contents:

Poetry:

*Inheritance, Menopause Swings Its Golden Shovel* – Candice Kelsey ........................................... 5, 40

*EXPLAINED, WHAT WAKES ME ON A SATURDAY MORNING* – Juanita Rey ............................ 6, 53

*Effort, A Mother Tells Her Children No More Chemo, A-Frame Dress* – Marc Darnell ...... 14, 38, 52

*Cyst Sex, The Haunted Nursery* – Robert Beveridge ............................................................................ 15

*In the Garden* – John Horvat .................................................................................................................. 24

*Blue Men of the Minch* – Douglas Jensen ................................................................................................. 26

*Men in the Woods* – Scott Quinn ................................................................................................................ 28

*Triplet from the Crypt (I, II, III)* – Torian Bay ......................................................................................... 54

Fiction and Flash:

*The Railroad Trestle* – G. D. McFetridge ................................................................................................. 8

*Secret Boxes* – Sue Steging ....................................................................................................................... 16

*My Nimrod* – Craig Proffitt ....................................................................................................................... 30

*Eight people go missing in the city every day* – Sura K. Hassan ................................................................. 42

Art:

*History of Creatures (Photoset of 4)* – Irina Novikova ................................................................. 4, 37, 41, 51

*The Night is Dark, Draculine, Sirens* – L.M. Cole ............................................................................... 7, 23, 27

*when Death knows, dayth’s shadows, climate unveils* – Alan Bern ...................................................... 13, 29

*Fort Lauderdale by the Sea* – Melissa Ashley Hernandez ................................................................. 55
History of Creatures (Photoset of 4), Irina Novikova
Inheritance

Candice Kelsey

A woman smells cigarette smoke wherever she goes / No one can explain the odor / They pretend to smell it too / sometimes even feigning a search for its source / Few enjoy the smell / She meditates on that truth / and how her mother chain smoked while pregnant / Funny how the word chain creates an image of captivity / fetter / shackle / bond / She is thankful the umbilical cord avoided the curve of her tiny neck / That was lucky / Maybe her lungs are better off for it / stronger in some way / She begins to feel proud / for beating the odds / low birth weight / miscarriage / lung damage / SIDS / At a faculty meeting yesterday she smelled cigarette smoke again / She scanned her colleagues / They were in the library / Surely she was imagining it / She grew agitated / until she realized it has been her all along / Her internal organs have been smoldering for years / like wildfire / She is literally smoking from within / What bothers this woman most is that smell
Sometimes to heaven I go,
wrapped in sheets the color of clouds,
leaving brown skin, dark eyes, in my wake,
my teeth smiling and my unsaid words
like a sparkling, undulating river,
that wraps around hills, snakes across plains,
flushes into a lovely lazy delta.

In his world, there is no waiting,
and how it is can only be
how it never was before –
and then there’s the ocean,
a moment slowly joining every other
from a careless race up and down
a sun-seamed beach
to a glazed rainy view
of a sleepy brown town.

My explanation has no regrets
There are days and nights
when I’m in the same room as life.
The Railroad Trestle

G.D. McFetridge

Everything turned on a dime in his imagination and then he mentioned the girl on the trestle. They were standing together near the railroad tracks, waiting for the train to flatten a dozen shiny pennies. The older brother ran his fingers back through his shaggy sun-bleached hair and reached for a cigarette pack in the pocket of his T-shirt. “You mean one of those hot college babes,” he said, the cigarette dangling from his mouth.

The younger brother said yes and glanced in the direction of the train. He told his older brother how he and a friend had been surfing that morning—perfect glassy conditions—watching college girls watch them from the cliffs west of the university, just north of the old railroad trestle. A Marine Corps helicopter flew high overhead making heavy thumping sounds that resonated from the concave doom of blue sky. His older brother inhaled and blew smoke into the air. It floated there for a moment, shimmering, like a cloud of iridescent motes. “I should’ve been a pilot,” he said.

The younger brother mentioned that he and the friend had driven south to check the point break north of the trestle. Willows and sycamores grew in the canyon, running along the edges of the creek bed, and there were more willows underneath the high iron framework. In the sunlight, in the midst of it, in the midst of the cloudless sky, the girl was on the trestle, with sea breezes blowing her blonde hair, making a halo of yellow mist.

When they cleared the shadow of the high railroad trestle, where the stream widened into a delta overgrown with shrubs and wild grasses, and where the surfers’
footpath angled north toward the sandy beach by the point, he glanced over his shoulder to
look for the blonde girl, but a tall sycamore blocked the view.

Pedestrians were not allowed on the railroad trestle, but the rule was rarely
enforced. The older brother dropped his cigarette and stepped on it, mashing in the dirt
with a worn tennis shoe. “And so what happened next?” he asked.

The wind had come up and the ocean was choppier, and only a handful of surfers
were still in the water off the rocky point. They paddled out through the breakers and the
water was warm, the sunlight bright and hot. He told his older brother that he kept
watching the trestle, between waves, and wondering what had become of the blonde.

Without warning a rogue swell arrived and it was twice the size of anything that had
rolled in all day. A skinny surfer outside had a chance at the rising swell and took off as it
peaked. He shot down the steep face of the large wave, cut sideways and lost his balance,
and then fell forward like an unstrung marionette. Closing over him the plunging tongue of
blue-green water curled forward and swallowed the surfer in an explosion of white water.

The younger brother stopped telling the story and glanced in the direction of the
train. Everything was quiet. The tracks shone in the hot sun, the shiny new pennies
glittering in the sunlight. The older brother reached in his pocket for his pack and fingered
out another cigarette. The breeze kicked up and blew out the lighter. He cursed and flicked
the lighter a second time, then exhaled a cloud of smoke. “Keep going,” he said.

“Are you even listening?”

“Of course I’m listening.” He looked sideways down the train tracks.

They had waited for the surfer’s head to reappear in the expanse of foamy white
water. An older more experienced surfer had caught the shoulder of the large swell and
managed a long roller coaster ride, punctuated by his yelps of delight. He was close to the shore now and wading toward the beach, toward a girl lying on a brightly colored beach towel.

The skinny surfer’s board popped up cork-like and a moment later his head appeared. His eyes wide, flashing white, gasping for breath, arms flailing for the surfboard. They watched until he reached the board and climbed on belly first. After the rogue wave had passed the ocean flattened, eerily, like a lake almost. Then the breeze died, as if the world had stopped breathing, its breath held in anticipation of something bizarre yet indistinct.

The younger brother said he heard a female voice, a wailing sound that drew his attention towards shore. He looked at the railroad trestle and near the middle of the trestle he saw the blonde girl waving her arms. She went up on her tiptoes, knees flexing, pointing and calling. Pointing as if her fingers were fifty yards long and she was trying to touch something in the water. He turned to his friend. They looked at each other and shrugged it off, thinking that the girl was shouting at someone else. The skinny surfer, his eyes still wide, paddled past and said something had tangled his tether line; something down there had snagged his tether and held him underwater. He was still out of breath. The girl on the trestle was screaming louder now, but the wind gusted and her words became inaudible, a mishmash of blurred sounds.

The older brother wanted to know why she was so excited, but then he yawned as if only half listening to the story. Half listening was something that happened a lot. It had been that way as long as the younger brother could remember. He said he wasn’t sure, but it didn’t matter because all at once the train’s air horns blew from the south, from the beach
town where the tracks intersected streets and where the engineer always sounded warnings. The blonde turned toward the piercing blast and began running for the north end of the trestle, but her balance seemed awkward, as if running was unfamiliar to her.

He had never walked on the trestle, although he knew many surfers who had, and they all said the catwalk was pretty wide; there was plenty enough room to avoid the train, although they all agreed it was scary, terrifying even, because the train went by at fifty miles an hour.

The large wave had churned up the blue-green water and it was murkier than before, and something dark passed beneath them. The train's air horns blew again, louder this time, and the first of three massive pullers rolled onto the south end of the trestle, its triple headlights made weak by the bright sunlight. The girl had a hundred yards to go before reaching the end of the trestle. They looked at each other and he saw fear in his friend's eyes.

The cloudlike form that passed beneath them had made the water's surface ripple, as if from an upwelling current. They paddled for the shore. His heart pounded as he pulled his forearms and hands through the water. His friend had a longer board and moved quickly ahead. He could feel the darkness coming from somewhere underneath, menacing, rising like a cold shadow. The train's horns blew again, a loud, extended blast followed by another, as if to push the girl forward. He glanced up. Three big puller engines rumbled toward her, trailed by a long line of boxcars and tankers, clattering, the tonnage and sounds of metal on metal. The air horns blew again and again.

“Let's get out of here,” the older brother said, “the train's not coming.” He dropped his cigarette butt in the dirt but didn't bother stepping on it, then headed toward the road.
where the pickup truck was parked. The younger brother picked the dozen shiny pennies off the track; they were like points of copper light dotting the gleaming steel.

The younger brother remembered when he had nearly drowned in the river, and how he’d fallen from his brother’s tree fort and almost broken his neck; how he’d crashed his motorcycle into the back of a car at forty-five miles an hour, and that his life had often seemed unreal and disconnected.

His brother never listened to him—mostly he just occupied space.

And they didn’t really enjoy each other’s company anyway.

Or maybe it was more than that, some unspoken thing only brothers understand, something wedged inexorably in the past. Mom had never loved them equally, and the old man never loved them at all. All that crazy shit buried deep in unconscious mind, the baggage and unseen forces pulling strings.

A ground squirrel hurried to its hole near a pile of rocks. Doves sat in a line on a rusted chain-link fence, their pastel shades of gray and brown washed in sunlight. He put his hand in his pocket and jangled the pennies. Then he got the truck key and opened the door.

“So then what happened? Did she make it?” his older brother asked, and reached for another cigarette.

“Of course she made it. No one’s ever died on the railroad trestle.”
when Death knows, Alan Bern

Death does
Death knows
Nothing
But stares
And stairs
Are up
Or down
That is
Unknown
Angels
Of Death
Rush past
In wind
And rain
“No, I
regret
nothing,
but I’m
a lit-
tle tired.”

The White Knight
in Ingmar Bergman’s
The Seventh Seal
thinks & speaks
The day I tried to live
the rest of man was playing dead.
It was too late to be a live

action figure in a world that didn't move,
unless the light was turning green from red,
and those in love were driving to live

apart again. Departure seemed to thrive.
The children were housed and fed,
but talking wasn't live--

cell towers were the medium of love,
and emails put the kids to bed.
The day I tried to live

welcome home never arrived--
don't wait up instead.
What tried to make me live was unalive.

I'm sorry for this heaviness but I've
been trying to fly with wings gone lead.
The day I tried to live
it was too late to be alive.
Cyst Sex

Robert Beveridge

force, velocity,
endless mist

a harvest gathered
a blade put up

scattered wheat grains

The Haunted Nursery

Robert Beveridge

That cold patch
could be a ghost
or it could be
the air conditioner
Once upon a time, at the edge of a small town, itself on the edge of a large and neglected tract of ancient woodland, an old carpenter waited out his days. It was not by accident that his many journeys had brought him to rest here. He needed plenty of space between himself and other people. People who, for instance, would call him the old carpenter when he considered himself to be the maestro of the art of working in wood. He could not become numb to the cloud of disappointment that came to be inherent in the pursuit of his art. His silent storm of emotion encouraged others to keep their distance and he was glad of that.

He had spent some time in Japan, blown there by the harsh winds that drove the British Navy. Even at sea, some jack of all trades would amuse himself by mocking a man who chose to spend his off-watch hours sober, embellishing the oak of the mast and capstan, allowing the beauty of the grain to come to the surface and nourish his own wooden heart as it had nourished the living tree before it had been given to this god-forsaken task of murder and mayhem in the service of an unbearably ugly commerce.

In Japan he had freed himself from this incongruous joining of tree and ocean. He managed to find a place on the outskirts of the imperial court. Excluded from full access through race and custom, he was gratified to find his talent recognised and appreciated. As well as new skills, he learned about the ways of such a court: the intrigue, forbidden intimacies and their consequences, ambition, above all, ambition and ultimately
assassination. As an outsider he had his uses: his childless mentor passed on the secret skills he learned so well that he was accepted as myadaiku; a full acknowledgement of his skills. Without the prejudices of the local craftsmen, he was able to apply those skills to bring to the courtiers the new fashion for Himitsu Bako, ornately decorated boxes for the keeping of valuables, and valuable secrets. And he applied older skills to ensure that, at a price, there might be unwelcome surprises in store for those who tried to pry.

But life had taught him nothing of acceptance and gratitude: he only knew rivalry and he thought to deal with the ambiguities of his position by turning against his master, using the poison his master had taught him to make. In his preoccupation with the wood, he had misread the culture. Hard as it was to acknowledge that his envied master had also been his mentor and protector, he was brought to realise that those who bought his luxurious and sometimes deadly boxes, cabinets and domestic art works would only do so through his trusted intermediary. He was left in the shadows. They grew deeper. He was forced to move on.

Increasingly bitter, he found more and more patrons for the art of the deadly and subtle poisons: embedded in the most innocent of domestic artefacts, attractive and functional enough to be touched frequently, or designed to be opened by intricate manoeuvres, they could pave the way to a sleep of a thousand hours, and no-one woke from that. He learned how to place the chosen poison on a splinter so delicate that its entry into the flesh would hardly be noticed.

Eventually he settled on the edge of the remote woodland and practiced his dark arts in solitude. When contracts were scarce, he found his own victims in those who had
disappointed him in the past and made passing phantoms of the human contacts that remained to him.

When his own end finally came it was, as might be expected, unremarked for some time. Eventually, the undertaker and his assistant came to the house to do the grisly business of seeing to the desiccated remains of a figure upright in his chair as though on a throne. Around the walls, densely packed and leaving only room for a door and a high window for illumination were stacks of shelves filled with marvels of his art. Oak, beech, walnut, rosewood, ebony they could recognise but many woods they had never seen before. Each piece was inlaid with the most marvelous decorations in other rare woods or with mother of pearl, ivory, even crystal and moonstone; some were lacquered and speckled with gold in the Japanese fashion.

The mayor of the town, for there was no other to lay claim to this treasure, ordered them off for sale in the city, mentally listing as he did so all the improvements to be provided for the people of a town the unhappy benefactor had so deeply despised.

And so, in the richest quarter of the richest city, there came to be an auction. A rich lord sent his man of business with a free hand to bid for an interesting collection of bibelots with which to furnish the boudoir of his new wife.

II

On reflection it was not mere accident that the man of business, well aware of his master’s proclivities, should have assisted in furnishing the wife’s private space with boxes, however beautiful and artistic. Constraint of a different order followed her into the bedchamber. And not surprising either perhaps that while her eyes were wet, her womb was dry. Tiring of this, Milord increased the intensity of his demands. Her state was an
affront to him, and she was unfit to be seen in public until her duty was done, while in
private she was to be available to him at all times.

Invitations, at first submitted to Milady for polite refusal were soon to be refused at
the door until finally they were withdrawn. Letters from her distant family were delivered
without reservation until one day Milord appeared with one of her replies. Carefully
phrased and the tearstains visible only to the educated eye, it was still too revealing. But
letters must be sent, else visitors might appear. She learned to write and take refuge in the
sweetest of epistles, full of pretty dresses, (seen in the street), sparkling balls (seen in
retrospect), and elegant tea parties with imaginary friends. Her sobs she saved for the silent
nights. Meanwhile, letters containing the truth of the limitations of her prison and its
miseries were also written, addressed carefully and stored in the pretty boxes with which
she was now so familiar and which she had learned to open with great care. Strange that
those lovely smooth boxes should have such prickly catches when first opened.

And still, despite all attempts, following many scientific theories firmly applied, the
wife failed to do her duty. Other means of securing the succession must be found. Milord
withdrew to test his options farther afield, sympathy for his sad plight as the husband of a
woman perhaps not long for this world gaining him entry to salons which might otherwise
be closed to him.

As he withdrew, so did the servants. Her own maid, sent with her trousseau, had
long returned to the country in an apparent act of generosity, to counter potential
homesickness. The staff who replaced her understood their role well and with little to do
except oil the locks and maintain minimum hygiene, they spent much of their time in the
butler’s parlour, availing of the extra delicacies they amassed through filching her small
allowance. Eventually, their usage of her became more unkind. They spoke loudly and in her hearing of her husband’s new conquest, the jewels he had bought, the silks and satins he had them deliver.

Her letters continued to gather but her use of paper was monitored as it cut into the profits of her jailers. It was unreasonable that the letters she was still required to send should require so much paper and ink. There were no papers to be collected; no spoiled drafts seemed to be burned in her meagre fires. They joked about increasing her rations (although they never did). She must be hungry, they laughed if she had turned to eating paper.

As interest fell away and the household developed new rhythms around her, it became too much of a chore to see to the locks and all the extra work that entailed. She began to drift through the rooms at night in the silence that had become habitual. In search of the paper that had become her only correspondent she finally found the courage to enter her husband’s study. A place of soft luxury compared to her own rooms; the large desk strewn with documents that betrayed the interest he still had in managing the large estates that his marriage had secured for him. There were stocks of paper and ink enough to pillage in secrecy. Eventually, realizing that the servants had become a self-sufficient society below stairs, she allowed her curiosity to take her further and she began, carefully and quietly, to begin a nightly exploration of the writing in his cabinets. She found much to inform her own recordings.

III

One day, as she was sitting in her habitual seat just back from her window, she heard an unfamiliar tread in the corridor and the door suddenly opened. Her husband was there,
smiling. “Look what I have brought you. I found another box by the man who made the others. I thought I would bring it to you. I see you like them. They are cleaner than anything else in the room. Including yourself, now I come to look at you.” His smile dimmed. He seemed surprised by her calm silence. He expressed dissatisfaction with her hair and dress. “What am I paying that woman for?” But then, calmer, he asked about her health. “You are damnably thin and pale”, he said, “but I suppose…”. He straightened his shoulders. “Well, here is another pretty box for your collection. I believe it has a secret drawer. You can amuse yourself trying to open it. But don’t wait too long, the surprise is perishable.”

But her time in the room with her boxes had taught her more than one secret of their maker’s skill. She knew that the boxes’ designs were as devious and as subtle as an assassin could make them. She realized that another must know their ways as she did and was prepared to look for the sharpness to be navigated en route to the secret drawers. And in this case, she had been warned that the trap was live.

So carefully, and wearing the strongest gloves to be found in her depleted wardrobe, she began to search for the box’s secret. And there it was. A needle this time, disturbingly sharp with an opalescent tip and a scent of almonds. The apprentice seemed less than subtle but no less effective for that. Just as carefully, she replaced the parts, leaving only the needle to hand.

By this time the servants were all deep in their drunken and complacent sleep. Her husband had also stayed at home this night. She didn’t need to wonder why but it made her doubly cautious as she crept into his study; found his pen, his ink, his paper and copying a long familiar hand, wrote a letter: “My darling, a sweet surprise for you to break your fast.
Sealed with a loving kiss.” And she signed it with the name of the old school friend who was now the recipient of her husband’s favours.

She took the letter and the needle to the kitchen. Going to the butler’s private pantry she found the special conserve her sweet-toothed husband enjoyed and dipped the point of the needle in it, waiting for a moment to ensure that all its essence had been absorbed. She left the note on the early morning tray, hoping that the servants would each assume a late delivery and not dare to interfere with that letter writer.

And then she returned to her room, to wait with her boxes and the spirit of their maker, wondering if her old self, the one she had entrusted to the letters in her own secret boxes, would find a place in the world when the door was opened.
Romance Is Undead

the Vampire

There's Promise in Her Smiling Eyes—

sweet Eerie QUEEN

Draculine, L.M. Cole
Dandelions, grab weed, snooker grass
whose red broad penile pods seem near
ready at midday to burst seed - no one
would want to be here then - and mostly
stones, the gray to brown varieties,
some wood that has been petrified by
thought of ending here, but stones lain
happenstance or in the order of a chaos
secret and unknown so anyone can walk
this way or that, to north or east or
toward their opposites or circle back
around to view blue sprinkle mists, its
hue runs light to almost rankled rancid
blue, as purple as a mark of plague or
royalty. I’ve sat beneath the dum-dum
tree (be cautious of the Cheshire drip)
and eaten black ear fungus just to hear
that famous laughing crunch; the picnic
ants are delicate, so bring just fine
cuisine – a camembert will bring them
back, a Swiss will make them weep
(there’s almost nothing worse than
formic acid tears: they’ve made
a stream of Eisenhower table-top
that’s trimmed with mourning sprigs).

I love the green small schmetter-fleas,
the chirping ladies-under-hats, that
gorgeous houndstooth weave of ivy
schooled to climb on monkey-bars,
the hushing sound of blood red
aftermaths among the rusted cannonades
of baby breath and bridal veil whites.

There’s always something fresh in bloom
each day or hour of the day; the garden
keeps good gardeners to certify that nothing here is ordinaire, not ever what we breathe. So come prepared. Wear mackintosh and steel-toe boots, with socks that match your underpants (it seems a silly rule, but follow it you must), and don’t forget a parasol of brightly colored knit. I once had failed entry without the pocket watch and kettle steaming with hot tea (the nits prefer an Earl Grey brewed thick as onyx black (I know not why) with clover honey for their scones – oh, yes, you must remember those). At center garden sits a box made from an oriental type of soap, but never on inclement days when quickly moved inside gazebo hall where wall-less-ness has been perfected into art; visitors who visit there may listen as they like to lectures from profound and likeable professionals who discourse on the ins and outs of planting war rose brush and coward sage and herbs that make one ill from never having tasted them. Come right now; there’s much to miss; tomorrow is another day. The grab weed blooms on every hour; the snooker grass will burst at noon – be elsewhere when that happens, dear; else weeks will pass before its scent is gone from you.
Blue Men of the Minch

Douglas Jensen

Tell me tollman
of the blue men
of the fin men in the Minch
no chain can bind

Beneath the boat
the fateful hunt
the echo of an ancient time
a time of ice

Tell me, fate, let full
fathom fall the tale
the edict of the tide
the tomb

At home beneath the ice
I bide amid the damned

Note

The blue men inhabit a stretch of water called the Minch, between the Outer Hebrides and mainland Scotland. It is said that they will approach a stricken ship and call out two lines of poetry. If the captain cannot answer with two lines of his own, the blue men will sink the ship and drown the crew.
you and me and the

SURGING TIDE

..., Seaside
Sirens

Sirens, L.M. Cole
Men in the Woods

Scott Quinn

Men in the woods,
Men in the woods,
or am I just seeing things?

A rustle of leaves,
snap of a twig,
I am alone
on a quiet backroad.

Just out of sight,
stalking my mind,
I keep on walking
and there they still are.

Hooded figures standing still
in the comfort of dark,
my mind is playing tricks
until a breath touches the back of my neck.
dayth’s shadows (above),
climate unveils (left),
Alan Bern
I arrived on a Tuesday—the hottest day of the week in Africa. Fritz met me on the tarmac. He was a pink-cheeked man in his thirties with licks of fiery red hair.

“Mr. Curd?” he asked in a German accent.

“Yes,” I answered as I descended the steps of the double-propeller airplane in my brownish safari outfit and matching cowboy-like hat with the side pinned up.

“I am Fritz, your guide. Where are your supplies and weapons?”

“Won’t need them.”

On safari with no firearms? Insane! I’m sure he thought. Another arrogant American with dreams of African glory, but clueless when it came to hunting big game. And truth be told, I was a novice. I had never gone hunting, or touched a real gun, or attempted to be anyone other than the person my father wanted me to be. But my safari wasn’t a quest to blast a hole through the skull of a wild animal. Where is the fulfillment in that? I was on a safari for my soul.

“How do you plan to bring down big game without a weapon?” he asked.

“Mano a mano.”

His puzzled eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“Hand to paw, my friend.”

His laughter sputtered to a stop when he saw my toneless expression. “How can you kill a lion or an elephant with just your hands?”

“With confidence. And by keeping a laser-like focus on my positive attributes.”
“I want to be paid in advance,” Fritz said. He was probably worried that one of the great African predators would kill me before he collected his wages, so I paid his entire five-thousand-dollar fee in cash, and off we went.

#

As we drove away from the airport in Fritz’s army-looking tan-colored car that had racks all over it, I told him I didn’t want to spend time in the city and demanded to go on safari immediately. In just twenty minutes we were away from civilization and on our way to the savanna on a dusty two-lane road.

“How is your father?” asked Fritz as he steered the army-looking car.

“He died last year. Happened unexpectedly. I didn’t even have a chance to tell my father how I felt about him.”

“I am sorry to hear that. I took your father on many safaris. He was a great nimrod.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.”

“And I will show you how to be a nimrod like him.”

The statement was odd. Why would I want to be an idiot like my father? I wondered if something had been lost in the translation, so I asked: “What do you think the word nimrod means?”

“A nimrod is a great hunter.”

I chuckled. “Is that the definition in your native language?”

“No, that is the definition in your native language. And your father was one of the greatest nimrods I have ever known. Oddly, he never mentioned you.”

“Never?”
“The only child he ever talked about was his daughter who he called a ‘nervous, weak, and simpleminded girl.’”

“That makes no sense! I’m an only child.”

As we neared the location that the natives call “the place where the animals live,” I saw the real beauty of Africa. No traffic jams. No judgmental people to seek approval from. The outdoors of great big Africa could only be described as a huge unmowed lawn that was teeming with exotic species of uncivilized animals at constant war with man.

Fritz looked sideways at me as I scanned the passing terrain for game and asked: “When you said ‘mano a mano,’ did you mean that you will be using a handgun to bring down the animals?”

“No.”

“A knife?”

“No.”

“So just confidence?”

“And a laser-like focus on my positive attributes.”

“That will not stop a charging rhinoceros.”

“Are you trying to jinx me, Daddy?” There was an uncomfortable silence before I corrected myself: “I mean, Fritz.”

“I’m trying to save your life! Only a crazy person would go on safari and challenge wild beasts without a weapon.”

“Self-doubt and fear of expressing my true self are the only beasts that I’m trying to conquer. The animals that I will battle are just sticks that I will use to beat those two monsters out of the bushes.”
“Maybe you can conquer your ‘two monsters’ with your ‘confidence’ and ‘laser-like’
whatever, but you can’t win a battle against the great beasts of Africa without a
high-powered rifle.”

“But I am a pacifist who rejects weapons. How can I find my soul if I’m not true to
myself?”

“Do you have a death wish?”

“Shut up, Daddy!”

There was a long pause as we both pondered what I said. Of course Fritz wasn’t my
father. My father was a bloated, lazy, angry, intolerant, drunken bastard with a thick head of
banana-colored hair and a bushy beard. Fritz was none of that.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted what I had been searching for. “There!” I yelled
pointing to vultures that were flying doughnut shapes over something, probably a dead
thing, behind a hill.

We drove off the road in search of what the big ugly birds were doughnutting over.
On the other side of the hill we found the carcass of a buffalo.

Fritz and I stepped out of his army-looking car and studied the fresh kill. The grass
around the buffalo was still shiny and wet with blood. The beast’s insides were on its
outside. Besides all that grossness, only a sack of hide and bones remained.

Fritz put his hand on the buffalo’s tongue, which was sticking out of its mouth like an
unruly sloppy-chic tie after a half-day of work and a full night of clubbing. “This buffalo died
less than an hour ago,” he said. “The pride of lions that killed it is nearby.”

Fritz and I followed bloody paw prints to the top of another hill. We saw a pride of
six lions on the field below. I counted three females, two cubs, and a bloated old father lion
that had a bushy yellow mane. The lazy old cat was sunning itself out in the open where anyone could sneak up and strangle him.

Fritz pointed to the overstuffed beast and said, “It’s very dangerous to be around a lion after a kill. Let’s go.”

“Go?” I laughed. “Showing that lion what’s what is the reason I came to Africa.”

“Only a person who is sick in the head would challenge a pride of lions without a weapon.”

“I’m not sick in the head, Daddy!” I had no idea why I yelled that.

I marched down the hill toward the pride and filled my consciousness with positive affirmations about how I was going to pounce on big Papa cat before showing him what’s what. The three lady lions were sprawled on the grass. They were keeping one eye on the kids and the other on Papa who was flopped on his back as he slept off all the buffalo flesh he had just eaten. Trying not to wake the sleeping fool, the two cubs quietly chased each other and played their hunting games.

I stopped marching twenty feet from the pride and tiptoed toward Papa. He opened one of his bloodshot eyes. Insane! I’m sure he thought when he saw me creeping toward him with my outspread hands. The bloated old cat was too lazy to pay me any mind and went back to sleep.

I hovered over Papa lion and glared at his enormous face. The fur around his mouth was red with buffalo blood, and he was cradling one of his victim’s severed legs like a passed-out drunk hugging an empty bottle of vodka.
I yanked a fistful of grass from the ground and sprinkled it over the old lion’s head. His enormous eyes snapped open. The old bastard snarled at me, but he was too drowsy to accept my challenge to a duel and went back to sleep.

I found a pile of lion dung nearby and kicked it at his face. The poo-covered fool roared at me, but he was all talk and no action. So I wrenched the buffalo leg from his greedy claws and whacked him hard on the snout.

“Do you want to die?” yelled Fritz from the top of the hill.

“Not anymore,” I yelled back. “I’m finally self-actualizing!”

Wham! The lion swiped my feet out from under me. The buffalo leg sailed out of my hands. Big Papa pounced. I felt the power of the beast as he mashed my face with his filthy paws. But I was determined to win the battle for my soul, so I grabbed the lion’s throat with both hands and squeezed with all my might. His neck was so thick—it was like trying to strangle a hairy palm tree.

Big Papa bit down on my head and dragged me around for a while. I knew he was toying with me—exerting his authority over me—trying to make me succumb to his will.

The lion hurled me into a bush. After a few minutes of recuperating time, I stood and saw him perched on his hind legs. The lion’s shoulders were slumped. His stony eyes shined with tears. I knew he was sad because he thought I wasn’t worthy of being on the same battlefield with him. A heavy sigh passed through the bastard’s lips as he shook his head slowly at me. The disappointed look on the lion’s face cut deeper into my being than his fangs or claws ever could.

Then the spark of an epiphany set my mind ablaze. In that moment I realized that it was up to me to decide how I felt about the lion’s disappointment. I decided to feel nothing
because I knew that I was wasting time worrying about what he thought of me. It was then that I learned that my opinion of myself was the only thing that mattered to me. So I yelled at the beast: “I don’t care what you think of me, stupid lion, because I am the most perfect me that I can be!”

The lion showed me his butt and waddled away.

“How dare you turn your back on me?” I yelled before springing into the air like a ninja and landing on his back.

The lion took off running. I toppled off him but got a good grip on his tail. He dragged me in doughnut shapes for what felt like hours.

Dizzy and exhausted, the old lion collapsed. I climbed off the great beast and saw Fritz gazing at me from the top of the hill. There was wonder in his eyes.

I then took a moment to reflect on what had transpired. I had beaten the lion, but I didn't find my soul, and the victory had taught me nothing. I was exactly the same—no, not exactly the same—I was the same, but older and tired.
History of Creatures (Photoset of 4), Irina Novikova
When I was eight my birthday cake
was a stack of honey pancakes
drizzled in weak cane sugar,
and father smelled of sweat and beer,
hanging his putrid shirt on the chair
where in the setting sun it burned.
He fattened a runt pig in the barn,
made wine from grapes he found
as foreman along the railroad tracks.

At night I heard the evil sound
of attic walls scratched by a mouse
and cicadas in the weeds and cracks
of our three-room tarred house
melting in summer with the smell of lilacs.
I thought of the years ahead,
how with my smooth face I’d never be dead.

But now, my loves, I look in the mirror,
and it’s only a desert I see—
baked years, baked hands, past fears
of will my children outlive me?
and now I know that calming answer.
I’m sorry I will take no more poison
as I give in to this grayest cancer
which bloats my innards without reason,
for cancer is causeless, and not disease,
but a reaper bringing bodily treason.

Though I believed in a god, I do not now,
for that whim of afterlife, of angels
mutated with dove wings is a lie,
and truth is in the bound sky,
these cottonwood-pocked, groaning hills,
the foot-on-foot of wet early snow,
the tear on your lash, sweat on your brow.

This morphine dulls my knife enough to say
believe only what you see, love your Eye,
and in my absence don’t go astray
with bludgeoning faith, or you will die
with deceitful hope that pulls you to the deep
beyond the Nothing that lies in store for you.
I look at your five downward faces, keep
your heads high and embrace all that’s true.

See this chemistry leave my flattened veins,
burn me, scatter me when it rains
over anything, for my life was tears, to tears
I shall return – no funeral, no memorial–
it would only foster future morbid fears.
Grieve me, respect me in the Fall
when I tossed you in lumps of raked leaves–
hear me in dry leaves, where my dry heart weaves.
Menopause Swings Its Golden Shovel, Knocking Me into a Sweeping Drift of Lavender
Candice Kelsey

*a golden shovel poem,*
*after Kwame Dawes’ “Purple”*

Sleep is the baby that will not come. I labor the pillow that is too warm, so lumpy
I pray for some doula to relieve me of this nine-month insomnia. I toss it away
for one cool as metal stirrups which held these feet wide to see my daughter’s nose
emerge like a spring bulb from weeds & clay. A body asserting purpose aggressively.
The warmth of her tiny palms, baby girl gripping my finger like a flower to smell,
or a future. Both of us intoxicated by new life, unable to sense the thousand *what ifs*—
nineteen years & I sweat a midnight; three hundred miles away, she cries from wasps
of anxiety, expectation, confusion, & fear this global humbling releases into our air.
I send her an Easter basket, tiny wicker garden of chocolate & raffia, purple & green,
to remind her she is loved. She sends her paper on Henry James’ use of the Edenic: *you
always know how to fix my writing.* She accidentally reminds me I am needed. A wasp
sounds like a purring cat if you listen carefully. Sleep arrives in the cool Georgia rain.
The first time you see him, it’s on the way back from work. Public transportation is a nuisance, but you’ve decided to be wary of carbon emissions, so instead of driving to work, you choose your bicycle. Unfortunately, both you and the climate reach similar conclusions at the same time because the next thing you know, it’s raining cats and dogs. So, metro it is.

You struggle to balance your laptop bag and maintain a firm hold on your bike. While ensuring you’re standing steadily enough not to bump into someone in the overcrowded train, your eyes lock for the first time.

He appears to be deep in thought. This serves you right, of course, as you have the chance to properly look at him. Compared to everyone else, yourself included, who has definitely spent the day running errands or working at an office, he’s very put together. As though he’s just going to work, which would make sense since many people have the graveyard shift.

Yet, the all-black, 2010ish ensemble he’s got going makes you curious. It’s summertime in the city, and no one’s particularly fond of black at the moment. Not with the heat and all. Even though you’re a big fan of the whole dark academia aesthetic, the heat has made you choose pastel colors with minimal layering. Of course, with the sudden downpour, you wished you’d decided to embrace your winter fashion sooner and—
He smiles. You withdraw into yourself. He’s got a nice smile. It’s barely there. If you hadn’t been looking at him, you wouldn’t have noticed him. But you’re startled enough to look away immediately. After all, you’re the creep who’d been looking at him.

You make sure not to look at him for the remainder of your journey home. Somewhere between the stops and the constant shuffle of passengers, he gets off. You let out a breath you didn’t know you were holding.

#

The next time you see him, it’s outside the coffee shop you frequent on the weekends. You’re a creature of habit, so after its opening a few years ago, you’ve made it a part of your weekend ritual to indulge in the New York cheesecake and caramel macchiato offered there. The staff, a husband-and-wife duo known as Ryan and Dina, are very friendly, sometimes throwing in a slice of the cake of the day for you as they refill your coffee every two hours.

You fancy yourself a bit of a blogger, working on your blog about your profession during the weekends. You hope that by the time you retire, you’ll have a substantial readership to perhaps write an e-book or something on the subject.

You haven’t decided yet, but it’s a hobby you’ve maintained since university. As long as you update the blog once or twice during the weekend, your parents don’t call you. And that’s all that matters. You’re too focused on your career right now, at the precipice of a promotion, and you can’t let your mother get to you with questions about romance and children.
Or moving back home. Your mother’s been keeping track of all the missing persons (read women) cases in the city. Even though 3,000 people a year in a population of over 10 million doesn’t seem much to you, your mother is skeptical.

Just like she was skeptical when you went to university, pursuing your passion because who’d employ anyone in that particular field? Funnily enough, not only did you get employed, but you’re earning quite a good amount of money for someone in your line of work.

Mothers, you grunt to yourself, pushing your laptop away to enjoy a long sip of the lukewarm coffee Ryan set beside you a few minutes ago. As you do so, you look around the coffee shop to see if any of the other regulars are in.

The weather has gotten significantly colder, with frequent rains but no chance of snowfall yet. You really hope it snows soon. After all, it is November, with Christmas just a few weeks away. You love white Christmas in the city and—

You almost choke, setting the cup down immediately. From the counter, Dina calls out to ask if you’re alright. You smile weakly, reassuring yourself more than her that you’re fine, before turning your attention back to the window.

He’s standing outside the store opposite the coffee shop, looking right at you. His ensemble is the same as the last time, with the addition of a black overcoat and boots, no doubt to combat the weather. You’re in shock. Your neighborhood is a long way from the metro station. Besides, you’re sure that he got off before you. So, how did he-

A shudder runs through you as your mother’s voice rings in your head:
“Eight people go missing in the city every day. Six of them are women.”

Surely, surely, you’re overthinking, right?

#

You’re going home for Christmas. You don’t know why, but even though the city looks positively mythical with the snow and all, you have this sudden urge to go back home. You still don’t like your mother’s interference, and you definitely don’t like being compared to your married brother, but you can’t help it. Perhaps you’ve finally grown out of the city. You don’t know.

You’re just tired of looking over your shoulder. You know it’s stupid, paranoid even, but since that day at the coffee shop, you’ve been looking around for the man. Whenever you’re walking down an alley or a deserted street, you always look over your shoulder, expecting him and his ridiculous Black Parade-inspired clothes to follow you.

He’s never there, but between your mother’s missing persons statistics and you seeing him at the coffee shop near your house, you’ve done it. You’ve developed a fear. Fear of what exactly– you don’t know. You haven’t privated your socials or stopped your weekend routine, but you have grown wary.

So, you’re going back home for Christmas. You tell yourself that you need a break, that you need to get away from the city. That’s how you justify the absurd amount of money you spend on plane tickets and then the equally ridiculous amount of money you spend on your mother’s Christmas presents when you know she’s going to say that the best present you can give her is an engagement announcement.
God, you hate your mother, and you equally hate how much of a teenager you feel like when you say that.

Still, it doesn’t matter. You’re going home for Christmas. Unfortunately for you and your developing paranoia, you see him at the bus stop to the airport. Your eyes lock, and you make a run for it.

#

Someone was listening to you when you prayed that your mother wouldn’t bother you about marriage, or so you think as you help your father and nieces decorate the Christmas tree. Since your arrival four days ago, your mother has been doting over you, but she hasn’t mentioned the subject at all.

Of course, she still thinks that you don’t sleep enough, eat enough or even go out enough, sacrificing yourself for a career that won’t matter in twenty-five years, but she hasn’t brought up the subject of marriage.

It’s a blessing.

You’re able to recollect your thoughts, think through your fears, and even go shopping with your sister-in-law. You attended high school together, but you haven’t spoken to her about things that aren’t related to your family in a very long time, and you look forward to reconnecting-

“How’s your boyfriend?” she asks suddenly, causing you to frown.

“Who?”
“Your boyfriend?” she repeats.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” you reply, and she frowns.

“Really? Then who’s been calling Wanda all these weeks?”

#

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting?” your brother asks you as he helps you pack your bags. After interrogating your sister-in-law, you realize that your mother has been trying to set you up with your ex-boyfriend from high school.

Apparently, your decision to come home for Christmas was the final step to bringing her plans to fruition. As if you’d ever get back with that loser. Your mother’s inability to stay out of your love life stings. Suddenly, you can see everything more clearly.

That man isn’t a stalker. He’s just new to your area, standing out in his 2010ish attire, but your paranoia has made you believe the worst in him. Add your mother’s well-placed statistics to the mix, and you’ve sealed your fate. You actually fell for it.

You came home for Christmas thinking that you’re running from your stalker when it’s your mother you should be running away from.

With a renewed motivation to never come home again, you leave your parents’ home the day after Christmas.
It’s New Year’s Eve, and your friend, Alex, has managed to secure a table at one of the most sought-after clubs in the city. You’re not one for partying, preferring to stay in your neighborhood most weekends but even you have to admit it: the club’s buzzing.

Besides, you’re looking for an excuse to leave the apartment. Your mother’s continuous phone calls have really started to annoy you. Usually, you’d ignore it, but then your father, your brother, and even your sister-in-law have taken to calling you, and you’d rather not think about it.

So, when Alex and the girls show up at your doorstep while they’re “warming up” for the evening, you’re quick to wear your sexiest dress and head out with them. That’s how you end up in the alley at the back of the club, smoking cigarettes and finishing your bottle of beer.

Joan leans against the wall beside you, the two of you sharing wide grins as you hear Alex make plans to go home with a rather attractive-looking man. It’s like university all over again. When Joan points this out, you nod enthusiastically, taking a long sip of your drink. You’re about to answer when she interrupts you.

“Say, that guy’s been looking at you all night.”

You follow her gaze to see the familiar black coat and boots. You’re drunk enough to compare him with one of your favorite lead singers from those emo bands of the past decade.
“I think he’s new here,” you tell her, “I’ve seen him in my neighborhood.”

“What’re you waiting for then? Go say hi!”

Joan’s encouragement and the ungodly amount of liquid courage running through your veins allow you to finally make a move. Pushing your mother’s missing persons statistics away, you walk over to the stranger.

He’s stunned that you’re speaking to him but soon, you two fall into a comfortable exchange. He isn’t new to the city, per say but he has been away for a few years. “Why?” you can’t help but ask and he sighs deeply.

“I was with someone,” he tells you, “and they wanted to leave the city. So, I followed. But then I realized that the city wasn’t the only thing they wanted to leave. And now I’m back. For good.” He looks at you intensely and you can’t help but look away. Maybe it’s the alcohol or perhaps, in spite of your focus on your career, you’re a romantic at heart. Besides, you’ve never had a relationship where someone would move for you. So, you tell him that you think he’s pretty cool for doing what he’s done. He laughs and you decide you like the sound of his voice. It seals the deal, and you two end up talking for much, much longer than you anticipated. Somewhere during the course of the conversation, you bring up your mother’s reservations about living in the city. He lets out a wolfish chuckle at that.

“She’s right, you know. Eight people go missing in the city every day. Six of them are women,” he tells you, and you laugh, ignoring the predatory look in his eyes.

#
As the world counts down to the new year, your stalker-turned-friend and you stumble into your apartment. You’re extremely drunk, and let him lead the way to your apartment. He enters the pin to your building, and guides you up the stairs to your third floor flat. You’re excited; enraptured by the idea of what could happen in the next few minutes, at the thought of finally finding someone so that your mother would stop interfering.

Speaking of your mother—

Your telephone’s ringing, and you find yourself staring at it. Suddenly, there’s a wine glass occupying your vision. “My secret stash,” you grin at him, looking at the drink. You frown a bit, noticing a little white residue on the side. You really need to learn how to work the dishwasher, you remind yourself. Your drink will taste a bit soapy. Still, you’re plenty out of it to care, so you finish it in one swing. “How’d you know?” you ask him. He shrugs simply.

“I know a lot about you.”

You nod, not really sure what to make of it. As your vision gets blurry, and you’re unable to maintain lucidity, you find yourself thinking back to the statistics he quoted earlier in the night, a statistic your mother’s been going on about for a while: “Eight people go missing in the city every day. Six of them are women.”
History of Creatures (Photoset of 4), Irina Novikova
A-Frame Dress

Marc Darnell

I interviewed for a para-educator,
teaching one on one with challenged youth.
The principal-- he looked me up and down,
but never in my eyes, and then he asked
if I had children, and what my husband did.
I said I wasn't married anymore--
he squinted, then he grew a studious frown
until his gaze was focused on my mouth--
my, that is the brightest shade of lipstick.
Before I asked how much the teaching paid,
he rose, grinned, and showed me to the door;
glancing at me as if I wore a mask
he never cared to see beneath-- its cracks
that showed my flaws and age. In my car
I wiped my lipstick off and started to sob
as interviewee 3 with high heels walked
to greet the principal-- he touched her shoulder,
and he looked in her eyes, she had long legs.
I went home, I felt like such a slob--
I hadn't worn a dress, I boiled some eggs.
He never even phoned. She got the job.
WHAT WAKES ME ON A SATURDAY MORNING

Juanita Rey

It is a parade or something
outside my second-floor apartment,
trumpets and drums
and the clomp-clomp of feet on pavement
and was that a flag
that just brushed against my cheek,
a bassoon that bellowed
from the man curled up beside me.

I feel myself breaking through the rope,
grabbing at the uniform –
a snug pajama bottom -
and jumping aboard
the float of hair and pillow.

It’s a procession
and it’s all in my name.
And yet, I whisper his name.
Triplet From the Crypt
Torian Bay

I

Through a window, the farmer looks at them, row by row. A murder of rooks peck a scarecrow to shreds of straw that falls below the beak and claw where they stand, swagger and feed on a fertile land of rats and seeds. They have no fear of a ghostly leer.

II

A black cat walks across my path, stalks and talks of witches’ wrath and “bubble brews that turns a fool into a tiny shrew hiding by a stool” I stay in a shadow In a fear of an end and no place to go this truth I send Liars and cheats turn into treats.

III

Caught in her net, salivating eyes wrap me in regret, spins clockwise a cocoon of dread, a terrifying end to remain unsaid, unable to defend, the spider spins her giant thread whirls and thins a vicious spread.

To barfly, beware! Enter if you dare!
Fort Lauderdale by the Sea, Melissa Ashley Hernandez