

euphony

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# EUPHONY

VOLUME 26, NUMBER 2  
SPRING 2026

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*Euphony* is a nonprofit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism. Visit our website, [www.euphonyjournal.org](http://www.euphonyjournal.org), for more information.

Founded Spring 2000 by  
Stephen Barbara and Matthew Deming

[euphonyjournal.org](http://euphonyjournal.org)

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## **Design**

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# MANAGING EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear Reader,

While each issue of *Euphony* I have seen come together over the past three years has had its own sense of self, I am not sure I have ever had that sense of self surprise me as much as in this issue. The sense of melancholy running through almost every piece like an undercurrent has made this issue a wistful one, one that looks toward the past amid an uncertain future. It is undeniably a “spring” issue, one that emerges out of the gray of Chicago winters, but it is one that is not quite sure what summer it will bloom into. Most importantly, it is an issue that is okay with that uncertainty.

Of course, I may be reading too much into this connection. This is the final of four issues I will have led as managing editor of *Euphony*, and I cannot deny that, for me and for many graduating seniors (or even non-graduating students) picking up this issue, the future seems precarious (particularly for those who care enough about the arts to pick up an undergraduate-run literary magazine). I do, however, hope that, whatever time in your life you are in right now, these poems and short stories bring you a sense of solace. They can't reassure you that everything will be okay, but they will remind you that you are not alone in your worries about the years ahead. These are pieces for looking back and for looking ahead (and, sometimes, they are about continued fun and action even in stages of life younger people might fear). No matter what you are seeking, I think you will find something here for you.

Thank you to everybody who came to our meetings this year, whether you popped by once or showed up consistently for months. I have loved chatting about submissions with you each week. And, as always, thank you so much to the *Euphony* editors—this issue would not have been possible without any of you. Shiloh, it has been a delight to be part of *Euphony* with you for the past three years (and I am glad we're graduating at the same time so that I don't have to know it without you). Juliette and Katherine, I am sure you will continue to lead the prose section with care (and whimsy) in the next year. Kiran and Eliot, I can't wait to see what you two do with *Euphony* under your leadership.

I am proud to present the Spring 2026 issue of *Euphony*.

Happy reading,  
Mazie Witter  
Managing Editor

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*POEMS*

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# POETRY EDITORS' LETTER

Dear Reader,

We are thrilled to bring you this season's selection of poems.

This spring, we were honoured to receive work from poets spanning multiple continents and all walks and phases of life. While we always regret we cannot publish all of the poetry we receive, we decided to round off this year's slate with six of our favorite pieces. Several of this issue's poets are making their *Euphony* debut, bringing with them fresh voices and perspectives. Faithful readers may also notice some familiar names returning to *Euphony's* pages. New or perennial, these six poets brought what our reviewers look for in spades: voice, nerve, and heart.

Our first poem, "The Undertaker" reflects on life's transience with a moment of sublimity amid the mundanity of loss. "Letter to E. from the Elko County Jail," charts a frenetic path through the Nevada wilderness. "The Next Edge of the World" laments a tragedy with a modern incantation for natural disasters. In a delicate meditation on seasonal decay, "Chronoscope 205: Cool ooze September sunlight" finds traces of human loss. In equal parts moving and absurd, "Mal" captures a plaintive moment of foiled desire. Finally, "When a Bird Headed Out to Sea Off the Coast of Nantucket" mixes sympathy, awe, contempt in its speaker's impressions of a sea-bound gull.

If the poems in our winter issue focused on finding life in the harshest circumstances, this issue might be read as the inverse. Whether set against a stark New England seashore or the Great Basin plains, these poems cut to the bitter pit at the core of the grand and picturesque.

We would like to express our gratitude to all of the *Euphony* staff who enriched our discussions this season with their time, praise, and critique; to every poet who trusted us with their work; and especially to our readers. Thank you for taking the time to appreciate the work of six truly talented poets.

Maybe you are reading this issue in the shade of a flowering tree, or on the deck of a boat in the middle of Lake Michigan. Whatever your spring looks like, we hope these poems will remind you not to take it for granted. Thank you once again for following *Euphony* this year—we look forward to seeing you again in 2027!

Sincerely,  
Kiran Collins, Eliot Fairhall, and Shiloh Miller  
Poetry Editors

# The Undertaker

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*Erica Miriam Fabri*

His were the last hands to undress you. If there was any breath left, it spilled out onto his table. How I envied him, knowing he fixed your hair with the same fingers he offered me when we met, in his attempt at solace. We drank rich coffee at his desk. He wore a dirty tie. *Was his skin cold?* I asked. The words leapt out of me before I could stop them. He nodded.

*I didn't have a chance to say goodbye. I was in the bathtub. He disappeared while I was underwater.* The Undertaker told me what he most likely tells everyone that sits at that desk:

*Misery moves like a sloth. Bliss is a cheetah.*

I unzipped the garment bag and pulled your slick navy suit out of its envelope. The vents on the floor started to whistle and howl. A sudden burst of air came streaming from the metal gills and shot straight up into the bottom holes of your pant legs—that indoor wind rocketed through the suit's blue body—until, all at once, the flat legs and arms had blow-up-dolled you back, thick as life, swaying like a drunk, side-to-side, headless.

Then as quick as it happened, it happened. I dropped the fabric, let it puddle onto the floor. What a melted-witch you had become. All your timber sunk under the rug. I too, deflated, said to the Undertaker: *He was only mine for a moment. He's all yours now.*

# Letter to E. from the Elko County Jail

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*Will Falk*

Dear E.: July got dry. So I stole a few arsenic sips from a tailings ditch. I didn't know it was possible to trespass on public land. BLM did. Sent cavalry and deputized cowboys to herd me into Ruby Valley. I would have signed any treaty they offered. But all the treaties were already broken. I sought allies in aspen groves. They were sick, nostalgic for the times before the gold mines. All I found was the specter of a Basque separatist shepherd. He still hid from Franco and his fascists. With sympathy, the Basque presented his skeletal sheep and a creased print of *Guernica* he kept in his back pocket. I needed a lamb. He only had mutton. In his wake, a lithic scatter. I sifted through the flakes for projectile points to aim at assault rifles pointed at me. When they cornered me in an ancient antelope trap, they said it'd go better for me if I just gave the water back. Like ancient antelope, they could have used their batons to club me to death. They used their tasers instead. In the end, I gave my water back. But not to them – to the front of my dusty pants. Not to worry, my new orange jumpsuit is baggy, comfy, dry – Will.

# The Next Edge of the World

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*Ed O'Casey*

Mother of wood, of river, Mother of dream, of safety  
beyond the next edge of the world, of quiet life, Mother

of resistance, of walk together gently in soft earth as we  
move past the stones our fathers lodged in our throats,

Mother of treats in snake oil milk, of rivers worrying  
the world stone to thumbprint, of rejection quiet

on the milk carton missing persons ad,  
Mother of mysticism, of children washed

below the heart's surface, below their best lives, below  
our ravenous faith, washed below the blurred edges

of perception's borders, Mother of Pearl by the pint  
to wash away this bucolically hopeless Texas sunset,

Mother of the ways I waste time while human beings sink  
beneath the current, plucked from under into some guileless

darkness, Mother of wishing this world away one single-use  
plastic at a time, of detritus on the surface and all that's hidden

below, of gnawing on bones to allow our teeth space  
to recognize their distant cousins, of sucking the ivory

clean, Mother of all the trash down the river  
and empty into the Gulf of Namelessness

# Chronoscope 205: Cool ooze September sunlight

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*John Walser*

Cool ooze September sunlight  
the afternoon downpour stopped  
hard as it fell.

Early leaf rot like eyespots  
to scare predators away.

Now small birds again gather chip  
around the feeder.

And the sun goes down. Soon.  
No longer summer.  
No longer really summer.

This morning I watched  
a green shimmer hummingbird  
test the night cold wilt collapse  
the pink flower hanging plant  
the dangling vine  
outside our living room window:

but by the time I said its name twice:  
reverse incantation:  
it was gone.

This storm sky:  
grey plastic stretched thin  
almost dead  
like the skin on my father's forehead  
when I last time leaned over  
to hospital kiss it.

# Mal

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*Sarah Watkins*

I must have rung up the pepperoni package seventeen times  
before it occurred that you wouldn't notice me  
no matter how loudly I tap-tap-tapped to delete  
or how many times I coughed into my elbow

but I knew you—  
the way your nostrils burned  
from your first peroxide bleach,  
the crooked grin you slipped me  
like a five-dollar bill—

so I knocked over a tabloid,  
the kind we used to clip the models from,  
and watched it flop face-heavy like buttered toast  
the same way the magazines did on my carpet

but you didn't come.

I'm not sure why you'd start now—  
random convenience store,  
Sunday afternoon, dressed down—  
or why I thought you might:

you, real,  
ring-fingered, dark-haired,  
with your collage-making safety scissors  
left behind so long ago—

but I waited for as long as I could,  
ruminating on you like sour cud,  
rushing my hands over stipple edges  
until I got finger cuts.

now I gotta pick up the magazine.

I gotta leave the store.  
I gotta swallow  
what I've been chewing.

# When a Bird Headed Out to Sea Off the Coast of Nantucket

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*Claude Wilkinson*

While a thick fog prowled in  
on the already shortened  
autumn evening, I watched a gull,  
  
lovely, and white enough to still  
see, glide vaunted above us  
walking hurriedly inland.  
  
Then he lifted, barely rowing  
his disappearing wings, and turned  
toward a wholly blind vastness that I  
  
was afraid to even imagine.  
Not to make gulls sound anything like  
paragons of virtue—I know all too well  
  
how they commandeered picnics—  
but I've since learned amazing  
facts about their ability to predict  
  
storms, their having high IQs,  
and UV and binocular vision, that they  
sometimes study human eye direction  
  
to plan their own next move.  
Yet this thundering swell to cross was no  
narrow ribbon of oxbow to be doubled back  
  
through, so I wondered, as we ourselves  
had begun thinking of dinner, whether  
a succulent memory was driving him  
  
to distraction, or if it were some  
unseen siren-singing that had to be  
answered before the weather cleared.

Though mostly, what I wondered  
was why something not made in God's  
image should have more heart than me.

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# *PROSE*

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# PROSE EDITORS' LETTER

Dear Reader,

Over the past couple of months, we have watched snow melt to give way to myriad flowers, bright new leaves, soft grass, and dewy spring mornings. In honor of these changes, the theme of our Spring 2026 prose contest was “Transformations.” Our winning piece, “My Week on the Milk Carton,” takes the grim reality of the “milk carton kids” of the mid-1980s and twists into the backdrop for a coming-of-age story about friendship, first love, and family. Next, the runner-up of our prose contest, “King69,” marks the narrator’s journey through the manosphere in a haunting look at the impact social media can have on a person. For a story that is sure to make you laugh out loud, read “Pickle War,” the dramatic telling of a passionate and violent pickleball match between “rival” retirement communities. Lastly, “Fire-Breather” explores the aftermath of disaster as a young woman tries to rebuild her life, only to be pulled back to the ash and smoke she thought she left behind.

These four pieces together reimagine transformation as something stranger, something less obedient than renewal itself. It can be a disappearance transfigured into self-discovery or an online persona consuming the person behind it or a game inflated into mythic absurdity or even a life rebuilt in the long shadow of ash and smoke. Varied in tone yet bound by their attention to rupture, each story asks how the self persists when pressed by circumstance and desire. Some of the transformations are chosen, while some of them arrive unbidden. Some announce themselves in comedy, others in terror, and others still in quiet devastation. When read together, they remind us that change is rarely gentle but almost always revealing.

We hope you enjoy them as much as we did!

Best,  
Katherine Chen and Juliette Shapiro  
Prose Editors

# My Week on the Milk Carton

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*Himanshu Sharma*

## Winner of the 2026 Prose Contest

For a week in 1987, my face was on a milk carton. MISSING – DAVID FORREST BECKNER, it read above a smiling photo of me. The photo was pulled from picture day – overexposed, freshly combed hair, chipped teeth. My parents had a framed version of it on our stairs. They walked past it for years without giving it much thought. But now that it was at our breakfast table staring out at them (and thousands of other families), they seemed sick at the sight of it.

The truth was, I had never gone missing. The whole mess started when Billy Bullhorn told me there was easy scoring to be had on Halloween night. His brother had gotten plastered at Mulligan's Shed, he said. So plastered that he left behind half his stash down there. Now, I gave Billy his nickname because he was a loudmouth, always blowing hot air in everyone's faces. But looking across the cafeteria, I could see his brother wearing shades indoors, ready to hurl with each bite of his meatloaf. I decided it might be worth checking out. The crew was supposed to just be me and Billy, but he'd been sitting next to Wanda Perry in his math class and had taken a real liking to her. Billy had a bad habit of obsessing over whichever pretty girl laughed the hardest at his jokes. But now that he was driving his dad's Mustang to school I could buy that some of them might be into him too, if only for a joyride. When he asked me if he could invite her for our expedition I said yes, as long as I could invite Riley Gothke. The first time I met her, Billy was getting his car fixed at her parents' auto shop. She was sitting behind the front desk working through her math homework. I asked if she went to our high school, and she looked back at me with the most incredible eyes I've ever encountered. Never seen anything that's caught the light like them. Patient soul, Billy waited 15 minutes while I chatted her up and tried to figure out how I'd never noticed her at school before. The day before Halloween I saw her again and invited her along for our misadventure.

At 9 o'clock Halloween night Billy picked me up from my place. It was a Saturday night, so my parents wanted me home at midnight. I thought I'd be able to make that. They weren't worried about what I'd get up to – I don't know if they knew I drank, but my report card never took a hit so it wasn't ever brought up. We collected Riley and Wanda and headed to Mulligan's Shed. I was kicked out of shotgun for Wanda, but sitting next to Riley more than made up for it. She told me about the craziest people she'd encountered in the lobby of her parents' shop, and

the whole time I found myself paralyzed by her eyes. I was swallowed up in their blue, practically drowning in them. I was mesmerized by how they lit up with each little joke she made, every crazy new turn her stories took. Billy brought me back to the surface when he hollered that we had reached Mulligan's Shed.

Mulligan's Shed was a concessions stand whose name survived even after it'd been turned into a lifeguard station. During the off-season, it made a good landmark for hooligans. Riley, Wanda, and I watched the light from Billy's flashlight dance around for a minute until he was able to retrieve his brother's stash. He reemerged with a grocery bag full of Heinekens. We were all happy with this score and began working through it. The four of us sat in a circle drinking and telling stories. It started off pretty basic. Billy and I recapped some of our greatest hits, like the time we stole a shopping cart and pushed it through the McDonald's drive-through to settle a bet on whether they'd take our order (they did – I made 5 bucks that night). We were a kind of double act, me telling the story as-it-was and Billy making the girls laugh with his wild embellishments. Riley repeated some of the stories she told me, about hillbilly kooks and dumb kids our age trying to cover up that they'd totaled their parents' car. The drunker we got, the more we shut up. Wanda was the exception: she reveled in filling us in on all the popular-kid lunch-table gossip. I'll be honest, I was 15. I'd acquainted myself with the stack of Playboys my dad had poorly hidden under the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. My mind was blown the first time I flipped through those pages, the answer to a mystery I didn't know I was trying to solve. Hearing that kids my age were going at it like *that*, I felt almost ready to faint. I kept looking at Riley, trying to see what her reaction to it all was. If she noticed me looking she never glanced back. I wanted to know, more desperately than I should admit, if she had any of her own stories to share.

The deeper ruination started when we found the sunglasses cases at the bottom of the bag. At that point each of us had two or three bottles scattered around us. Billy opened the case to find three joints and a lighter sitting inside. Pretty soon we were passing this trophy around and taking it in. The way my parents talked about pot, I thought even being within a mile radius of it could get me thrown in jail. But when our prize made its way to me, I bit back my fear and inhaled. Having never been high before, being high and drunk was a pretty intense experience. I was watching life play out before me, warped and slowed like a badly-wound tape.

I'm not sure how the others bore it. Billy and Wanda had enough firing in them to make their way back to the Mustang. That left me with Riley. I let her finish the joint – the calm confidence with which handled it told me she had more experience on that subject than I did.

Once it was burnt out she moved closer to me on the sand. We sat and watched the moonlight glint off waves, listening to the foamy ocean crash against the shore. Finally, after a few minutes of me stumping myself trying to think of something smooth to say, she began speaking.

“You’re going through it, aren’t ya?” She began, a playful smile stretched across her face.

“Me? No. This is nothing I can’t handle.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want you losing your mind.” She put her hand on mine and squeezed. “You know, I always saw you around. You and Billy. Always laughing at yourselves. I wondered what you guys were laughing at, what your days were filled with.”

“You were stalking us?” I asked incredulously. I regretted whatever part of me fired that one off when she gave me a stern, are-you-serious type of look.

“No. I don’t know what it is. Sometimes I sit in the cafeteria, or walk through the halls, and I watch people coming and going and wonder what’s going on in their lives. I remember one time,” she said in a soft whisper, “my family and I went into the city, and as we were walking I looked all around and saw hundreds and hundreds of rooms with people working and living and *being*. I looked at them and I just thought about how many people I will have *nothing* in common with. They’ll hate things I love and love things I hate. Their whole lives are spent working jobs and loving people I don’t even know exist. Or our lives could be exactly the same, and I’ll never know it because we’ll never speak to each other. Have you ever felt anything like that? That endless not-knowing?”

“You know those kids they have on milk cartons?” She nodded. “When we sit down for breakfast my parents always tell my sister and I about how terrible it must be for the families who’re missing kids. Then they remind us to be careful around strangers, and we all go back to our cereal and orange juice. I think they think that’s all it takes to keep us safe, that little warning and those kids on the milk carton. Like us remembering what they said will be the thing that keeps us from winding up dead in a ditch. But I’m just left thinking about what it would be like if my sister was gone. Or I was gone. I wonder if when the kids come back home their parents show them the milk carton and those kids think it’s cool. Like they’re Jim Kelly on the Wheaties box.” I looked back at her. “I did feel that way about you. After we met at your parents’ shop I was wondering how I’d never noticed you walking around the halls before. Whenever I’d run into you I’d play our conversations back and wonder if you thought I was funny or if you thought about me at all after we finished talking. And then tonight, when we were all telling stories, I just kept waiting for you to go. I wanted you to tell me everything about you. I wanted to hear you talk and talk and talk until I was sick of

your voice.” She was looking at me deep in thought. In my compromised state I thought she was annoyed with me. “God, I should shut up.”

“No, no, no, please don’t,” she said. “That’s all so... you’re very sweet. I’ve never had anyone say anything like that to me before.” She seemed embarrassed to admit that, and for a moment was unsure of what to do. Then she gained some resolve and in one swift movement kissed me. It took longer than it should’ve for my brain to register the feeling, and despite feeling flustered by it some intelligent part of my subconscious kissed her back. Soon I was slipping away from myself as we disappeared into each other.

I woke up to the sun rising. For a moment I was caught between the bliss of the previous night and the hangover that was pounding against my skull. Both gave way to the sudden realization that I was completely and utterly fucked. I shook Riley awake and we stumbled our way back to Billy’s car. We caught him and Wanda in the backseat – suffice it to say I drove us home. I was fighting for my life. I had never seriously pissed my parents off before, but showing up 8 hours past curfew reeking of everything they had ever warned me about was a bad place to start. I chomped six sticks of gum from Billy’s glovebox to try covering up. When I pulled onto my street, I saw a police cruiser sitting in the driveway and felt a chill run through my body. *I’m going to jail*, I thought, *they’re gonna send me to jail for underage drinking and I’m gonna get beat up in prison and I’m never gonna go to college or see Riley again*. That’s really what I thought. I pulled up on the curb, told everyone I hoped I’d see them tomorrow, and bolted through my front door. When I barreled into my kitchen I saw my parents sitting at the dining table with a burly officer.

My mother was the only one of the three who was facing in my direction. I’ll never forget the look on her face. It was pure revelation, like Jesus came down from heaven into that tiny New Jersey kitchen. Every time I saw her in church after that day, I watched her take in the pastor’s words with closed eyes and solemn devotion. She was chasing that divine feeling, hoping something from scripture would deliver it in her again. In one moment she went from gawking at me to swallowing me into her arms. My father turned around in his chair, his face – if my mother saw Christ when I came in, I was Satan incarnate to my father. My mother asked me if I was ok and when I told her I was she hollered that she was so worried about me, that she called Billy’s parents and when they said I wasn’t with them she got worried, that kids, good kids like me, would get snatched up on Halloween night. I’ve only been hunting one time, because the one time I went out I shot a young deer and had to watch its mother cry over it. When animal mothers lose their children they shout their anguish into the sky because they have no better recourse against whatever supernatural force took their babies

from them. My mother's wails were something like that. My dad had to usher her to their bedroom as I sat down with the police officer.

I sat there trying to stay composed, terrified that he'd catch a whiff of pot and haul me off to jail. After a minute I stammered out that I'd just been hanging out at my friend Billy's house. I'd fallen asleep on his couch for what I thought would be thirty minutes and ended up being the whole night. He asked me why my friend Billy's parents said I wasn't home. I said that I misspoke, I was sleeping on my friend Wayne's couch after Billy dropped me off there. He didn't believe a word of it, but I was in front of him in one piece so he was fine to let my story ride. He told me that my parents had reported me missing at 1 that morning and that there were a couple squad cars roaming the streets looking for me. He said they had a couple hundred missing posters ready to go, and that my name had already been printed into the Sunday paper. He seemed upset they had kicked up such a fuss for a kid on a bender. As he left he shouted from the door that I should leave a note the next time I'm drinking with my buddy Wayne. After he left my dad came back down and took his spot at the head of the table, stewing in his venomous anger.

"Your mother is asleep," he hissed out an angry whisper, "finally, and we had your sister stay at the Rockfords' this morning, so she wouldn't get scared by all the commotion." He stood up, walked to the kitchen to grab a glass of water, sat back down, took down a hard swallow, then continued. "I know *exactly* what you were up to last night so I want no lies and no excuses. What the *hell* were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry dad," I began, "I lost track of time and fell asleep. I'm really, *really* sorry I wasn't home by curfew."

My father gritted his teeth, and gulped down another swig of water. "All right. You fell asleep. Because you 'lost track of time', your mother and I have been up for nearly 24 hours raising hell trying to find you."

"You said you didn't want any excuses," I replied lamely.

"I know that's not an excuse. I just want you to understand that while you were in la-la-land, your mother and I were thinking about you being in somebody's trunk three states away. Your mother," at this he choked a little on the lump in his throat, and took a gulp to push it back down. After he'd steeled his nerves, he looked at me through teary eyes and continued, "I hope you never know what state you put her in. Sometimes, your mother and I, we talk about those kids on the milk cartons before we go to bed, and we thank God that our kids would never put themselves in danger, that Lindsey and David will never end up on the side of a milk carton for some other family to feel sad about. But now I think we're gonna talk about how we raised such a *fuck-up*." That was the first and last time I ever heard my dad swear.

I sat there shaking, fighting to stop my silent sobbing. "Here's the deal. You're grounded until the end of the school year. All the way until

June. You go to school and you come back. If you want to spend time with your friends they can come here where we can supervise you guys. After June, if you ever," he leaned in until he was inches from my face, so close that I could smell the Folgers on his breath, "and I mean ever, come home smelling of alcohol or grass, you will no longer live at this house. Am I clear?"

I responded "Yes, sir" in shaky breaths. He banished me to my room. I spent the day in the fetal position, nauseous from guilt that pulsed through every part of my body. My sister came back home in the afternoon, and I heard my parents explaining to her what happened. After they were done she marched upstairs into my room. She wrapped me up in the tightest hug she had ever given me. I sobbed into her sweater and she sobbed into my hair; she left without us exchanging any words.

School on Monday was a terrifying prospect, but it was the only chance I had to get out of the house so I soldiered on. People came up to me all day saying their parents had told them I was missing and they had been worried about me. I never had more friends than on that November 2nd. I didn't see Riley, Billy, or Wanda until lunch. I slunk embarrassed into the cafeteria and tried to be as discreet as possible, but someone spotted me and raised a cheer for me, the lost boy who was found again. I stood frozen in the spectacle before Billy grabbed my wrist. He was sitting with Wanda and her friends, decidedly not our table, but I enjoyed the opportunity to put names from her stories to faces. They started hammering me with questions, but Billy could tell I was getting queasy and put his Bullhorn to work. Later as I went to put my tray away Riley came up to me.

"I bet you got a real intense grounding, huh?" She said after we exchanged hellos.

"Yeah, I got it pretty rough. Did you get grounded too?"

She gave me a bittersweet smile. "Before I left I told my parents I was going to a sleepover."

"Oh. So... you'd be able to see me again?"

She laughed at that. "Would your parents be fine with it?"

"Well, you'd have to come to my house. If you're ok with not going on any real dates until the summer, then I'm your guy."

She made a face feigning that she was deep in thought, before brightly saying, "Ok! If there's nothing to do at your house, you're just gonna have to hear me talk and talk and talk forever." She gave me a peck on the cheek and departed. That little kiss rolled around my mind the rest of the day. On weekends I'd wait on my front porch for her to bike over. She knew how hard I was fighting to contain my excitement, so she'd always busy herself making sure her bike was locked tight to our mailbox before coolly sauntering up the driveway. When she actu-

ally sat next to me, though, she'd light up. We'd watch cars drive by and people walking their dogs, giving them all manner of hidden lives. She'd muse that Mrs. Appleton in the green Volkswagen picked that color because she wished she lived in the rainforest, or that Mr. Bradley walking his sheepdog had thought he'd bought a rug until it barked at him.

"You ever wonder if mailmen collect stamps?" She asked once, as we watched the mail truck make its way through our neighborhood.

"Why would they do that? I feel like they'd get pretty sick of anything to do with mail."

"I don't know. They might see a cool stamp and go out and buy one for themselves." She paused for a moment, thinking. "If I was a mailman, I'd probably have a little map with all the places people have sent mail from. Just imagine, you're going along your route and along with the phone bills and magazines there's a letter from cousin Bill in Alaska or a postcard from Italy."

"They shouldn't let you be a mailman. You'd open up everybody's mail." She laughed pretty hard at that. I turned to her and said very sincerely, "I'm sorry you're not getting a real date. You deserve better than this."

She shot me a stern look. "You know, I'll go out and find someone who gives me 'what I deserve' if you don't stop saying dumb things like that." She slapped me pretty hard in the arm, which made me burst into laughter. Suffice it to say, my parents absolutely loved her, and after three months of hearing me wallow in self-pity they bent their rules a little so we could start dating for real. Luckily for us, they never figured out that she was with me on Halloween night 1987.

Billy and Wanda started going steady. With those two coupling up, and me dating Riley, over time we got pulled into each other's groups. I'd play DnD with Riley and her friends and he'd party with Wanda and her friends, and each of us was where we wanted to be. We'd reconnect every month or so, for a long chat about life. We often just ended up going over our most recent misadventures, trying to see if any of them lived up to the glory days. Even during our once-a-month calls from separate colleges, we never spun any yarn that came close to what we got up to in high school.

The Millersfield Dairy Company saw my name and photo in the newspaper, and for the second week of November 1987, I was their milk carton kid. Our breakfast table was rendered eerily silent. After we'd emptied the carton I cut myself out of the cardboard and held onto it in my wallet. It was my badge of honor. People at school would come up to me and show me their milk cartons, asking me to sign it like it was a baseball card. Some of them took to calling me Milk Carton Dave, a nickname Riley made endless fun of but I admit thinking was pretty cool.

My family never saw my “disappearance” as something they could just laugh off. I came home alive, but my parents lost their son that night. Their perfect boy was sprawled out in the sand surrounded by Heinekens. My father looked at me like I was an imposter. Like I was a teenage drifter who’d masqueraded as his son to get a roof over his head. They still cooked me dinner. They still did my laundry. But I overheard their bedtime conversations, wondering out loud if I was still the son they had raised.

My mother was consumed by fear of “stranger danger”. She was paranoid in a way I’d never seen before, almost crippled by her suspicions. I remember the house being filled with neighbors and the smell of her baking as she campaigned for HOA. Once she was elected, she devoted her energy to locking our neighborhood down. All over the street, on every tree and lightpost, were signs telling our neighbors to call her if there was a car or person they didn’t recognize. She stood watch on the porch every day, until I left for college, as I walked the ten feet to my car. She was so worried I’d be snatched up out in the front yard she needed to watch me get in my car and drive away, for her own sanity. As for my sister, I wasn’t her annoying little brother anymore. I realized that she’d had the same thoughts as me about the milk carton kids, wondering what would happen if I’d disappeared. She’d learned from whatever regrets she’d had when she got a glimpse of it. She also seemed to understand that I had graduated into the adult world (as a 17-year-old would define it) after Halloween night. We could sit down and have actual, serious conversations and bond over things deeper than “mom and dad are so lame”.

Now that I have kids who’re creeping up to be the age I was then, I often wonder what I’m gonna say to them when they disappear into the world. Whenever I run in the park and see parents with their young kids, I tap into that phenomenon Riley told me about. I hope sometimes that I run into another milk carton kid, who was found again and knows exactly what lessons to take away from it. But it’s just as likely that he’s pulling a photo of himself out of his wallet and hoping I figure it out for us.

*Sasha Darvas*

## Runner-up of the 2026 Prose Contest

I was the first to join the online waiting room. A pair of aviator sunglasses with the words “KING69: HOW TO BE A REAL MAN” written in block red glared menacingly in the middle of the screen. I stared at them mindlessly as I waited for the others to join. Around thirty men had signed up for the course, all of them probably just as pathetic as me. I sighed and checked the time. It was due to start in two minutes.

All I wanted was to get some confidence back. To have some guidance on how to be myself in a world that seemed to be squared against me.

King69’s “How to be a Real Man” ten-week online course had seemed like a good idea when I first saw it. I’d watched some of King69’s YouTube videos, all of which showed him looking vaguely smug on a yacht or in some fancy club, always surrounded by girls in bikinis and short dresses. He wore dark aviators, and walked around bulking his huge, Aztec-style tattooed arms, talking to the camera about how he gained success by being a “Real Man.” He flaunted the image of alpha like a Michelin star on a restaurant menu. I couldn’t tell how serious channel was or whether I actually wanted to be like him, but I envied how confident he seemed. How free.

I made sure that my camera and mic were off as others started to join. My mind drifted back to when Hannah and I had faked being ill to spend the day together, but she’d forgotten to turn her mic off after giving her boss a whole performance of coughs and sneezes, and exposed the whole operation. She was fired the next day, but she didn’t mind. She didn’t like her job anyway, and the whole thing made her laugh too much to care.

It made me laugh too, so much I almost pissed myself.

It had been around a month since we’d broken up. Not a single part of me saw it coming. We both cried a lot, holding onto each other on her sage green bed like children who think they’ll never see each other again. She told me she ‘just needed some time alone.’ I said that I didn’t understand, we were good together. We’d dated for ten years, since we were fifteen. We knew everything about each other. Every weekend, I bought her flowers. We had a cinema date night every other week. She’d been to the past four Christmases at my Mum’s. I felt so rough after it ended I thought I might be terminally ill.

Mark told me I should try to get over her. We’d been out on our

weekly run together, and even though I'm much less strong than he is, I'd kept pace with him. I didn't care that he was so much henchman than me—he was a personal trainer, so it made sense. We got on well, and that was all that mattered.

Mark was the one that recommended King69 to me.

"He'll help you get your confidence back," said Mark as we jogged along the Thames.

"I'm fine," I muttered.

"Bro, you're clearly not. Hannah ruined you."

I didn't say anything. Even though we were mates I didn't like admitting so casually that I wasn't feeling good.

"I had a breakup, around a year ago," he said, picking up the pace. "Felt like dogshit. Then I found King69. Honestly, this guy saved my life."

"Seriously?" I said, going even faster.

He panted, then grinned. "Just google King69 when you get back, ok?"

I said that I would. That night, I spent hours in my room scrolling through his socials. All the videos were pretty similar, promoting what he called "Real Masculinity." "How to achieve your full potential as a man." "Why your relationship is holding you back." "Best protein sources for bulking up." "Why you're not getting women." The list went on.

At the bottom of the page there was a ten-week online course on "How to be a Real Man." A picture of King69 sat on a beach with a load of girls by his side flashed on my computer. It looked kind of stupid, but there was something about it that made me feel strangely powerful. I clicked on the link. It was £1000. I could picture Hannah's reaction. She would hate it.

I pressed purchase.

A few guys had popped up on the register. Like me, all of them also had their mics and cameras off. I scrolled through their names. "Andrew B." "matt howard." "PussyLicker." I laughed for the first time in weeks, and immediately thought of Hannah. She would have found that hilarious. "Poor guy. He must so insecure," I imagined her saying, before dropping a kiss on my forehead and ruffling my hair.

But even though he did seem pretty desperate, this "PussyLicker" had automatically achieved the status of most alpha guy in the forum. I checked what I'd registered my own name as. "Joshua." It suddenly felt so average.

With a red flash the screen blinked to action. A new image emerged: a henchman, bald man, wearing a pair of black aviators. King69 himself.

"My fellow men. Welcome," he said through the screen, keeping his sunglasses on. His computer screen reflected back in the lenses, so that two King69s shone before us. "Let me start by saying that you have

done well to choose this course. The modern man is currently under threat, and you are part of the force that is going to defeat that threat.” He smirked and leaned back in his gaming chair. “But first, let tell you about me. I am King69. Entrepreneur, business owner, and fitness coach. Not to mention, king of Real Men. Over the past four years, I have quadrupled my income. My success can’t be stopped.”

He paused, and for a second I thought he might take off his sunglasses. He didn’t.

“I wasn’t born with any silver spoon in my mouth, though. My mum was a drunk and an addict. She abandoned me and my brothers, and as the eldest, I had to step up as leader of the family. Do you know what that does to a man?” No one responded. King69 hit the table below his computer. “It makes him strong, that’s fucking what. It teaches him how unfair life is, and how women are not our equals. Not in strength. Not in power. Not in anything.”

I cringed slightly. Though I didn’t agree with his opinions on women, I felt a surge of admiration for his vulnerability. The only person I’d ever been able to open up to was Hannah, and King69 had just done it in front of a group of strangers, all of whom were nothing more to him than a black screen with a crossed-out microphone in the corner.

“You have all chose well to be here,” King69 said. “It shows strength. Courage. You want to be the master of your own life, and that makes you powerful. It’s not your fault that life is shutting you down. The system—the system is fucking rigged against us. Women have abandoned their roles as women. We are the victims of an unjust society.” He leaned closer to the screen, flashing a smile with some of the whitest teeth I have ever seen. “That’s where I come in. Let me teach you how to be Real Men.”

\* \* \*

At the end of the session, I typed “Thnx” in the message bar and switched off my Mac. I wasn’t sure what I thought of it. King69 had spoken for the whole hour about the struggles of modern men – how because of feminism, our identities are threatened, and we have to learn to assert ourselves by any means possible. He’d raged how male suicide is at a record high, and how the rise of equality-diversity-inclusion traps men in a system that doesn’t allow them to succeed. He said that it was up to us to change how women didn’t want to date anymore, that the future of family life depended on our assertion as men. He assured us that he would teach us how to reclaim our power as men, and how to get women in the process. There was an anger in his words that almost scared me, but at the same time I was awestruck by his sheer confidence. His conviction made me feel powerful.

At the end, he said he had a challenge for us.

"To prove yourself to me, you must complete this task. Do something you've never done before. A crucial part of being a Real Man means putting yourself in uncomfortable situations to prove your strength. Do this, or don't bother coming back."

I stared at the ceiling. I had no idea what new thing to do. I liked my routine—I worked, then cooked, then ran down the Thames pathway in the evening. That was it.

Later that evening I met with Mark again. We jogged in comfortable silence over the grass as the sun started to set.

"How did you find King69 then?" he asked.

"Good." I said, wiping a drip of sweat from my forehead. "I've joined his confidence building course."

"Good for you man! You'll forget Hannah in no time. Bitch."

I clenched my fists. "Don't say that," I said.

"Huh?" he asked.

I sighed, slowing down a little. "Just don't call her a bitch, ok?"

He was quiet for a second. "That's the thing with you. I'm only saying this to help, but you're soft, bro. She screwed you over! Do you think she's thinking about you now? No! She'd probably off fucking some other guy. That's just the reality."

My chest felt tight. I tried to speed away, but he caught up with me.

"I'm sorry, man. I'm just saying it how it is. You should call her a bitch, too. It would make you feel better. Get the anger off your chest."

"I'm alright," I said.

He sped in front of me and started running backwards so that we were face to face. We were so close I could feel the sweat pouring off his chest. "Do it. Call her a bitch."

"Nah, mate, you're alright."

He shoved his face so close to mine I thought we would butt heads. "Do it! Bitch!"

"Bitch! Fine!" I screamed. "Hannah's a bitch! She's a slut and a whore and a bitch!"

He smiled and returned to my side. We ran in silence down the river.

"Bet you feel better now," he said, before catching the bus home.

The scary thing was that I did.

\* \* \*

The chat box in the next session was swarming with boastful recollections of the new things people had done. Harris\_W said that he smoked weed. Jed H. said he went to the gym for the first time. King69 laughed when Jed's comment came through. "Alright. Don't scare us all

off,” he said. Jed’s name blinked from the chat.

PussyLover said he had a one-night stand. “That’s more like it,” replied King69.

I commented that I called my ex a bitch to her face. I cringed as I clicked send, but no one would know it was partly a lie.

King69 was right on it. “Good for you Joshua!” he yelled. “Show her who’s boss!”

That night, I felt good about myself for the first time in weeks. I searched for King69’s exercise plan, and set an alarm for 5 a.m. to go to the gym the next morning.

That night was the first night I didn’t dream about Hannah since we broke up.

For the next month, I went to the gym every day. I mostly did weights, focusing on biceps and abs. And always, I had King69’s videos playing on full volume in my headphones. “Push harder! Reject weakness! Assert yourself! Reclaim your power!”

The phrase “Gym Rat” become almost comically accurate for me. I was always sweaty, and I’d gained a certain restless, almost rabid energy. I’d also put on around three pounds of muscle. My shoulders felt broader than usual, and I kept bumping into things where I wasn’t used to my new size.

I couldn’t tell if I was imagining it, but I also thought that women were looking at me more than normal. The gym had transformed me into something resembling one of those fitness posters you would see on the train, probably with a dick graffitied in a corner. Part of me missed my running routine; feeling my feet thud against the earth and being out in the open air had always provided me with a sense of calm. It was very different to the gym’s flashing neon lights, omnipresent mirrors, and loud electronic music. But running had never made me look this muscular. And I liked being big. It made me feel powerful.

One evening, as I was heading back from a hard leg session, I saw a girl who looked just like Hannah. She had the same dark hair as Hannah, similar clothes, even a similar walk. She stared down at her phone as she walked past me.

“Bitch,” I said.

\* \* \*

On the fifth session, King69 told all of us to share something that made us feel good about ourselves.

I’d been feeling great about myself that week. I’d bought some new shirts because none of my old ones fit. The shop also sold some aviator sunglasses, so I got a pair of them too. I thought back to the first session, when King69 had told us about his Mum leaving and having to raise his

brothers. For the first time, I turned on my mic.

“When I was six, my Dad left me, my mum, and my sister,” I said. A green bar on the screen flashed with the new, unfamiliar sound of my voice. “I helped my mum raise my sister. And I helped her with things around the house, too. Cleaning, cooking.” My mind flashed back to spending time with Mum in the kitchen. For a while after my dad left I struggled to speak, and cooking gave me a way of connecting with her without having to say anything. To this day, nothing made me calmer than the smell of a roast chicken. “I’m a really good cook, actually. I made this risotto the other night—”

“Wait, *what?*” spat King69. Even with his sunglasses on, I could see a scarlet red colour firing across his face.

I could feel myself blushing. “Yeah, I—”

“Never say that again. Cooking is the woman’s role. If you’re a Real Man, you have no business in the kitchen. You should be served on, hand and foot. Do you want women to think you’re soft? If you ever say or do anything like that again, you’re out of here.”

I was stunned. My hands were shaking, and I didn’t want to know how pink my face was. I didn’t speak for the rest of the session, and when I closed the laptop, my whole body was drenched in sweat.

I wished Hannah was there. I clenched my fist and punched the wall.

\* \* \*

The next day, I went to my mum’s for a Sunday roast. She greeted me at the door with a kiss then stepped back, mouth open as she stared at me.

“My goodness, love! You’re so different! And so big!”

Normally, a comment like this from her would make me smile, but King69’s words stung like a wasp sting in my mind, and all I could do was mutter a quiet thanks.

“Mills is going to be late,” she said, rubbing my shoulders as we walked into the kitchen. “Could you help with the potatoes? You always do them so well.”

I froze. King69 told me never to cook again.

“No,” I said.

Mum furrowed her eyebrows. “Why not?”

I gritted my teeth. “That’s your job,” I said. I heaved myself onto the sofa and stared at my phone so that I didn’t have to look at her. It was her role, though. I was the man of the house, and I shouldn’t have to do shit like that. That’s for women.

When Mills arrived I stayed hunched on the sofa, glaring at King69’s Snapchat. From the kitchen I could hear Mills telling Mum

that she'd broken up with her boyfriend.

"Slut," I said.

Though I couldn't see them, I could feel their shock. "What was that?" said Mum.

My face grew red, and there was a hot tension in my chest, like a coal about to explode. "I said, you're a slut, Mills. A fucking slut. You know what, you deserve to be—"

"Get out," Mum said. I left without saying another word, and listened to King69's podcast on how men should have sexual control over women the whole way home.

\* \* \*

Over the next few weeks I slept with a ton of girls. It was always the same. Bar, drink, back to mine, fuck. None of them were anything special. I couldn't even remember their names.

Mark texted to see if I was around, and we went out for pints. He seemed impressed by how much muscle I'd put on. I pretended not to care. Then, when I was talking about all the birds I'd fucked, and how women deserved to be hit if they disrespect men, he called me extreme. I called him a pussy, and he told me not to text him again.

\* \* \*

The next evening as I was coming back from the gym, I saw Hannah.

It was her, I was sure. With her long hair, huge headphones, and the little ankle boots she always loved so much. We both froze as we locked eyes. After what felt like hours, she smiled. The power that smile had over me. Its warmth, its infectious, wasted love.

We sat down at a café nearby, both pretending to be hugely interested in the latte art on our coffees.

"You've changed," she said, stirring her cappuccino with a teaspoon.

"Yup," I said.

"What have you been up to?"

I tried not to look at her. "Oh, this and that." I paused, considering whether I wanted to hurt her or not. I decided that I did. "I've slept with a shit ton of girls."

"Oh," she said. Her cheeks flushed and she looked away.

"Yeah. It's great that we ended things. I've done so much more with myself."

"Josh—" she said. I winced. Only she called me that.

"You never gave me the respect I deserved. I'm better than you, you

know.”

“What happened to you?” she muttered. For the first time since we’d sat down, she looked me in the eyes. “You used to be so ... good.”

I hit the table so hard our mugs shook. “Good? The fuck does that mean?”

Her face suddenly glistened with mascara-tint tears. “I don’t know Josh, so... sweet.”

I felt hot all over, like my body was raging with one of those out-of-control wildfires I’d seen on TV. “Ah, ok, ok. I get it. You think I’m weak. You think you’re better than me. I was just another one of your victims. You used me. Made me forget who I am.” I hit the table one more time, fist clenched for extra impact. She flinched. “Never again.”

“Josh—I—I don’t...” She stood up, pulling her skirt down over her thighs.

“Slut! Fucking slut!” I yelled. She bolted down the street.

\* \* \*

I worked out again when I got home, blasting a “Best of King69” YouTube video. Hannah had thrown me off, but it was fine. I’d shown her. After a few hours, I was so exhausted I felt almost delirious. Before I knew it, I was scrolling through old photos of me and Hannah on my phone. A lump formed in my throat, and my legs started to shake. I stood up and stared at myself in the mirror. I hated what I saw. A thick, hot tear dripped down my cheek, and I slapped myself in the face.

\* \* \*

It was the night before the final King69 session, and I felt like shit. Though I would never admit it, I was nervous about how King69’s course was coming to end. He had become my God—his words were gospel, his instructions law. I revered his teachings about men’s superiority, women’s inferiority, and the necessity of asserting strength—by any means possible. I was proud to be one of his followers—or his dukes, as he called us.

I texted the chat of fellow dukes to see if anyone was around that evening. PussyLicker replied straight away. “Yup. I’m in. Where are you.”

“London,” I replied.

“Same,” he said. I couldn’t believe my luck. These guys could be anywhere in the world, but we just happened to be in the same city.

“Meet in Soho in an hour?”

“Yh,” he replied. “Can’t wait to get fucked.”

The bar was rammed, and stunk of sweat and fruit-flavored vodka. Glares of green neon light flashed across the dance floor where a few

girls were dancing, holding their cocktails in one hand and their phones in the other. We stared at them while we drank pints.

“Easy prey,” PussyLicker said, leaning onto my shoulder and hitting my back.

We didn’t speak much. We mostly just watched the girls dance, or tried to chat up any girls that came near us. I learned that PussyLicker’s name was actually David, and that he worked at Aldi and lived with his mum.

It must have been around two or three in the morning when we left. Outside the bar, one of the girls from the dancefloor stood alone, swaying, typing on her phone.

PussyLicker slapped me on the back again. “This one’s mine.”

I watched as he walked over to her. I watched as he talked to her, guiding his hand over her waist. I watched as she tried to push him away and he pulled her closer. I watched as he took her phone from her hand and put it in his pocket.

I watched as he pulled her into the alleyway.

I watched as he shoved her into a wall and pulled down her skirt.

I ran as fast as I could.

\* \* \*

I didn’t attend King69’s final session. I sat in my room and cried my eyes out, my whole body shaking with violent floods of tears that wouldn’t stop. I felt like I was under an avalanche, snow and rocks and houses and everything falling onto me over and over again.

I texted my mum that I was sorry, and Mills too. My mum called me straight away.

“It’s ok, love,” she said, as I sobbed down the line. I didn’t tell her about the bar. I couldn’t. I felt like I had let her, and Mills, and Hannah, and every other woman on the planet down. Visions of PussyLicker—of *David*—pushing that girl into the alley haunted me like a recurring nightmare. I wanted to help, but I didn’t know her name. I wouldn’t even know how to go about reporting it.

A part of me worried I would be betraying King69 and the brotherhood of dukes if I were to report it.

I hated myself more than ever.

\* \* \*

Someone emailed me a feedback form for King69’s “Become a Real Man” course. I pressed zero stars. “This man ruined me,” I typed in the comments. “He is truly dangerous. He spreads hatred and brands it as confidence. I would strongly discourage anyone from participating in

this course, or in any of his associated media.”

\* \* \*

A month later, I was on a run with Mark. The fresh air felt cool in my lungs, and I loved that the only sound was our trainers patting against the earth.

It had taken Mark a while to forgive me. I told him King69 had gotten to my head, and that I would do better. To my surprise, he apologised for recommending King69 to me.

As the sun went down, we jogged past a police station.

I stopped. Wrote the name of the station on my phone. We ran on.

# Pickle War

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*Harvey Silverman*

John sat quietly and alone. The others knew to stay away lest his concentration be broken. Slowly and precisely he wrapped the tape around the handle of what he considered his weapon. Then a certain amount of chalk or rosin—exactly how he chose which was known only to him—to dust his hands and the handle. His focus was acute. He was ready.

A hint of mystery hung about John. He came from somewhere in the area of St. Paul but nobody knew quite where, exactly. They did not know, they had no idea, that the man - their hero - who was known to them as John Johnson was known back in that unknown place from which he had come as *Yohnny Yonhson*, the Scandinavian pronunciation persisting in that quiet place to which his family had immigrated almost two centuries ago.

But everyone knew—*everyone*—that his skill as a pickleball player was unsurpassed in the world of Southwest Florida condominium communities. He had rivals, of course, that Walter Pilarski guy from around Chicago, that snowbird from Quebec, Pierre Marceaux, who always played with a hat that read *Je Me Souviens*. There was Vito Marchetti who had moved from Boston's North End to become a full time resident. And the New York duo, Hymie Goldstein, the former Hasidic from Brooklyn who had first moved to Del Rey on Florida's east coast but after taking an adult education class at Florida Gulf Coast University decided to stay on the west coast, and Malik Jones from Harlem.

John, Marsh Landing's very own, had beaten them all in the Southwest Florida Pickleball League championship tournament. Just one more match and he would be the champion who would be celebrated by a huge Marsh Landing party at Chen's Buffet, taking advantage, of course, of the Early Bird prices.

It would be a challenge. His opponent in the final round, curiously enough representing Fountain Lakes, the community next to Marsh Landing, was Ivan Demitrov, known by some as "Ivan the Terrible," by others as the "Vladivostok Villain." Ivan showed no mercy on the pickleball court. He had used his uncannily accurate volley to disable one opponent by hitting him with a smash onto his prosthetic hip. Worse, many thought, was when he hit another right onto the victim's implanted pacemaker sending the poor soul into a profound bradycardia. Both had recovered; a replacement hip for the one, a new pacemaker for the other, but each had retired from competitive pickleball, the PTSD too much to overcome.

Despite the stakes—a buffet of slightly warm and soy-soaked faux Chinese food for one, a bottle of diluted grain alcohol which had been decanted into a Grey Goose bottle for the other—the competition between communities was, though spirited, a friendly rivalry. Or so it was expected.

The match was hard fought and close, Ivan aggressive as always, John unflappable and controlled. Finally, match point. The game to be decided on the final volley.

“Out!”

“In!”

And so on. The disagreement spiraled. The two referees—there were always two in case of a sudden illness—likewise disagreed. The folks from Fountain Lakes began to yell and curse. The Marsh Landing folks responded. Tempers raged. Blood pressures mounted. Four people from Marsh Landing and three from Fountain Lakes took out their blood pressure monitors and began to scream. Somebody threw a bottle of Ensure. Chaos reigned.

The match was suspended. People headed back to their respective communities but not before threats were made.

A couple of days later a Marsh Landing resident, the always polite Maxine “Minnie” Mouse reported that she had learned by chance that morning during an AARP meeting (the exact way she learned was unsaid but “Minnie” had moved to Marsh Landing from upstate—The Villages—and was still taking Acyclovir for something she had picked up there) that Fountain Lakes planned an assault on Marsh Landing. Revenge.

Marsh Landingers immediately began to prepare. Leadership was needed. There were a number of military veterans who lived in Marsh Landing, even some Greatest Generation folks, but all agreed that former LCDR Harvey S. was the best choice. There was no need to even ask why.

By the next day, the day of the expected invasion, Harvey had organized the defense into three corps. On the left was the Cane Corps, those folks who moved with the greatest alacrity with assistance. There were canes of all types, the classic wooden with the curved handle, the carved walking stick type, and the fearsome four posters.

On the right was the Walker Corps. This group had perhaps the greatest esprit de corps. Many had removed the split tennis balls from the front posts for greater speed and mobility. The ones with walkers that had a basket were at the very front.

And in the center was the Power Chair Corps. All had fully charged their batteries. A few had installed chains of twist ties around the wheels for what they expected would be improved traction.

And there was Harvey. He sat atop a borrowed power chair of the

Dean Kamen variety, the kind that used some sort of gyroscopic means to climb stairs and to rise up so a seated person would be at eye level with somebody standing tall. And standing tall was what Harvey intended to do, to rise up so as to see the battlefield and to be an obvious target for the Fountain Lakes bullies. Bullies indeed. Not only was Fountain Lakes a large community with more residents but it was well known that Fountain Lakes had an inordinate number of renters.

The sun rose. Another beautiful day in Paradise. Harvey dispatched the three ladies in Marsh Landing who owned adult tricycles on a reconnaissance mission, reminding them that J. E. B. Stuart had likewise been a daring hero. He waited with anticipation for their return and grieved when just two returned. The third, he was told, had turned her trike over into a drainage ditch and would not return. She was okay, just shaken up, but had gone to the nearby consignment shop to recover on a very nice Canadian rocker. She hoped somebody would take her companion dog, a well behaved cockapoodle, for a walk later.

The intelligence the two remaining trikers brought back was crucial. The Fountain Lakers were assembled for an assault in a broad formation. That was just what Harvey needed to know.

Then, there they were! Coming through the gates at as rapid a pace as they could. The battle was on.

Harvey used Napoleonic tactics. He sent his forces straight at the center of the Fountain Lakes line. Overwhelming force concentrated at a single point. Then the Cane Corps and the Power Chair Corps turned to the left, outnumbering the right flank of the Fountain Lakes fighters while the Walker Corps turned to the right to fight a holding action against FL's left flank.

Screaming like crazed seniors trying to get the last bus at Disney World and waving weapons fashioned from adult diapers and orthopedic shoes the Marsh Landingers fought bravely. Joe Dorsey unhooked his urine bag from his catheter and flung it into the face of a charging foe who sputtered a bit and turned and fled. So many similar acts of courage.

The right flank overcome, demoralized, defeated, in full retreat, the Marsh Landing warriors then all turned to the right where the Walker Corps had courageously held off the foe's left flank. United now, they made short work of the remaining enemy.

Victory. But victory at a price. The well-maintained common areas were littered with the remnants of battle. A CPAP machine in pieces, an empty bottle with oblong blue Viagra pills scattered in the grass, a Spiriva inhaler split in two, the remains of a comfort height commode barely recognizable.

But no serious injuries. The community was safe. Harvey lowered the seat of his power chair and headed for the pool.

# Fire-Breather

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*Gretchen Troxell*

I thought when I left I could leave it. I called people I barely knew and who knew me far less than I knew them, and we carried loose garments in shaky arms and packed up the car. I hadn't wanted to, but I told my parents, and they helped seal the property. I was weak-willed and weaker physically. I looked in the mirror and saw nothing.

Irene, my new roommate, gave me more space than I needed and told me to settle in. She said I no longer had to worry about the safety of my own home. My father called to inform me they failed to remove the monster that had taken up residence in my old property, but I'd be fine. I had more than I could ever need at Irene's. I already had more than before, and it had only been six days.

Irene's other roommates, Simon, Trevor, and Caitlyn, know all the same places and all the same people. They are familiar with the monster in my house, or, at least, its species.

"Fire-breather, right?" Simon asks.

I nod.

"Fuck those things," Caitlyn says, "burnt all your shit, I'm guessing."

I nod.

"Ruined the whole apartment," Irene adds.

I nod, though this time it isn't necessary, and Irene fills in the gaps. I have told this story enough times already that we both have the polite conversation down pat: the monster crawled in through my window. It didn't respond to water and the usual internet advice. I tried to live with it. It burned most of my apartment down. Yes, technically, the apartment is still habitable. No, I haven't gotten my lungs checked. Yes, I will. No, I don't have an appointment yet.

Someone will say something like, "sounds awful" or "yikes," and the conversation will move on to something I'm not a part of.

Irene explains that on Tuesdays they make margaritas and play board games. This weekly tradition stalls while they try to explain the rules to me. We're saved when Trevor cuts in to say, "you'll catch on."

The game is 'easy.' Move the tiles, roll the dice, play a card, play another card, reroll, move.

Simon stares at me. "You forgot to play your card," he says.

"Sorry," I murmur, but no one hears me. I end up getting third.

Irene resets the game. "You remember Steven?" she asks me.

I shake my head.

"Steven who dated Sydney?" she tilts her head, awaiting a response. My eyes in my lap are answer enough. "Sydney – the hostess from that

restaurant, you know her.”

“With the burritos,” Caitlyn adds.

“Those were fucking disgusting,” Trevor says.

“Those were delicious,” Simon says.

Irene looks at me.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay, great, so Steven...” and Irene is off, and the other three fall in sync. They cover intricate details, puzzling over every word, every action of Steven, and it makes sense to them, and it is clear by the way they skip over explanations, that it should be clear to me too. I nod when they nod, and Irene gives me more margarita, and I land a joke or two. When they laugh, I feel lighter, but most of the time when I speak, I’m met with blanks. Luckily, they always move on quickly, not even out of politeness, just got better things to do.

I cough, and Irene swaps in a water. The ash is bitter in my throat and flaky on my tongue, but sometimes I find myself coughing more than I need to just to taste it. Sometimes when I’m alone, I let it fall out onto a napkin or into the bleached-white sink, so I can study it for longer.

“Fuck, it’s hot in here,” Trevor complains.

“You’re drunk,” Irene says.

“What’s that got to do with the temperature?”

Irene, Simon, Trevor, and Caitlyn’s apartment is sickly cold. They leave all the windows open and blast the A/C and walk around in tank tops and shorts. They’re all from around the same area, a place they’ve told me the name of many times, but I can never remember, so I imagine they’re from the Arctic. Otherwise, I’m not sure how they survive.

Irene adjusts the temperature anyway. It’s below freezing.

“That should be better for you at least,” she says to me, and the others nod, so I do too.

\* \* \*

When they go to bed, they all say goodnight and ask if I need anything. I never do, but they ask anyway. Goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight.

When all the doors close, I go to the bathroom and cough with my mouth open. I watch the ash pop up, a party trick for one. Sometimes I get a bit overzealous and throw up, but I try not to. The fan can cover the cough; vomit noises are harder to disguise.

I pick the pieces off my tongue, and they break away on my fingertips. I try to paint my nails with them, but the color fades too quickly.

I taste blood, a warning sign of vomit. I hold the metallic taste against my teeth, filling each crack, and try to spread it back to my mo-

lars. I smile, so the girl in the mirror flashes red. Her teeth are too close together, the red highlights that, and the corners of her lips don't point up like they should as if she's trying to be awkward on purpose, as if it's funny.

I swallow, and she closes her mouth. It tastes like medicine, the good kind that doesn't really work. The cherry cough drops you always end up eating instead of sucking.

I don't drink more water until the taste has dissolved completely from my mouth. I prefer when it lingers – when my mouth feels dirty and my tongue dries. While I wait, I rummage through various drawers, the contents of which I'll never memorize, for a lighter. Most I find don't work, but I would feel bad throwing away things that aren't mine, so I keep retrying, never remembering the broken ones.

When I find the scratched red one that works every seventh try, I hold the flame under my fingertips. The light exaggerates the grooves before melting them into one pale blur.

"You good?" A voice asks from the dark. The flame disappears.

The overhead light flashes, and Simon runs his hands over his buzzcut. His sleepy eyes blink in sync, and with that and his perfectly matched pajamas, he looks like he could fall asleep before I open my mouth to respond.

I nod.

"What are you doing?" He asks, hovering.

"Just getting a light," my voice delivers.

"You smoke?"

"Sometimes."

He shrugs and rubs his eyes. Then he moves past me into the kitchen and pours himself some water, humming quietly as he does. When he turns, he seems to remember I'm still there, and he brushes past with a complimentary, "goodnight."

"Goodnight Simon," I whisper, and it doesn't matter if he can hear me.

The next few days pass similarly. They are nice, good people who say goodnight every night and offer to pick items up at the store. I laugh more as I learn from them. I mostly learn names: Sarah, Sally, Sal, Salyer, Sam, Samantha, Sammy. All friends of one of them that got brought into the group ("like you!" Irene adds. I nod.). The apartment remains cold, but my water is the only one that turns to ice ("what are you doing to it?" Trevor asks).

It has been a few days since Simon caught me with the lighter, so my nighttime routine is interrupted for a bit and is further disturbed when I run out of medication.

"You want me to come with?" Irene asks when I tell her I'm stopping by my old apartment for it.

“We all can,” Caitlyn says. Simon and Trevor groan because they are allowed to. Caitlyn smacks them both with one hit.

“I’m okay.”

“Okayyy,” Irene says, holding onto the ‘y’ to let me know she doesn’t buy it, but she respects me enough not to fight.

The others waste a half-second exchanging a look. I leave before I can see them forget me.

My apartment looks just fine on the outside. Inside, the foundation dissolves under the lightest touch, but outside, it seems nothing happened at all. Outside, I would live in this apartment again, and anyone else of sound mind would agree. The plants bloom, watered despite being hidden from any rain, and the mailbox stands clean of rust and pregnant spiders. The only thing that stains the place is the worn door knob that holds the lightened spots of my pre-burnt fingerprints. I place my hand around the knob, and it doesn’t fit the same.

I don’t need the key – the hinges have been ripped clean off from the fire department rushing in, and it’s my job to call the landlord to replace it, so it’ll never be fixed. A few fluorescents flicker, the only light source since the blinds haven’t been opened in months. I have the urge to open them now, but I’m worried they’d snap, and it’d be another call I’d never make.

From the depths of the apartment, the monster grumbles, hungry. I have been told fire-breathers don’t eat humans. Irene reminds me that doesn’t mean the toxins don’t kill, but inherently, by themselves, fire-breathers are harmless. You can live with one as long as you don’t mind the taste of ash and don’t require fresh food or personal items.

I walk towards it if only to prove it’s still there. I don’t call out, even though my throat burns in anticipation. I turn the corner, and there it sits. Folded up, smoke circling, docile like a cat. We stare at each other for a moment. I’ve found that when I stare long enough and my retinas start to burn, I can almost make out a face: spots of black among the glow of its skin, hollow and fuzzy. When I finally do look away, the face paints my eyelids.

It roars as if to say *what are you doing here?*

*My medication*, I think but don’t say. The hair on the back of my neck sizzles and breaks away.

It stretches, howls. *You came back*. It is hungry. It’s not saying that, but its stomach grumbles loud enough to shake the entire place. With a flame that could be a hand, it covers its stomach, perhaps blushing if fire-breathers could blush. It has no one to talk to, no one since I left.

I look around and find an opened granola bar smashed into the carpet. It falls a part in my hand, but I push it towards the fire-breather.

The fire-breather does not trust me, which is deserved. I let it take its time, puzzling over the gift before destroying it. I stare into its light

long enough to see a smile, and I smile too.

I feel my phone buzzing. No one calls me, so the fire-breather and I both know it's Irene. I let the buzz stab my leg.

Later, the fire-breather and I sit side-by-side just like we used to. When I cough, I have enough ash to paint both my hands and feet. I strip down to my bra and underwear before surrendering and lying naked on the floor. The fire-breather has nothing to remove, but it reaches out to my clothes as if it wants to help. I whisper forgiveness when my clothes erupt into flames because we both knew it would happen, and both the apology and forgiveness are nothing more than formalities. We're formal with each other which bothers us both.

My phone, not yet completely gone, buzzes again. I apologize to the fire-breather and answer.

"Hey." Irene's voice sounds centuries away. "Been trying to reach you. Is everything okay?" The fire-breather does not like Irene. It hisses.

I start to respond, but my throat is clogged. I cough, slamming my fist into my stomach as I do, and blood splatters our cracking walls. I drop the phone with Irene's voice still echoing on the other side. The fire-breather moves to help and places a hand on my back.

I smell my burning flesh, but I never feel it. I can only feel the blood. It erupts, thick and wet. Chunks of deep red and black that fall from my bottom lip and slide down my chin before bouncing onto the carpet. Beside me, the fire-breather wails and screams and hisses and cries. If I could speak, I'd tell it that everything will be okay, but if it keeps wailing and screaming and hissing and crying, it'll alert the neighbors, and that is when things will stop being okay. Not to blame the fire-breather, people just get concerned and like to play the hero. They rarely stop to let the dust clear.

There's a sharp pounding on the broken door. The fire-breather retreats, back to whatever hole it reserved before I got here. For a moment, I don't move. I'm not wearing anything. I know that, but I forget, and the pounding grows louder. I try to say "be right there," but it only comes out in blood.

I stagger to the beat of the knock. I should have clothes here. I know I have something unburned and usable. I throw my body to the floor and squeeze my arm under the couch. My arm returns, pinched and red, with an XXL shirt and pants with holes in every pocket. The knocking stabs my brain, excavating holes in my head with each bang. I pull on the clothes, choking on the fabric, and run to the door.

Irene nearly falls through. Somewhere, the fire-breather roars, but Irene only stares at me, transfixed. She reaches a hand to me. "Come out," she coughs. The smoke blows her hair back.

"Is she in there?" another voice calls, but Irene doesn't look back. She steps through and guides me forward, not saying a word. "Shit," the

voice says when I step through the black cloud. I can feel the blood on my chin. It feels like makeup, like I'm wearing my other face.

From the outside, the apartment looks beautiful. Nothing is disturbed.

"Hospital?" someone from the collection asks.

I stare at these strangers: Irene, Simon, Trevor, Caitlyn. Together they fit as if they were always destined to fulfill one another. The hot to one another's cold.

"I'm okay," I say through sludges of blood. They look away, afraid.

"Can you feel the burn?" Irene asks.

The burn. *The kiss.*

"Yes."

Slower now, Irene leans close. "Do you want to go home?"

The wind howls, and it is snowing in late July. With my charred skin, I will die if I stay outside.

"I already am."

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Sasha Darvas** is a 23-year-old writer currently studying for a creative writing masters at Keble College, Oxford. A graduate of St. Catharine's College Cambridge, she founded a feminist magazine and was president of Cambridge's oldest poetry society. She is currently working on her first novel.

**Erica Miriam Fabri** is a Brooklyn-based poet and the author of two books: *Morphology* (Write Bloody Publishing) and *Dialect of a Skirt* (Hanging Loose Press). *Morphology* was the winner of the Jack McCarthy Book Prize and *Dialect of a Skirt* was a finalist for the Paterson Poetry Prize and included on the bestseller lists for Small Press Distribution and the Poetry Foundation. She teaches writing at Pace University and College of Staten Island. [ericafabri.com](http://ericafabri.com)

**Will Falk** is a poet, attorney, and community organizer. He writes poems while traveling across the U.S. to offer free legal services to communities fighting against extractive projects like mines, pipelines, and clear-cuts. His first poetry collection is *When I Set the Sweetgrass Down* (Wayfarer Books, 2023).

**Ed O'Casey** earned an MA from the University of North Texas and an M.F.A. from New Mexico State University. He's the author of *Proximidad: A Mexican/American Memoir*. His poetry and prose have appeared in a variety of places throughout the years. He lives in San Antonio, Texas.

**Himanshu Sharma** is a student at the University of Chicago, writing fiction, drama, journalism, and essays. His work explores the complexities of being human, using language to capture otherwise elusive phenomena. His writing can be found at [himanshuiswriting.com](http://himanshuiswriting.com).

**Harvey Silverman** is a retired old coot and writes primarily for his own enjoyment. He winters at Marsh Landing in Southwest Florida.

**Gretchen Troxell** is an experimental and psychological fiction writer from Ohio. She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in creative writing from Bowling Green State University in May 2025 and completed minors in scientific and technical communication and film. Previously, she has served as the editor-in-chief for the undergraduate literary journal, *Prairie Margins*, and as an assistant editor for the international literary journal *Mid-American Review*. You can find her on Instagram: [@gretchentroxellwrites](https://www.instagram.com/gretchentroxellwrites)

**John Walser's** poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Plume*, *Posit*, *Nimrod*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *South Dakota Review*, and *One Art*. His manuscript *Edgewood Orchard Galleries* has been a finalist for the Autumn House Poetry Prize, the Ballard Spahr Prize for Poetry and the Zone 3 Press Prize as well as a semifinalist for the Philip Levine Prize and the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award. A four-time semifinalist for the Pablo Neruda Prize and a three-time Pushcart nominee, as well as a Best New Poets nominee and a Best of the Net nominee, John is a past recipient of the Lorine Niedecker Poetry Award. He is a professor of English at Marian University and lives in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, with his wife, Julie.

**Sarah Watkins** is an educator by trade and a writer by necessity. She currently resides in northeast Arkansas with her husband. Her work has recently been featured in several publications, including *Menagerie*, *Moss Puppy Magazine*, and *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*. Instagram: @sarahwatkinspoetry

**Claude Wilkinson** is a critic, essayist, painter, and poet. His most recent poetry collections are *World without End* and *Soon Done with the Crosses*. He received the Whiting Award for Poetry in 2000.

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EUPHONY  
5706 S. University Avenue, Room 001  
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Grace Printing  
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Chicago, IL 60659

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