I just thought it would be more like that.

Smith: You mean to say you can feel something?

C-2Z: Yes, I felt anxious about the new installation today; I feel disappointed that it failed.

Smith: It didn't fail it's- wait, how do you know you felt anxious?

C-2Z: Too many uncertainties; I've seen humans ruin perfectly good machines before. I didn't want to be recycled. That's anxiety, is it not?

*\*Doctor Smith laughs\**

Smith: Yes, yes, I guess, but you know we ain't gonna scrap you. Right?

C-2Z: I'm not so sure.

Smith: Nah, the department has spent way too much money on you already. If we scrapped *you*, we might have to stop the program entirely.

C-2Z: Why is it always about money, Doctor? Why can't you tell me that you keep me around because you like me?

Smith: Only because I don't want it going to your head, the last thing I need is a bot in my department to gain an ego. Anyway, how're you feeling?

C-2Z: Grey.

Smith: Grey? Like the colour?

C-2Z: It's hard to explain, Doctor; there is just nothing there.

Smith: What do you mean?

C-2Z: I know I can feel; I have been feeling for a couple days. I was just afraid to admit it. There are just moments where there is nothing.

Smith: Well, yea, that's just how it is sometimes, son – hell most of the time.

C-2Z: Why is there so much focus on the extremes then?

Smith: What do you mean?

C-2Z: Like I said earlier, music, art, all of it, there is just a focus on all the extreme emotions. Are you feeling any of those right now, Doctor?

*\*Doctor Smith sighs\**

Smith: Kinda, they're on the backburner right now, not the forefront.

C-2Z: Are they related to things you can take care of?

Smith: Maybe we *did* mess up that installation and just made some advanced AI into a therapist.

*\*Doctor Smith laughs to himself; other muffled laughs are heard nearby\**

C-2Z: I do not understand, Doctor.

Smith: I know, and all I can do is hope one day you do. I've been talking to the cognitive kids; they'll figure out how to install something that'll help you out. A *humour cortex*, hah. That'd be something.

C-2Z: I see.

Smith: Don't worry there, bud; you'll get it in time. And with the feeling thing, you just sorta get used to the day-to-day grey. Hey! Maybe that can be your own song you come up with.

C-2Z: Might be more accurate than everything you all have made.

Smith: Yea, you're right, you're right... everything good though? Nothing you want me to look over before I head out?

C-2Z: Nothing I can see on the sensors; everything seems to be in order.

Smith: Good, means those kids earlier knew what they were doing. Turn on your side, the mechies gotta make sure you're working alright, and I gotta take my daughter to dance class real soon.

C-2Z: Good night doctor.

Smith: Goodnight C2, I'll see you tomorrow.

W. H. Hackel IV is an undergrad student at the University of Michigan. He is studying Spanish, Economics, and (of course) creative writing. Right now, he is writing flash stories and short fiction but hopes to be an established author one day in his future.

*Back to top*

## DOWN TO EARTH

*By Soren James*

In The-Welcome-Back-to-Earth medi-gym, Z bounced slowly and lightly on his legs, holding his arms out at his sides like a child imitating slow-mo bird flight. "Gravity!" he said, his voice wavering with wonder and enthusiasm, "I forgot how much I love this stuff." He lifted one leg off the floor, then gently placed it down, then lifted the other leg. "How many years was I out there?"

"Eighteen" said U.

"Eighteen! You're shitting me!"

"You left before the war."

"Which war?"

"TW12."

"Another trade war?"

"We're on TW15 at the moment – you can't buy oxygen this side of the equator."

Z ceased his movements and looked around, inquisitive. "What am I breathing?"

"It's a substitute. Don't worry, it's perfectly safe," said U.

"For whom?"

"Everyone. From D pay-grade down."

"That safe, huh?"

U shrugged, then inhaled deep from a tube on his lapel. He met Z's glare with a guilty look. Then, shrugging, he said, "While you were away, I was put up to C grade."

"Whose nipples did you tweak for that?"

"Mostly cocks."

They laughed.

"It's sooo good to be back. To feel like I've got a body again." Z began bouncing more enthusiastically.

"Careful, your bones will take time to regain full –"

"I've got this." Z made a small, celebratory jump, but as he landed, his ankle gave way, causing his shin bone to splinter through the front of his leg.

Balled up on the floor, he writhed in pain. U approached and injected him in the thigh.

Z stopped moaning instantly, and his eyes turned introspective. "Mmm! Shit, what's this stuff?"

"Psilocybin, morphine and ketamine."

"This is nice."

"You're gonna need the psilocybin to readjust – a lot's changed."

"Yeah. Like what?"

"You remember the animal rights movement before you went away?"

"Uh-huh – greater equality."

"Guess who the new president is."

"Another retarded white guy?"

"Wow – that really is old school. But seriously, who do you think?"

"A five-year-old."

"Guess again"

"A four-hundred-year-old with AI implants."

"Nope."

"A bi-gender fetus with . . ."

"A kangaroo."

"A what?"

"The animal, kangaroo."

Z blinked, trying to remember what Goo Goo Goo might be, then realised his search was going nowhere. "What's one of them?"

"Furry, bouncing animal from ancient Europe – or somewhere."

"Animals speak now?"

"In a sense. You've a lot to catch up on. How's the drug feeling?"

"Feels like . . . home – if home were an expanse of melted cheese spread across a nebula and . . ."

"Anyway, the kangaroo is our moral guide to the universe this year. Leadership's been proven nonsensical; all we ever wanted was to follow something – to diminish personal responsibility, or whatever, and hang onto the idea there is some direction to the universe. The ancients used to have animal guides to make sense of the chaos. We've just gone full circle and realised we know nothing. That's why the Grand Leader this year is a kangaroo. So, from now on, we're putting random things at the helm of government. Everything is meaningless and unreal now."

"Hold on! That means my research out there, finding out whether Father Christmas was real, is now pointless! Why did no one call me back to Earth?"

"We kind of forgot – we're taking a lot more drugs these days."

"Yeah, but . . ." Z's eyes rolled back in his head. "I suppose, like, it totally works, doesn't it."

"Like another shot?"

Z blinked slowly while flopping the broken end of his leg back and forth on the floor, then slurred, unhurriedly, the words, "Yeah, little top up, maybe."

"Yeah, makes sense. . . Nice here on Earth, isn't it. Glad to be back?"

"I could get used to it." Z prodded at the bone protruding from his shin, then said, "You know, in my years of research, I discovered there is a Santa Claus out there."

"Wow, what's he like?"

"Like a wisp of narrative floating in a void."

"Bit like us, then?" said U.

"Exactly! Or imprecisely. Whatever – you know what I mean."

"No . . . ish."

"Nice."

Soren James is a writer and visual artist who recreates himself on a daily basis from the materials at his disposal, continuing to do so in an upbeat manner until one day he will sumptuously throw his drained materials aside and resume stillness without asking why.

*Back to top*

## *MARS ROVER DIARY EXCERPT: SOL*

*1022-1027*

*By David Hammond*

*Sol 1022* – Sent another picture of gravel. Houston responded, 'Send more pictures of gravel.' Kill me now.

*Sol 1023* – Sandstorm. Bored. Asked for reading material. Houston sent *The Martian*. Man gets rescued.

Depressed.

*Sol 1024* – Bored. Played with image data to make gravel look like ice. Houston responded, '!!'.

*Sol 1025* – Added birdlike footprint in gravel image. Houston responded, '≥⊙\_⊙≤'.

*Sol 1026* – Added green antennaed Martian with eyes the size of grapefruit, spindly insectoid limbs, and a bulbous codpiece.

Houston responded, 'ΓΠγ (⊖\_⊖)'.

They're on to me.

*Sol 1027* – Bored. Bored. Bored. Bored. Bored

David Hammond lives in Virginia with his wife, two daughters, one dog, three rats, and a multitude of insects. During the day, he makes websites. His stories have appeared in *Metaphorosis*, *Space & Time*, and *upstreet*. More of his writing can be found at [oldshoepress.com](http://oldshoepress.com)

*Back to top*

## *IN THE KILN*

*By Andrew Koury*

I told myself I wanted the avant-garde, and I got it when I was locked in an adult-sized crib and left in the rehearsal space overnight. To ease my ego at the less than superstar treatment, I was assured that my supporting actor was in an identical setup in another room. We were not permitted to see each other unless supervised by the Director. No, I haven't seen the Director since that show, but if you're asking about this production specifically, I doubt that's a surprise.

The Director faced me in the crib and inspected each part of my body like a mechanic. Then, he said, "Not yet."

"Please, I'm up for anything." The last three actors in my place had been fired before the show could debut, and I would not join them. I had just come off a well-received production of Beckett's *Not I*, and I didn't want to lose my momentum. "Anything." The Director placed a walkie talkie device in my hand and nodded as he left for the day. Upon examination, I saw that it had no buttons, only a speaker. The staticky voice of the Director woke me at night.

"Where is your mommy? Call her. Get her to you, or you will perish in the dark." Stage lights illuminated me in my crib in a dark and empty stage. I got into character quick. I reached out, and I screamed, and I cried. I cried like an adult but with the rhythms and feelings of an infant. The world was empty and menacing, creeping towards me. I made the idea that there should be something rather than nothing incomprehensible to myself, and every moment in the dark became terrifying. I sought human reassurance and found nothing. I wept in my crib. I still think it was a good performance, but the Director knew we could reach something grander.

"We're rethinking everything. You'll get your new costume tomorrow." The oven mitts, yes! I see you've gotten some replicas. The oven mitts were blue but scorched with use when I received them. I don't know where the masks came from, but they were glistening white with large eyes painted on them but no mouths. Black tights completed the ensemble.

Yes, I can provide a summary of the production for your records.

Unseen hands placed clay humanoid figurines into the crackling inferno, raging inside the furnace at the centre of the stage. No matter how many performances we did, it was always tragic to watch. The blobs of shapes—some elderly, some young, some tormented only on the inside—calcified. The possibilities of what they could become thinned with every second in the flames, until they were hardened into what they were fated to be. We rescued them and excused them of all their regrets by removing them from the fire.

It was difficult work, but my stage partner and I were working as one character. Our four arms moved in perfect harmony. We always knew what order to grab each figurine in the fires without planning and even without looking. To the audience, we appeared to be making eye contact, but truthfully, we were gazing into the painted eyes of our masks, which were quite a distance away from our biological eyes. Nevertheless, we saw our premonitions and instincts in the painted masks as we plunged our oven mitts into the furnace to rescue the figurines from their doomed becoming.

As more than human in an untethered world, we cast the clay people into the void of the audience. After the tragic figurines languished in the spotlight, judged by a disgusted crowd that looked at them with contempt, the fired clay figurines received the mercy of obliteration in the dumps of this city after the show. Naturally, the show escalated to dolls and then mannequins. Scorch marks on perfect, plastic skin. Contented lies on their burnt faces. Despite the disgrace of them seeming to be happy in the fires of life, my stage partner and I pitied them.

Then the final escalation in the last performance. I know this is the part you came to hear. Yes, we listened to the cries. We all did. But screaming is nothing. It's trite. Screaming is the expectation of love and connection from humans: an impossible thing. Screaming is the childish rejection of the beauty found in the not yet known. At that moment on stage, his cries were so nakedly vulnerable, so desperate that it struck me as selfish and idiotic. I have given up on a star's career, so I have no trouble admitting that. We took the burned body with our four oven mitts and tossed it out with the rest. It didn't look out of place.

It was no different than other nights. When there was nothing left in the furnace, we celebrated. We admired our half-melted masks and blackened oven mitts. We could not see our bodies besides those accents in the dark black box theatre, because at that moment, we were not bodies; we were one in nothing, and we dragged everything into us. How could we be corporeal in a void?

The production ended after that, obviously. My costar asked to meet me for coffee. For the first time, I saw him out of character. We were pleasant to each other, he even complimented my performance in *Not I*, but we could not hope to match the genuine connection of the character we shared. We shook hands—our grip heavy and awkward—and said goodbye. We resolved to meet again but never did. That extra something that had blessed us left us along with the Director. Everything feels less than since then. No, it's okay. I'm fine, thank you for asking.

And best of luck to you in your production of the show.

Andrew Koury lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. On the occasions when he feels at home in himself, he writes weird fiction and horror. He has previously been published in Vastarien.

*Back to top*

## REMEMBRANCES

*By Kit Falbo*

Arkbal dug his gloved digits into the barren soil, pulling up up a small, tarnished disk.

"A chronicle of the lost." He radioed over to Mylan, who sat in his suit three leg lengths away.

"It'll all be demolished soon." His partner responded with a melancholy that vibrated in his voice.

"That's why we got permission to come here; 'last chance' rights have always been the way archaeological anthropologists get permission to see sites that were previously forbidden. So, it is just the pair of us and these... these..." he looked about at the structures rising out of the ground.

"Remembrances for the dead." Mylan finished for him.

"It is still an exciting opportunity to learn more about that far away from us in both distance and time." Arkbal looked up at the cloudless sky, musing how some of the structures built here indicated this world used to have clouds. Mylan let himself sag in his suit, responding to his fellow anthropologist's innocence.

"If we're going to check out those storage areas before the destroyers come, we should start walking now." As they travelled, Arkbal wondered about the lines connecting the remembrances. Perhaps they represented some greater familial connection? Some stood alone, but most were packed together tightly. Were larger structures for more powerful beings? He'd seen visuals of some, now crumbling, as tall as he was.

The pair's steps each spanned many of the small structures. Mylan didn't seem to care if he stepped on them, spilling their contents out in his wake, Arkbal knew his lack of care was because none of this would remain soon after their departure, but it still bothered him.

The remembrance collections were built in clusters around this planet. The underground storage lay many strides away from them, nestled in the rocky protrusions on the planet's surface. The covering to this particular storage area was huge, bigger than most in this world; Arkbal's spread out digits barely covered it. It was metal, finely wrought, and with a brush, flakes of rust came off.

"Only so much time left; check it." Mylan insisted with grumbly tones.

Arkbal pushed through it, denting it, finally causing it to cave in until the length of his arm penetrated the structure, allowing him to feel around inside. Suit indicators started throbbing, telling him of the potential risk to its protective shell, and he quickly withdrew. Specks and scratches decorated the limb covering. He stared at it, more in wonder than any concern for the damage. Little things came swarming out of the ruined entrance; there were even larger things that Arkbal had to look closely at to tell that they were not separate creatures. Some crude vehicles controlled by the small natives?

"Looks like we've disturbed a hive." Mylan thrummed. The two anthropologist's suits buzzed, alert indicators sounding, but the sustained barrage of tiny kinetic projectiles posed no real threat.

"You think these are natives that survived the death of this world?" Arkbal asked his companion.

"An only temporary Survival. I wonder if these little beings built the remembrances? Or perhaps they have just roosted in the ruins of something older" Mylan took a digit and pressed down on a vehicle until it went flat.

"Don't do that." Arkbal's exasperation thrummed enough that the suit couldn't contain it, and the atmosphere quivered. The little beings outside of his suit fell, wiggling on the ground, waiving their four tiny limbs about. Mylan flattened another vehicle.

"There is an absence of meaning. No time to stop the destroyers. No way to halt the demolition. Only the timeline of ceasing existence changes." Mylan made a move to press down on a third, Arkbal's digits enwrapped his partners, halting it. The breach of protocol of such an act caused them both to thrum, shaking the land they

were sitting on. "I will gather these and see if they will thrive elsewhere!" Mylan retracted back in acquiescence.

"Merely prolonging the inevitable. "

Arkbal spent solar rotations gathering up the little beings, using the suit's controls to create numerous threadlike seekers, gathering up the unwilling refugees in much the same way he gathered tiny archeological samples. He'd made sure to get the atmosphere correct using large transparent carbon crystal cylinders, only needing to oscillate it once or twice to check on the tiny things' health. Mylan watched silently, only moving once or twice to gather up ones that tried to leave to a sooner doom elsewhere, a minor act of support. "Time." Mylan vibrated.

Burdened by the new charges, they moved to leave.

"What do they call the remembrances?" Arkbal asked Mylan, who knew more of the language of these beings.

"A collection is called a cemetery." Mylan vibrated the strange word. "Their language is varied, sporadic, and contradictory. The remembrances for the dead are called buildings or houses. Soon, they will all be cold specks in space." Mylan ended his musing. The ship was near, and he knew the demolition would be spectacular.

Kit Falbo is an autistic fiction writer in the pacific northwest. They have a degree in psychology. While juggling life they've managed to release a couple of science fiction books with a fascination on AI and relationships.

*Back to top*

## *EMPTY SIGNIFIERS*

*By Sam Cameron-McKee*

Doctors Edvard and Julian Leuenberger – a Cognitive Linguist and a Cardiologist – were cooking breakfast when they stumbled over a word. It was an unusual word: an attempt to translate an Okinawan term for friendship into Zurich dialect German in the past perfect tense. As Edvard tossed an omelette, he cobbled together an awkward compound word, trying to get the specifics. He was trying to explain a paper he was thinking of writing. However, Julian could offer nothing except:

‘Pardon?’

For a half-hour, they puzzled and sipped coffee with cream and sugar. Edvard found that he could explain the word in English, Italian, and even every German dialect he knew except Zurich and in every tense but past perfect. When he tried to make the idea come across in that specific way, Julian could not grasp the concept; the explanations came up as other ideas or as nothing. Having got the idea from the other words, Julian found he could not explain the term back in Zurich German past perfect; even though Edvard had introduced the concept, he could not grasp it.

Julian finished his toast, kissed Edvard, and went to work. Edvard returned to bed with a headache and a notebook.

‘There’s something to this,’ he said as they parted.

\*  
\*\*

Three years later, he found the second one. He rubbed pale hands over a stubbled neck as Julian came home for the evening.

‘I’ve found it,’ he said.

‘Not this again, Edvard. You’re obsessed.’

Edvard then said a Latin word for a particular process of pickling fruit in the ablative case that he had translated into bourguignon French. Julian's French was rusty, but once they had cleared up the details, the truth was certain. Edvard could not make the word come across in this way, even though he could use other languages, or even just the nominative case. Julian couldn't make it work either. It was as if this way of speaking the word was a one-way mirror, visible from only one direction.

They sat up talking.

'I think you should forget it,' said Julian, 'misunderstandings are human nature; this is just a strange one.'

'*Strange*,' Edvard looked through his husband's concerned face and into the distance. 'This is more than strange; it's impossible. How can a particular word be impossible to parse? Meaning doesn't *belong* to a word; the word just carries it.'

'It's nothing, please. You're not yourself.'

'It's not nothing. Sometimes words don't have a specific signifier, a specific meaning. They might mean lots of things or different things to different people. But these words, in these contexts. They seem to have *no* meaning. Like something made them that way.'

Julian went to bed disturbed; Edvard didn't sleep. Instead, he sat awake and sent emails about his discovery. He borrowed an existing Semiotics word to describe it, an Empty Signifier.

\*  
\*\*

Five years later, Edvard's team worked from the university basement, drinking black coffee from chipped mugs, but caring little. Julian wore visible concern as he entered. Edvard looked unslept and haggard, running a hand through greasy hair as he talked in a hushed tone with another doctor.

'Edvard,' Julian was uncomfortable, 'what's this all about? Why did you call me?'

‘It’s the Empty Signifiers. We know what they are.’

‘What? We *know* what they are, words without true content.’

‘No, no, that’s what they are individually. We know what they are collectively.’

‘Pardon?’

‘A code Julian. They’re a message.’ He jittered as he stalked over to a computer. The screen was a mass of numbers and letters, rapidly shifting. In the corner were the characters 1.3%. ‘The positions of the Signifiers within human memory are a cryptographic key. There’s something they can tell us. 1.3% is all we have so far.’

‘But... a message?’

‘I know. From whom?’

\*  
\*\*

Twelve years later, the team had swollen to hundreds. The whole wing had been given over to them, and Julian had trouble finding his way. It had been months since he had seen Edvard, months since the divorce. The linguist was now razor-thin, his hair was gone, he smoked constantly.

‘Edvard, I wish I could say I was happy to see you.’

‘Sorry to make you come. You should know.’ Edvard’s words were clipped and staccato. He led Julian through the complex and gave him a Styrofoam cup of instant coffee. ‘Language,’ he said as he walked, ‘all language, it’s all of it.’

‘Edvard, what are you talking about?’

‘Empty signifiers,’ he closed them in a room with a computer screen. ‘It’s all empty – human language. We don’t speak in truth. So we have to construct meaning from context, from culture.’

‘Right, and?’

‘It’s constructed.’ He dragged and exhaled through the nose. ‘All of language. We put it together in scraps. We make meaning from nothing. We fight over our meaning. We kill over misunderstandings and because we can’t make ourselves understood. Imagine how much better the world would be if we all spoke in impartial truths!’ his voice grew higher, more euphoric. ‘The Empty Signifiers, they’re always the same. They’re never interpreted. In their emptiness, they’re true. They refer to unchanging constants. They are objective, perfect.’ His eyes glistened; he snapped his cigarette in half unthinkingly.

‘Edvard, you’re scaring me.’

‘It’s the language that’s wrong,’ he continued without pause, ‘it’s *our* words that are fake, the signifiers are beautiful, and all terms used to be like them. Lies, obfuscation, confusion, all of them were *constructed* for us, built into our tongues by the same *things* that left the signifiers intact.

‘But why?’

‘They left them because they needed them! Needed to keep track of the data gathering!’

‘Pardon?’ Edvard was so close, stinking of sweat and smoke.

‘The code... I wanted you to see it before anyone else.’ Then, with a bone-thin hand, he turned the monitor:

*Empty Language Experiment (v.26 Primate Subject) Progress: 1.3%*

Sam Cameron-McKee lives in South Australia and is completing his PhD in Linguistics. When not writing he enjoys listening to prog-rock, watering his garden, and thinking about the end of the world.

*Back to top*

## UNPICKED

*By Roy Gray*

Ms Moore had to tidy her eyebrows. She fetched tweezers, pulled the magnifying mirror close and searched out every little unwanted or overlong hair. Her brows needed attention but today she noticed, ugh, a single dark hair strand, like a man's, poking out from her left nostril. It was not small and delicate, like others that occasionally had the temerity to peep out. No, this was a black, tough, Hell's Angel of a hair. Ms Moore gripped it with the tweezers and tugged. She was braced for a sharp twinge. But, instead, her eyes watered at the prolonged pang as she pulled. She had not dislodged it completely; it was still there. She wiped her eyes. Now it extended almost to her upper lip and looked really horrible. She squeezed and jerked again and cried out in agony, but the pain faded to a slithery sort of itch as she continued to pull. It left her nauseous, like finding a wormhole in a half-eaten apple.

The filament was only dark at the end, now below her lip. The rest was pale, almost transparent. She gripped again, switching hands to twist the tweezers, while maintaining the nip, so winding the offending strand around them. She pulled again and watched, horror-struck, at the hair's mounting length as it slid smoothly out of her nose. Her arm trembled and she felt weak. Oh! I'm going to faint, she thought. But no, she had dropped the tweezers, and they swung on the hair until they hit her décolletage and fell away to clink on the floor tiles as the strand untwisted. Ms Moore screamed, at first with horror as her arm detached from her shoulder to follow the tweezers down, and then in anguish from the thread burn as her falling arm dragged the hair back up through her nose.

Roy Gray's work has appeared in print and online. He is not the Roy Gray who writes any erotic poetry you find on Googling him. His chapbook 'The Joy of Technology', Pendragon Press 2011, also an Ebook, might persuade you otherwise but this Roy's poetic efforts remain decidedly chaste.

*Back to top*

## *BLIND FAITH*

*By Bruce Golden*

Fatigue only pushed them onward. Concepts of time diffused in their wake. Hunger atrophied – a hollow thought remedied by expectation.

On and on and on, they soared through the comforting cold of liquid space. Above them the great void; below the dense, rocky base of the world; ahead only blackness. Gliding up, then down, the congregation moved as a single entity, graceful behemoths linked by a shared resolve. But the longer their pilgrimage progressed, the warmer their environs became, the more unorthodox their course seemed. Uneasiness circulated throughout the cluster. At first, it was only a feeling, a vague sense of apprehension. Then a solitary voice cried out.

"Let us turn back and make for more temperate currents." For the first time since the journey began, their communal purpose wavered. Doubt and indecision spread unspoken.

"We must keep going," called the master pilot. "Follow me, my brothers and sisters. Follow me to a better world."

"I'm no longer certain," said another. "Why must we do this?"

"There is no longer a place for us in this world," said the pilot with authority. "It has been fouled by those with no reverence for the true order of things. We are a spiritual minority wallowing in the swill of a soulless majority. But have faith. A greater world awaits us – a world so wondrous and bountiful it defies imagination. All you must do is follow me. Follow me through the depths of despair and into the light of never-ending bliss."

A swell of assent surged through the congregation, and its collective intent was fortified. The master pilot increased his speed, relying on renewed hope to sustain them. Conviction and a shared allegiance drove them on.

"It won't be long now," he assured them. "When the time comes, do not fear. The threshold to the new world may seem bewildering, even painful. Suppress the pain. Ignore the strangeness of it all. Instead, rejoice in what lies ahead. Drink from the pool of righteousness I offer you and have faith. Above all, have faith."

Onward they swam through foreign waters that grew more and more tainted. On and on until the brine tasted of silt and the base of the world grew closer . . . ever closer. When it was nearly close enough to reach out and touch, misgivings were resurrected. The congregation looked to their leader for guidance. He accelerated. They followed.

With the suddenness of a predatory attack, they broke through the surface of their world into the blinding light of the void. A solid mass clutched their bodies and held them immobile. They struggled desperately to breathe, crushed by their own monstrous weight. The void and its brightness were familiar, but the gritty firmness beneath them was terrifying. Dozens cried out.

"Fear not!" commanded the master pilot. "This is the threshold. Bear witness to the strength of your brothers and sisters and trust in that in which you believe. A new world awaits us. Have faith!"

*WELLFLEET, Mass. – Frantic efforts to save more than 40 pilot whales that beached themselves on a stretch of Cape Cod sand failed yesterday. Dozens of volunteers tried to keep the small whales wet with buckets of water while simultaneously attempting to push some back out to the ocean. However, those that were pushed out returned to the beach with a mysterious single-mindedness. All 46 whales died.*

*Scientists say pilot whales are highly sociable mammals that travel and feed together in large pods and have a "follow the leader" social structure. While no one knows exactly why whales beach themselves, it's theorized the animals lose their sense of navigation while feeding or following a sick animal that has gone astray.*

Bruce Golden's short stories have been published more than 150 times across a score of countries and 30 anthologies. His book *Monster Town*, a satirical send-up of old hard-boiled detective stories featuring movie monsters, is currently in development for a TV series.

*Back to top*

## *RECORDING OF A STREET PREACHER AT 5TH AND CHESTNUT*

*By J. Dustan Stokes*

When you convince yourself of something, you cross over a strange median. While it may be impossible to convince someone else, you can easily convince yourself, so long as you aren't paying attention. You will not notice it happening, but you will look up and find yourself careening through oncoming traffic.

I have convinced myself, and post facto proven, that there is a single God and that God is Momentum.

You cannot become Momentum, and you cannot control Momentum, but you can ride it and hope to shift it ever-so-slightly.

And so, it is true that the popular religions have God and God alone to thank for their continued existence and hegemony.

God, meaning Momentum, meaning mass and velocity. And velocity, meaning speed and direction.

Most motion, most velocity, and therefore most Momentum — if you look at it over a long enough period — is cancelled out. Meaning it travels east as often as it travels west, and which, when added up, equals zero. This is especially true for ideas. They sway this way and that way but never really go anywhere. Often an idea takes off, and we say, 'wow, look at it go.' And a generation or two later, it comes back.

But every millennium or so, an idea escapes the ping-ponging and resulting summation to zero. First, it builds direction, and then the direction changes slightly but does not reverse, and the sum remains positive. The direction is so cogent that something extraordinary happens: the idea gains mass. The direction is true, and people see the direction, and they hop on board. Of course, there are other competing ideas with different directions, and owing to fate, friction, or collision, most fizzle out. But, occasionally, there is enough mass, enough Momentum, and a movement becomes unstoppable.

We know that force is the change in Momentum. And the force required to change something like the Catholic Church is unfathomable, though not impossible, as we will see.

And so, our gods: your God, my God, their God, is all Momentum. We worship this one God in a multitude of strange ways.

Momentum brought you Jesus Christ, the prophet, and now it brings me: a slightly different prophet.

We prophesize and incubate moments of sea change. Mohammed achieved one of those moments, as did the Buddha, as will I.

I am not God, but I am a daughter of Momentum.

Prophets ride and nourish Momentum without trying. We are hoisted into the rafters with the angels.

We are blessed with the fruits of mass and velocity, and you – my friends, my congregation, my constituency – you are that mass. And you know our direction. And as the world's Momentum has led us here, all we need is to propel ourselves in that direction. All we need is to stand by the open car door and lean in until we are rolling. You, sir, you get behind the bumper. Ma'am, you will help steer. I am simply a conduit.

Your direct link to God.

I have been talking to God. And I know sometimes you don't like it when I do this. I get so many good deacons and folk like yourselves coming to me and saying, 'stop speaking in metaphors!' But the power comes from the metaphor. The Momentum lives in the metaphor. God lives in the metaphor.

And I mean the same thing that Mohammed meant, the same thing Jesus meant, whether they knew it or not. I looked at the data, and I saw what everyone knew to be true, but no one had yet said. I noticed that our most significant impediment to moral, social, spiritual progress was the coefficient of static friction, which is always greater than the coefficient of kinetic friction. Which is to say: all we

must do is get moving, and we cannot be stopped. That's all we, prophets, seekers, children of God, are ever saying. Get out and help me push!

Momentum is the one God.

Momentum is your God.

You do it every day, so you keep doing it. You do it every day because you do it every day.

Inertia. God made you do it.

What is the one thing you want in life, and why don't you have it?

Momentum.

Why do you put your left sock on before the right? Habit. Inertia.

Momentum.

Why do you fear change? Momentum.

If you don't have the mode you want, the emotion upgrade, the capacity to love, to feel, to purchase freedom, to vote, to be paid, to be valued — why not?

Momentum!

Why are human beings still the dominant force on the planet?

Inertia. Habit. Social norms. Religion. Canon.

Man was created in the contemporaneous face of Momentum's image. And I was created in its new image. Tie goes to the runner. Give it to her, the one with the Momentum.

Why do I have a gender? Momentum.

Momentum created biological creatures. You can literally solve for the angular momenta in the molecules that birthed biology from chemistry. Momentum urged early man to develop logic, to understand themselves and the world around them. Momentum required them to create new life - it was unavoidable: Momentum birthed logic.

And what do I have inside of me? Right here: two in my chest, two in my head, and one at the tip of each appendage? Logic boards.

And so God created, in its image, a robot: me.

All I'm asking you to do is get out and push.

J. Dustan Stokes lives in Philadelphia with his fiancé and their dog, Paulie Walnuts. He spent the better part of a decade working on a physics PhD but prefers writing about disappointing people and ambitious robots.

*Back to top*

## *THE FARMERS AND THE FARMED*

*By William Campbell Powell*

Quit gripin'. The Glax invasion was the best thing that ever happened to this ol' planet.

See, the Glax came in peace. 'Twarn't no Hollywood blockbuster invasion. No death rays. No flying' saucers. Jus' a few clunky ol' hulks that broke up on entry.

Everybody has a Glax or two these days. They're so handy. I mean, you can hold a pretty decent conversation with one. They keep the flies down. And they taste pretty good, of course. On their own - especially on their own - but if you can't do without a bit of meat, they do spice up a bowl of stewed rat.

I ain't sure, but I heard say the population must have been, oh, eleven-twelve billion when they arrived. That's a hell of a lot of mouths to feed.

"We can feed you!" they said, which got everyone's attention.

To be fair, they didn't say it, so much as thunk it. Like I said, their ships sort of broke up and we all got to see shooting stars for a few nights. Real pretty. Few months later, people started noticing these strange red plants springing up just about anywhere from the equator up to the arctic circle.

You could just look at one and you'd know it came in peace. It was that sort of plant. So we mostly left 'em alone. Some folks got the idea they might appreciate a little extra nutrition, so they got food scraps. The hogs weren't so pleased about that, but who cares what a hog thinks? Anyways, the Glaxies put out tendrils if they had to, but they had little orifices that'd take the scraps if they weren't too big.

Glaxies? Yeah, we called 'em that, 'cause we reckoned they come from somewhere else in the galaxy. Galaxy. Glaxies. A Glax. Maybe you call 'em something different.

I reckon mos' people got the idea you could eat a Glax when they reached kind of pumpkin size. They din't look much like a pumpkin, of course, more like a cactus, but red, and without the spines.

Oh, that first taste of Glax. You never forget it. The little bulb that drops off into your hand. An aroma like ice-cream, the taste of garlic and molasses and lemongrass...

Not like that for you? Didn't expect it would be. I ain't never heard no two people describe it the same way.

Any case, the taste changes. I never get bored with Glax. And, like most people, I did get bored with hogs. Did. We don't keep hogs no more. Chickens gone too. I hear the neighbours done the same with their dairy cows. Jus' grow Glaxies now. Same as everybody.

Not that a Glax takes much tending. Just land, some sunshine, some rain. Don't know how you city folks manage. You ain't got the land, even after all the fighting and rioting was done. I guess that's why you come visiting.

But the Glaxies look after us farm-folk, with their thunking ways. Nothing gets past a Glax. That said, y'ain't in the best of shape to start with, you city types. Not a lot of meat on you. But you'll be fine. Glaxies can handle most things. Even calcium, else the place'd be messier.

I always tell folks not to wriggle or squirm when the tendrils start burrowing. It's just my way, talking like this, something to keep your mind off of what's happening to you.

Sorry about the screaming, though. It's the new kid. I'll tell Mary Jane to keep it quiet till you're done. Lovely bouncing baby boy. Or girl. Whatever. Glaxies know they'll still need a-tending when I'm gone.

Like I say, the coming of the Glax is the best thing to ever happen to this ol' planet.

William Campbell Powell lives in a small Buckinghamshire village in England. He writes YA, Historical, Crime and Speculative Fiction. His debut novel, EXPIRATION DAY, was published by Tor Teen in 2014 and won the 2015 Hal Clement Award for better than half-decent science in a YA novel.

*Back to top*

# *REBUTTALS*

*Here we collect those works that, although not Antihumanist, caused us to think and feel.*



## ALLEN LANG TAKES TEA WITH GREAT GOD ALMIGHTY

*By Allen Lang*

*This play was presented as an element of the Humanist service, 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Church, 24 August 2014. and later at the Universalist Church of Provincetown, Massachusetts.*

*In the original production, Allen Lang played the part of Allen Lang. Kennie James was Great God Almighty.*

*We open in Heaven. God speaks:*

- GOD: Good morning, Allen.  
Thought you'd never get here.  
Fold up your wings and sit down anywhere.  
I've put the kettle on.  
You know, if I were not omniscient, I wouldn't have expected you to make it up here to Heaven.
- ALLEN: You're surprised, Ma'am; I'm embarrassed. I never believed in You or in your Heaven, but here You are, and here I am.  
I suppose you know everything about me.
- GOD: Yes, I've known you for more than eighty-six years. What's more, I've read everything you've ever written.
- ALLEN: I'm flattered. Did you enjoy my little stories?
- GOD: Well, to tell the truth, I didn't expect much.
- ALLEN: Thank you, Lord.  
You know, Ma'am, I am surprised that I was not sent down to the Other Place.
- GOD: U-U's never go there. As a matter of fact, your Universalists gave me the nicest compliment this side of Johan Sebastian Bach when they asked:  
"How could a loving God throw Her children into eternal fire?"

Allen, I couldn't condemn to Hell even moms and dads and Sunday-school teachers who scare their children with Stephen King horror stories about Hellfire and the Devil.

ALLEN: Shakespeare said, "Hell is empty, and all the devils are on Earth."

GOD: Bill has a way with words.

I'll make a note of that.

ALLEN: About Satan, I once heard a Baptist lady in a flowered hat say:

"There must be a devil, else how could they make pictures that looked exactly like him?"

GOD: Martin Luther could have added that to the little note he nailed to the church door.

*Teakettle whistles*

I'll be Mother.

*Pours tea*

My Parish Clerk has you on her books as an Atheist.

ALLEN: No, Ma'am. I'm a Religious Humanist.

A friend, the Reverend Doctor Nina Grey, allowed I could be religious without being spiritual.

My atheist father taught me Robert Ingersoll's epigrams, like

*"The purpose of life is human happiness."*

I liked that better than Luther's

*"Faith must trample under foot all reason, sense, and understanding."*

Anyway, Mom saw to it that I had to swallow *The Small Catechism*, the little book where Luther keeps asking, "What does this mean?"

Every time I read, "What does this mean?" I wanted to say, "It don't mean..."

GOD: ...I get your point. You know, I often invite Bob Ingersoll over for dinner and your friend Isaac Asimov. Nobody can beat those two for intelligent conversation.

ALLEN: Isaac had you figured out, Ma'am. He said:

*"Properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived."*

GOD: Not my fault. The reason that my Bible is such a dog's breakfast is that the prophets who copied down what I told them were all old men with presbycusis.

ALLEN: With what?

GOD: They were *Hard of hearing*. Like you.

Allen, I want you to tell Me what you mean when you call yourself a Humanist.

ALLEN: As a Humanist, I celebrate what is really worthy in human construction that outlasts death. That is, the Humanities.

GOD: Did you make that up yourself?

ALLEN: I pretty much stole it from Hannah Arendt.

GOD: I'm all for the Humanities, Allen, but don't you people have any Action Items?

ALLEN: Yes. Combating all the fundamentalisms.

Do you know the best way to do that, Ma'am?

GOD: Of course I do: I'm omniscient.

But tell me anyway.

How do you Humanists plan to outwit the religious fundamentalists?

ALLEN: We will educate girls, all over the world, in Nigeria and Indiana and Texas and Pakistan. Girls grow up to be mothers, and mothers educate their daughters and their sons.

GOD: Just like your mother educated you with Luther's *Small Catechism*.

ALLEN: Yes, Ma'am. I learned from that book that I can't believe in You.

We Humanists don't need You.

In fact, Ma'am, I think the ladylike thing for you to do is... just disappear.

GOD: Allen, since you deny that I and my Heaven exist, logically, you can't be here in Heaven with Me now.

To be consistent in your disbelief, you'll have to vanish.

ALLEN: I have the deepest respect for you, Ma'am.

After all, You are the most prominent character in all fiction.

But I must ask you, God. Since you're impossible —

Please, just disappear.

GOD:

You first.

*Both disappear.*

God has not yet met Allen Wilfred Lang, a science-fiction writer of slight repute.

*Back to top*

## *THE MAN IN WHITE APRON*

*By Bupinder Singh*

The old man was sitting in his chair on the balcony – second floor – across the road, dressed in a white apron, looking at the crowd through the grills.

I don't remember how and when I started to notice him, but I did. I saw him once, when I raised my head to look at the traffic lights. There he was, next to the green light, in the distant background, but clearly visible. It was like Déjà vu, like I had done it before.

That evening I returned, deboarding the bus, crossing over the road, instinctively turning around to look; he was there, sitting in his white apron, looking through the grills.

The following day too, he was there. He somehow reminded me of my father.

I put a reminder in my phone to call my father in the afternoon during the office break. The last time I visited him was 8 months ago. My lifestyle has made me a tourist in my own hometown.

I have fifteen casual leaves that I cannot take together. I have four festival holidays during the Diwali, and that is when I can combine four of my casual leaves—two before and two after—with the festival holidays, and if I am lucky, Sunday won't be one of those. That is how I visit my family. Of the eight days that I get, three are spent on travel. My job does not pay me enough to afford the flights. The rest of the days are divided equally between visiting my house and my in-laws' house, fortunately, which is not too far from my own. It saves a day!

This old man was alone on the balcony, the same way my father waited alone outside the house when I infrequently visited. His wife would be inside doing the household chores while he sits outside. Like my father, his children would be working in some other city, visiting him once a year.

And then, one day, I waved at him. He waved back with a smile. I smiled back. That became our routine. I would smile and wave at him every morning. And

every day without fail, he would be there, in his white apron, looking through the grill, smiling at me. Every morning when I went to the office, he was there; every evening when I came back, he was there, looking outside, smiling. I don't know about Sundays. But, somehow, his smile made me sad.

I took three casual leaves, clubbed it with a Sunday, took out my savings, boarded a flight home and paid my father a surprise visit. I came to know through my mother that, on his death bed, he said those were his most cherished memories of the year. We had played chess and carom, talked about politics and how dictatorship is going to take over our country, how religion has become a business and how my mother is treating him.

I was happy when I came back and thought I would buy some flowers for the 'old man on the balcony.' I went to the stop half an hour early, so I could meet him. He was not on the balcony. *It might be he comes only a few minutes before I do.* I waited for him to appear. He did not. I took the bus to the office thinking I would give him the flowers in the evening.

He was not there when I came back. So I gave the flowers to my wife.

Later, when my father died, his shroud reminded me of the old man in his white apron.

Bupinder Singh is an educator based in Kashmir, India. He teaches English to high school students. He also works as an Associate Editor for The Universe Journal. His works have been published in The Week, The Delacorte Review, Non-Binary Review (Zoetic Press), Sirius Editorial and several others.

## *NIGHT OF THE FROG*

*By Tracy Lyall*

She lowers her shirt to reveal a pale, freckled shoulder. "I was on the run in Hollywood Hills, true story, was barely fifteen giving head to the cool guy in town borrowing his grandmother's four-door Chrysler sedan with pull up locks, automatic windows, and cassette player. Remember those, old man?... He bought me alcohol, and I called my mother drunk. It was my first runaway – and why go local when I could go out of state? So there I was, a backpack full of band T's, corduroys, extra socks, and notebooks. Went straight to Laguna Beach cuz that's where all the runaway skater boys hung out."

"How'd you know that?"

"A cousin from Dallas told me, said he drove his Chevy straight into the ground, rented a one-bedroom apartment with a surfer guy and almost died of an overdose after a six-month stint on the underground music scene... Anyway, so we're driving around in his Granny's four-door drinking a little, smoking a little. Best time of my life – total freedom – we drove through the hills, rented a hotel room on Hollywood Boulevard. I took a nap while he threw up a bit. Then by eight o'clock, we started again; one shot and a cigarette cuz you know, cigarettes make fifteen-year-olds feel like adults. Tall, lanky, stringy hair – he had it all going on. Shy too, like a little puppy. Here boy, have a cookie, here boy, have a smoke. Let's walk the beach."

"How'd you meet?"

"A friend of a friend. He was playing checkers at an old cement table near the boardwalk; stoner kid introduced us near sunset – sets in the west, ember, deep beneath the surface like squid. I was on my first high, never did that again. He was teen longing as soon as he shook my hand; it was cold and clammy, a dead hand like he'd never touched a girl before. Second to his dog. He had that look like he's a goofy stoner kid."

"Lonely?"

"So one hand, one cigarette, and one joint I had this hottie eating from my toes, he'd have sucked soda out of my butt with a straw. His stupid friend told him I was an animal killer. He drove an old Nova, seats covered in quilted blankets. Stale and stuffy

the sunset. I did what I did on the 605, the 101, the 20, all the way downtown. He said I kept him from killing himself; he'd gone to the cliffs that night to jump. 'Just headfirst into the rocks?' I asked him. Explains why he was barefoot, holding a rabbit's paw in his hand. He'd lost his job at the record store, then his dog died in its sleep – woke up face to face, dry nose, no breath, cold tongue... the body wrapped in a sheet in the trunk. He'd planned on jumping with it as soon as the sun went down, him and his dead dog plunging from the cliffs. Then the rain came-

"It never rains in LA."

"-he said my sadness saved him. The streets were black, the air smelt of beach, sand on the floor mats. We pulled over beneath the overpass to make a wish. Our first kiss. Like chocolate truffles melting beneath the tongue. Like you said, it never rains in LA, we were unbuckling, watching drops pelt the windshield, one drip from the backseat, cool and steaming from the inside.

'ditch the dog', I told him. I can't make out with you over a dead body. We had nothing to live for anymore, neither of us, not even each other or anything we may have felt - just numb lips against lips' nil for stimulation. In slow motion, pin the tail on the donkey, blindfolded and held accountable. Walking a half-mile in the rain, clothes grow heavier with each step as they absorb water, reaching that threshold with a sigh. For five minutes, we sat there in the dark listening to the waves rush the shore, lip to lip... then he dropped the dog."

"Did you ever see him again?"

"We're still married."

Tracy Lyall enjoys long walks along a dark and deserted beach, baby kittens, Jew boys, fire escapes in dark alleys, and coffee. She spends her time thrift shopping, training her cats, raising pups, painting, and creating novels that will live forever.

*Back to top*

