

euphony

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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, drama, essays, criticism, and translations.

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# WELCOME TO THE WINTER 2021 ISSUE OF EUPHONY

Dear Reader,

We are proud to present the first issue of the twenty-first volume of *Euphony Journal*. In this year of turbulence, we are also immensely grateful—to our staff, our contributors, our friends at Grace Printing, and of course, to you, our readers—that we are able to do so.

Unsurprisingly, *Euphony* has looked a little different this year. We have not been able to meet in person, we have staff members living in time zones wholly incompatible with ours here in Chicago, and we have all dearly missed our weekly Oreos. Despite these challenges, as well as all the personal ones facing each of us individually, we have in many ways succeeded.

Rory, Irene, and Michael have brought us exceptional packets to review each week. Our seasoned members of staff have helped shepherd us into an online world. Our newest members, those who have never experienced a face-to-face *Euphony* meeting with all their heated debates over the usages of em-dashes and participles, they have contributed to *Euphony* with an enthusiasm that made all of our Thursday evenings infinitely better.

To Brandon, who has made this issue a thing of beauty, to Isabella, who has helped us share it with the world, and to Athena, who devotes her time and care not only to *Euphony* submissions, but to reviewing the works of previously-published writers, we are greatly indebted. And aside from that, we love you very much.

To our readers, thank you for your support and for your patience. We hope you have all been safe and healthy, and we hope now, more than ever, that this issue of *Euphony* brings you joy.

Good health and good reading,

Orliana Morag  
Managing Editor

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# POEMS

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# POETRY EDITORS' LETTER

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the Winter 2021 Issue of *Euphony Journal*. Amidst all that is happening in the world, thank you for picking up this particular book of adventure. We hope you enjoy your stay and come back wishing for more.

Maybe like us, you did not think that the coronavirus pandemic would last this long. Maybe like us, you did not realize the capacity for change within just one single calendar year. And maybe like us, you felt stuck in time and frozen in place. Perhaps without a jacket. Yet, we are still here. We are still dynamic as ever, jumping over each mountain that comes along our way and diving into every stream that offers the possibility. We find doors through which to escape, and we hope you find a few of these doors in the poems of this issue.

The first door opens with the transportive qualities of art. This camp of poems begins with "In A Print of a Room of paintings" and the link it establishes between a sense of belonging and a work of art: where do we hang the painting, what do we put in that room, and whom do we invite, indeed? Moving on from there, we have a juxtaposition of forms of arts: "Pencil Drawing by Zhang" and "A Remix for the Chronemicists." Sketches and tunes, the quiet and still confronted by the dynamic and chaotic. But in both, we see life seeking a means to express itself. "Writing a Yoko Ono Poem" picks up on this and pushes the inquiry further: how exactly should we tell our stories, our selves? Perhaps, as it suggests, we forget the question and become one with the work. Finally, with "the Death of Vincent van Gogh," we are reminded of the capability of art to combat mortality. How true, that in art we find shelters, encounter ourselves, and receive momentary but also timeless satisfaction in the soul. Through creation, we encapsulate fleeting moments and stand against transiency.

The second door, perhaps inspired by the first, meditates on home and captures the longing that strikes at the heart in terrible pangs. However, as this camp expresses, home is not a concrete concept that is limited by iron bars and single cells. Home can be the people that we feel even when they are not with us, as beautifully manifested in "Chori." Home can be the stories that have shaped us, such as the ones we are reminded of during "later than day."

Home can even be the natural world that commands reverence and excites awe, as “New Year’s Morning” and “Bird’s Nest” demonstrate. With all that home can be, we must also remember home is not trapped by time. Home can be the past. A past of days long gone yet days that are woven with us forever. Like “Hallelujah,” this home is often a past of monumental change and unexpected fate. Yet, from the ashes and piercing memories, this home is the foundation on where we build anew. Therefore, we wish you the best on your days of revolutionary change and new beginnings. We wish you the best when you go home.

No matter where and how you are reading this, we hope that these poems can offer you some solace during these difficult times. To all our readers and amazing contributors, you have our immense gratitude, as it was your patience, efforts, and brilliant works that made this issue possible. On top of that, a special thank you to all who have submitted to us. It has been such an honor and a pleasure to read your poems, and we sincerely wish to hear from you in the forms of creativity again in the future.

Happy reading,  
Michael Han & Irene Li  
Poetry Editors

# A Print of a Room of Paintings

---

Chris Yurkoski

*“One, who is not, we see; but one, whom we see not, is.”*

- A.C. Swinburne

So, the question is, where do you, yourself, hang a print in this room of some almost famous painting – subject, a roomful of paintings (maybe prints, you can't really tell) hung over the fireplace, sofa, accents, audio, dining room table and tv, all arranged as if to invite: *Relax and have a drink*; all angled just towards where the sunlight might fall at that time when you can't tell when things are dawn or dusk, all not exactly beautiful, but, you think, corporeal, organic and thoughtful, and maybe, just enough to spark some conversation, placed in the right space inside this quiet, ombre room, with all the right people, and you?

# Pencil Drawing by Zhang

---

*Stuart Jay Silverman*

West Lake. At the waters' edge  
a peddler rests his pack  
beside a rowboat,  
oars folded like hands;  
at the prow,  
planks a glitter of scales;  
the lake known for its carp,  
flesh like flakes  
peeled from the new moon  
by breezes hungry for light.

# A Remix for the Chronemicists

---

*Chris Yurkoski*

Jam more harsh semitones into  
a measure already so  
crowded with notes, blow  
until the song shatters.

Toss the splinters like fresh seeds  
that grow in thick weeds  
over your lives; a city  
garden multi-track release.

The strongest songs will sound back  
tuneless on the restack,  
on replay, and scar the staff  
that scores the memory.

# Writing a Yoko Ono Poem

---

*Stuart Jay Silverman*

Find a park bench somewhere.  
Inquire politely whether it is occupied.

No answer is not an answer.  
Perhaps a spirit has settled there?

Find another bench and observe it carefully.  
Is there a presence voiding the void?

When the bench calls out to you,  
answer in a low still voice.

Better, yet, do not answer, or  
answer by a nod, a smile, a head fake, a gesture.

Let the answer hang in the wind.  
If there is no wind, let it hang in its self, as though the wind...

Do not believe a scrap of paper has floated into your hands.  
Write this poem carefully on it.

Do not show it to anyone,  
especially not yourself.

Forget the poem and the paper,  
the park bench, especially yourself.

Under the seat of the bench  
the poem will rest undisturbed.

Do not wish for anything else.  
Become the poem, yourself.

# The Death of Vincent van Gogh

---

*Gianmarc Manzione*

The sunflower kept getting on my case,  
as did other suns. I watched the wheat  
field govern its yawning eternity.  
I pinned a smoke in the skeleton's face—  
see it smolder between its smiling teeth.  
What monsters I disguised as irises!  
When I tried to wheel the stars to their truth,  
cypresses assigned their darker judgments.  
In the quaking air, I stared from my blue  
self. I painted what happened inside me.  
All of Arles will think it is just like me  
to turn up dead. Fine. I have brushed the sun  
from God's hair. Dying is nothing to dread.

# Chori

---

Amy Lerman

He pulls his father's body out  
of his pants pocket, an old film  
roll carrier, one among many  
he found lining his father's desk  
the day a van repossessed the hospital  
bed, its size just right to keep  
his father near, air-tight enough  
not to leak any minerals or decalcify.

The bus he rides into eight hours  
of darkness moves to Durango,  
cousins his father kicked cans  
with after school, a yellow sky.  
*Un sombrero de vaquero*, he says  
tapping the container's top,  
he can't recall his father with no  
hat, even when he no longer left  
the house, and they spent hours  
watching soccer, shouting *Puto*  
along with the stadium fans  
to the other team's goalkeeper.

On a last night, the light from  
his father's television awoke  
the son who didn't mind  
moving toward the bright, a tired  
body. When he arrived  
at the room's door, he thought he  
might be in an old photograph,  
this man who had to be his father,  
sitting upright, eyes wide, unyellowed,  
as the *Rockford Files*' theme played  
its last, synthesized notes.

Maybe the father felt his son nearby,  
since he turned his smile to the door  
saying *Mijo* and pointing to the screen,

his son following the finger to Jim and his father Rocky waxing poetic about “awful nice ladies” over the morning percolator. How many times the son could recall unfolding tv trays with his own father to watch *Rockford*, they would all eat tacos, Jim’s favorite breakfast food, the son and his father’s always *con chorizo*, his father’s childhood nickname. On this

night, the son nodded to his father, the Rockfords, and walked to the headboard’s rustic post where his father’s cowboy hat rested. Placing it on his father’s head, he asked if he might like some eggs, perhaps some sausage while he watched, his father clapping lightly his son’s cheek in response.

His son

walked to the kitchen not needing to turn on any lights, his father’s glow melding into the stove’s pilot flame, the fridge’s bulb, the dimmed streetlamp coloring his father’s house, he cracked and sizzled in cast iron pans, plating large mounds for them to share, so soon they were passing hot sauce, *pimienta, por favor*, they ate and laughed in sepia, losing track of episodes, their neighbors’ cars leaving for industrial parks, yellow poppies opening for the sun.

# later that day

---

*James Thurgood*

we stopped at – an inn, I'd call it  
beneath the Great Wall

for dinner  
we took a table out to the yard  
– my father and my aunt from Calgary  
said the little inn was like the old house  
in the village

I listened to them talk –  
with their different lives  
different cities, different countries  
they had nothing left to share  
but longing for those days

*(Inspired by a story told to me by Hanzhe Wang)*

# New Year's Morning

---

*J. C. Scharl*

Rain again last night—ripped  
the baby tips off the ends of the acacia—

and now the sky's gray and tight-lipped  
over the hard bulk of the mesa.

The new year's coming in cold  
today, and silver. Today I am amazed

by existence, by that weary old  
sun whose light is really time, glazed-

eyed with travel—today, unbound  
briefly from time, I stand beside the day and see

it, incredulous, watch itself pass all around  
the bruised, oracular trees.

# Bird's Nest

---

*John Muro*

The crumble of hollow  
That once held a clutch  
Of planets  
With orbits drawn  
Into beds of feather down  
And blossoms of pear,

An overwrought amphitheater  
That once bled with sound.  
Wind's begun  
The soft silencing, let  
Water into the wattle's pouch  
Where shells implode

Into blue spackle.  
I bend to touch  
The long-ago tasks that  
Tied mud to ribbon  
And twine lightly bound  
To twigs and hair.

Little else to find there  
In the brittle urn --  
A quaint habitation  
Of the near-nascent,  
Songs longing for lush  
Like pieces of a broken life.

# Hallelujah

---

*Dorty Nowak*

Before they vanish, day's last rays  
gloss blackened stone, brush  
doors both barred and locked,  
give sheen to a parade of saints  
who grace the portals.

No light glows from rose windows  
lidded with soot, no glad song  
touches those bruised ribs, no  
murmur of human desires.  
Inside this place, God's carapace,  
built by men long gone to ash  
all is absence.

And yet, once more our lady rises,  
propped by broken-winged  
buttresses and human hands.  
In the gathering night her cracked  
voice tolls, calling pigeons to roost,  
and all souls home.

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# PROSE

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# PROSE EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear Reader,

The world feels smaller this year. The whole world is compressed into my little bedroom and it can barely breathe. When it inhales the particle board door strains on its hinges and the broken shade which I cannot roll up is crushed flat against the window. The whole world is shrunk down into my three roommates, it has been squeezed, gasping, into our apartment, at its greatest extent it luxuriates in the route to the grocery store, expands thankfully to a lonely stroll through a quiet campus.

People feel farther away this year. I've seen so many, but they are small, far off. I have spotted my classmates in the distance, a perfect grid of islands I cannot reach. I see people passing by as I walk, but we are never in the same space. Even when we come too close, when I take my bags from her or shimmy past him to reach the exit, that closeness feels so much more impassable than it ever has before.

*Euphony* is smaller. It has been flattened, all its members lounging on Reynolds Club's sunken chairs, all its coats thrown across tables, all its Oreos, and the hum of its every laptop brought in to read this week's packets. All boxed up and placed on my computer screen. *Euphony* is farther away. Every long-time member and every new face is a distant rectangle, way out beyond my reach.

I wish I could say that this gave perspective, or woke us up to what we have. That drawing a knife across the great interconnection of sociality and production and thought had somehow brought feeling back. But no. This is not good for us, and nothing I write can make it so. The losses of this year are blind tragedy. Its every mismanagement is barbarism. Its isolations are vicious cruelty.

There is nothing about what has happened that comforts me. There is no solace in the fact of compression, the fact of distance. That can only come from our refusals to be small, our refusals to feel far away. There is hope in the way the world strains against my apartment walls, in the smiling eyes above an unseen mouth. I have seen grins cracked at a poem turn my computer into a grand, warm hall, and felt someone step off the screen into my room as they quite seriously reject my interpretation of a story.

The stories here were not chosen as responses to the pandemic. Our votes were swayed only by their merits. The delicate play of empathy and detachment of “How they Linger” and “The Crazy Thing.” The way “If the Odds Don’t Change” aligns its dialogue and relationships toward its sullenly humorous conclusion. The unsettling sharpness of “A Case of Calico”’s staccato historical vignettes. It is only a coincidence that any merit appears now as a repudiation of the present conditions.

I can only hope that the stories published here bring you the joy and life they have brought to *Euphony*.

I want to thank the *Euphony* board members for keeping everything running. I want to thank all the authors who found the strength to put pen to page. And most of all I want to thank all the faces in their little boxes, all the faceless voices, all the voting forms turned in last minute, all the people who bring *Euphony* to life, for staying connected through it all.

Without further ado,

Happy reading,  
Rory Nevins  
Prose Editor

# How They Linger

---

*B. P. Herrington*

In the front room that glows green with a bay window's potted ivies, Verna shuffles to the ringing phone and drops on the sofa beside a herd of slumping knitted animals made for grandchildren long grown up.

"Mother has passed," her sister Moira tells her curtly on the line. "Funeral'll be Wednesday." Moira brushes past the awful silence. "Drive on up if you need to. I'm working late. Let yourself in. Key's under the mat."

Their ninety-eight-year-old mother has had pneumonia for days. Still, Verna mutters a prayer, her eyes fixed on nothing. A bird flickers across the bay window as if shooing her on to pack her bags.

She passes through the room where ratty wicker racks sprout from every wall in a dense tangle of knickknacks and jumbled photographs—of her late husband, her children and grandchildren, a gold-framed youthful picture of Verna's mother in a Sunday dress, the cherished sepia photographs of her grandmother and great-aunt on the porch of the old homestead, of her great-grandfather tending his persimmon tree and of her sullen-faced great-grandmother sitting in an arbor's shade.

In one black-and-white photo, her sister Moira—then only twenty or so—glares down the camera's intrusion with eyes like black acorns under her lowered brow. Moira never married or had much to do with the family, whereas Verna found a man and moved a few towns over. In all these years, Verna has never so much as set foot in her sister's house, and has seen it only once or twice from the street. Only in these past few years when their ailing, widowed mother required Moira's care did Verna drive up to Lufkin once a month to visit the nursing home. And there she would bump into Moira who has tended their mother in her brusque but diligent way.

On her way out the door, Verna slips her mother's gold-framed picture in the side pocket of her bag.

The forty-minute drive to Lufkin is colored not only by a bitter-sweet grief—her mother had been camping at death's door for nigh onto three years—but also, strangely, by the sunset that bronzes the highway itself. She generally makes this drive in early morning hours

when the sun placidly slants between trunks of roadside trees and the pastures are streamed white with fog. But on this late afternoon, the monotonous rows of pines like tarnished copper sweep along beside her and she sinks into unsettling meditations on her sister's stern face and her unknown life.

Away off in the thicket there, the old homestead of her childhood is hidden. Verna feels the ghosts of her grandmother and great-aunt might be waiting in the porch's blue shade. But she knows full well that the wraparound porch long ago collapsed into high weeds and the house's glum, battered face looks out over unkempt pastures now. Even that dilapidated corpse of rotting pine planks is more welcoming than Moira's place as Verna remembers it: a strangely tiny house that wears its weathered black clapboard like ragged scales and seems to have been dropped into the improbably narrow space between the spacious brick homes on either side. Verna begins to vaguely recognize Moira's neighborhood, like seeing an old friend in a gaudy new getup. When she parks at the leaf-cluttered curb, the sun has nearly vanished.

Verna scurries up a narrow, cracked pavement lined with beds of pebbles where she thinks flowers ought to be, cocking her head side to side like a hen at the shadowed alleyways. She stoops and peels up the corner of the straw doormat for the key. The clicking lock reverberates and the jaundiced porch light falls into a large darkened room where nothing catches the rays. Verna slides warily along the walls—all strangely bare—and finds a light switch. The living room, now lit, is so barren she cannot gain her bearings: the dark, geometrically intricate rug at the center and the only pieces of furniture—a fan-back Windsor chair and a low round tea table in a distant corner—give no sense of proportion. The walls that in Verna's house teem with shelves of consoling mementos gleaned over a lifetime are only blank, icy slabs here.

She drifts unmoored through the vacuum toward a black, unadorned hallway that offers only two doors. One opens to a bathroom that is all cold, white porcelain, a world apart from the crowds of frog figurines and crocheted lily pads of Verna's own. Through the other door, dingy streetlights stream through lace curtains. A simple wood-framed bed with a white quilt seems to hover above the dark floors. She steps beyond the threshold and bumps a pine writing desk on spindly legs. On its varnished top there is only a fountain pen and an unopened pack of postcards.

These rooms—devoid of the quiet clutter that signifies life for

Verna—lack even the gravity to hold her and she slips back down the corridor. The large room swells in its very blankness and whiteness to magnify what it does not possess. Her heart plunges. “Not even one picture of her,” she mutters, recollecting her mother’s square but delicate face. Then she begins to wonder if her mother’s face really was so square, if it did not taper a little at the chin. She hobbles over the dark rug and retrieves the gold-framed photo from her bag, but her mother’s face, blurred in mid-nod, cannot settle the question. Verna drops into the one wooden chair and its slats croak at her. She turns away the gold frame in her lap and summons her mother’s face, but the image only warps and withers and slips into the muddy deep. “Not even one picture?” Her voice cracks in the open room where old attachments were long ago set adrift.

# A Case of Calico

---

Orit Yeret

In 1786, Hannah Ocuish was accused of murdering Eunice Bolles, a six-year-old girl who had disappeared while walking to school in Connecticut. She was brought to trial and quickly convicted. Ocuish, who was twelve years old at the time, is believed to be the youngest person to receive capital punishment in the history of the United States. The following story is the fictional retelling of the sequence of events that led to her death.

*I awoke screaming on the last night. For I knew what was coming. For I knew it was the beginning of my end.*

JUNE

The season of strawberries was the townsfolk's favorite time of the year. Acres of land had been filled with delicious and ripe goods that contained flavors that exploded in one's mouth. Every weekend the townsfolk took to the fields to harvest the fruit of their labor in its peak. The town's children, some aided by their parents, would grab hold of handmade baskets as they basked in the morning sun. She was there too; maybe picking fruit for her mistress, maybe for herself. One thing was for sure: wherever she went around town, inquiring eyes followed.

*Hmmm, how do such wonderful creatures grow?* she thought as she kept picking the strawberries, tasting one or two along the way. *There is no harm in eating. Is there?*

She looked around at the townsfolk, busy with their own fruit picking.

*There's Little Bee...* She noticed the girl coming closer. The six-year-old girl wore a white dress; her hair was pulled up into a ponytail and tied with a pink bow. She held a nearly full basket of strawberries in one hand. *How did Little Bee get so many?* she wondered and waved her over, but the girl stuck out her tongue at her and turned away. She thought the girl was playing with her and started moving in her direction—*Silly Little Bee...where is she going?*

Moving fast, she caught up with the girl. She grabbed her by the shoulder from behind, which made her drop her basket full of berries on the ground.

“Look what you did!” the girl cried out.

“I...I...” She was at a loss for words. She hurried to help the girl retrieve the fruit into her basket, mixing the contents of her own basket with the little girl’s. It seemed as though the quantity of both baskets matched.

“What?!” the girl said, surprised. “I had more! You stole! You are a thief!”

Some of the townsfolk who were nearby had heard the girl’s cries and began to move closer. A small crowd had started to form.

“What is the case?” one of the townsfolk asked.

“She stole from me.” The girl backed away and pointed at her as the crowd stared.

“Go home, child,” someone shouted from the crowd. “Go home!” someone else said.

As the voices of the crowd echoed in her head, her hands began to shake until her entire body shivered. She started to move away from the crowd, slowly at first, then with longer strides, gaining more and more speed until she felt her feet leaping. Little by little the strawberries escaped from her basket as she ran, leaving a trail of crushed red fruit all the way to her mistress’s house.

## JULY

*You know what I remember? The cool water that grazed my skin as I washed Mistress’s laundry in the river that day. My gaze moved in unison with my hands, back-and-forth, back-and-forth—the washing board felt so heavy, the sounds that came out of it were so loud.*

The warm summer sun had been beaming for days, reaching its full brightness during the afternoons. Once a week she had been tasked with washing the sheets and the clothes of her mistress down at the river, most often midday, when other children in town were finishing their studies for the day. Like clockwork she used to watch them skipping around, some holding notebooks, some having bags strapped to their backs. Sometimes she wondered what they did all day in school and what they were learning.

*That day...*

The weather got weary and the sun intense. She wiped off sweat from her forehead with every stroke and squeeze of the fabrics. She tried to move rapidly but the heat was overwhelming. She stopped to catch her breath. In the distance, instead of the row of children she was

used to seeing at that time of day, she saw only one.

*Little Bee...? Yes, that is her... Should I...? I shouldn't... Would she...? She wouldn't come...*

The girl heard a voice in the distance calling out to her. She stopped in place and turned around, anxious to find its source. The voice got louder and louder.

“I have something to show you!” the voice exclaimed.

The girl saw the image in the distance, recognized it, and began to make her way down the hill in the direction of the river.

\*\*\*

“This is a serious accusation...she is only twelve years old, for God’s sake! You can’t possibly think that...” She heard her mistress’s faint voice as she spoke to a few of the townsmen in the living room while she stayed in the kitchen. “I just can’t believe it.”

“Tell us what happened,” the same townsmen urged her the very next day. She remained silent. They came to the house every day after that, pushing her until she recollected some events. She spoke about a group of young boys whom she noticed following the little girl one day, harassing her, calling her names; she suggested the townsmen go looking for them.

## AUGUST

“You are coming with us!” they called out as they barged into the house one day, causing her to drop the plate she was about to serve to her mistress. It made a loud noise as it hit the ground and immediately shattered into multiple pieces.

The townsmen took her to the girl’s house. She knew it well; it was one of the bigger and more decorated houses in town. They led her inside. She could hear soft weeping noises coming from the room they were taking her to. As she entered, shaking, she could see the girl’s mother sitting on a chair, holding a handkerchief, wiping her nose and eyes occasionally; the girl’s father was standing near her with a severe look on his face. Farther away, on top of what looked like a tiny wooden bed, a doll-like figure was lying.

*Little Bee...how peaceful you are, cannot make a sound, cannot cry out loud.*

## SEPTEMBER

“Tell us why, child,” the judge asked on the first day of her trial. “We

want to understand.”

She took a deep breath, as if preparing to give a long speech, but instead faced the ground and said nothing. She lifted her head a little to look behind her at the crowd.

*Mistress, Reverend, Little Bee's parents...the whole town is here, staring at me like always. They never accepted me as one of their own. I wanted to be... Did I want to be...? I don't know enough and now there is no time to know. They have made up their minds. They only see me as one thing and not the other.*

## OCTOBER

“Just look at the evidence,” one counselor said, though she couldn’t tell if it was for or against her. All she knew was that her new home was a prison cell, and that she could not live with her mistress for the time being while the townsmen decided her destiny.

“In your own words, child,” the judge persisted with his inquiries but she remained silent.

As she listened to the men’s voices, she began caressing the texture of her dress, more rapidly as the voices grew in argument, nearly clutching her hands into fists, squeezing the fabric. She began uttering to herself—C-A-L-I-C-O, C-A-L-I-C-O.

*If I had such nice clothes... If I had a mother who tied my hair with a pink bow...*

*If I had a home... If I had a family... If I belonged...*

## NOVEMBER

“Her testimony is irrelevant,” one of the men said to the judge.

“Nevertheless, I want to hear from her,” the judge explained and turned to the other man. “Can you get her to speak, to state her mind?”

“She refuses. She wouldn’t speak to me, to her mistress, or even to the reverend.”

“She is not well,” the first man spoke again.

“Perhaps we have exhausted our efforts,” the second man said.

The judge looked at the two men and scratched his head, seemingly at a loss for words.

## DECEMBER

*Reverend says that the day after tomorrow, I will no longer wake, I will no longer see the sun. He can pray for me no longer. He is handing me*

*off to God. Who is God? I have heard Reverend say that name before, but I don't know if I believe.*

In the cold, wintery morning, a glimpse of daylight shined brightly through the cell's bars, and she stood on her tiptoes, squinting her eyes to look up at the source. It passed as quickly as it arrived and the cool wind whistled. She stared down at the ground, clutching the bottom of her dress, uttering out loud—C-A-L-I-C-O, C-A-L-I-C-O.

“It is time.” A voice accompanied by a bang on the steel made her shake.

Less fine than muslin, less thick than canvas—undyed, unfinished.

# The Crazy Thing

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*Leslie Johnson*

Life is crazy, you know? My son Greg came over two weeks ago to meet my new family. First time ever. In my head I still call them “my new family” even though Deb and I have been together for ten years now. Married for seven. Our twins – that’s Joshua and Jessica – they’re six years old. And yes, I’m sixty-four years old. Deb is forty-seven. And yes, by the time the twins are twenty-one, I’ll be seventy-nine. Believe me, the math takes regular jogs around my brain. Deb says that a healthy seventy-nine is just as good as fifty-nine. She keeps me away from hard booze and red meat, sends me on walks with the double stroller on a daily basis. Do it for me, she says, and she says it like she really cares. Do it for the twins.

Good going, dad, you replaced us both in one try, way to go. That’s what Greg said when I called him after they were first born. By “us” he meant him and Megan, my daughter. My first daughter, who won’t have a thing to do with me. I didn’t even bother to call her when J and J were born. How could I? I didn’t have her number. I still don’t, and she blocked me on Facebook.

I called Greg, though. Left some messages. He wouldn’t call me back till I said it was an emergency. Then he was mad at me for making him worry. He thought something might be wrong, he said, with mom or with Megan. As if I would know if something was wrong with Megan or their mother. Diane. My first wife. Oh, man. Diane. Please. As if my own life with my new family didn’t count for anything. What if something had happened to my Deb, or one of the twins, god forbid, that I was calling to tell him about? That wouldn’t concern him, not even a little bit? I told him it was an emergency, a good emergency. He had two new siblings, for crying out loud. A new little brother, a new little sister. He said there was no such thing as a good emergency, it didn’t exist. Well, maybe it does now, I told him.

I guess I was just talking out of my ass, I don’t know, but then I started crying, right on the phone. I said, let me send you a picture of them, Greggie. Don’t you even want to see them? That got to him, I could tell. I mean, underneath it all, Greg has a heart. So I sent him a picture of the twin infants in their pink and blue knit hats, and in a few

days he texted back: cute. It was just a word, but I think there were a lot of feelings behind that one word, you know what I mean? Unspoken feelings. If he didn't care, he wouldn't have texted back at all, right? It's kind of crazy, because between Diane and Megan and Greg and me, I would say it was always the two of us guys who were more sensitive about feelings.

But that's not the crazy thing about life I was talking about.

So over the last few years – the last six years, I mean – I've been texting Greg photos of the twins. Christmas, their birthdays, or just at random times when I take a good photo. And usually he'll text back: still cute. That's it. But at least it's a connection between us. Then just this year I sent him a photo of Josh and Jessie on their first day of first grade, looking so stinking cute in their little back-to-school outfits that Deb dressed them up in. And then the next day, instead of his usual reply, Greg sends back a photo of his own: it was him, my Greg! He's such a good looking kid – but not a kid. He's thirty-six years old, a man. Handsome. In the photo he's smiling real wide, not the annoyed smirk he usually had in family photos and even his senior portrait. His brown hair is longer now, parted on the side and wavy on top. I guess that's a style. But it wasn't just Greg. It was Greg and another guy, sitting right next to him with his hand sort of resting on Greg's shoulder. Some kind of Asian, but not Chinese or Japanese. Maybe Puerto Rican? I couldn't quite place it. Very clean cut, wearing a sweater with a zipper, also smiling real hard, and on their laps were two dogs. Dachshunds, with the cute faces and floppy ears? But then here was what he texted with the photo: Not that you asked.

Not that I asked? What the hell was that supposed to mean? I showed it to Deb. She scrolled back through the text chain, all those pics of the twins, then back to Greg's photo and his message. "Well, clearly that's his partner," Deb said. "His significant other. And those are their pets. And you've sent him six years of photos of your new kids and never once asked him if he has a family of his own. That's what it means."

I sat down at our table and thought about that. "So I'm an asshole."

She shrugged, but in a sort of sympathetic way. That's what I love about Deb. She can tell you the truth without making you feel like she hates you for it.

I asked her what I should do, and she drummed her fingers on the table for a minute and then said, "I'll call him." She took my phone

and walked out on the porch. I couldn't hear what she said. But then a couple weeks later, Greg shows up at our house in Cloverhill for a visit.

He was wearing pants that showed his ankles and white leather sneakers with no socks and a short-sleeved shirt, slim fit. He looked not skinny, but thin. In shape. When he was a kid, and a teenager, too, he was always on the chunky side, and his sister would tease him about it. Diane, too. Diane would come up behind him when he was getting ice cream or something out of the fridge and poke at his spare tire. Not me. I never would. Why would I? I'd always carried around an extra twenty pounds in the middle myself. Or maybe thirty. Who am I to criticize?

It had been so long since I'd seen him. You aren't supposed to hug people now or shake hands even, and it took me too long to figure out what was the right thing to do in the moment, and before I even said anything he was already walking past me on the driveway to Deb and the twins, introducing himself and making small talk with Josh and Jessie about the cartoon characters printed on their tee-shirts while I just stood there like a dummy.

We all walked around the side of the house to the back, staying outside for the social distance. Deb took the kids to play on the swing set on the far side of the yard to let the two of us "catch up." She'd left two plates of sandwiches cut in triangles and a pitcher of ice tea on the table on the porch, so we sat down there. I picked up two of the triangle sandwiches, put one in my mouth and then the other. Greg watched me, and there it was: his old smirk, his lips pressed together and curled up on one side.

"You didn't bring your friend," I said.

"My friend?"

I could tell he knew what I meant, but I said, "From the photo. You should have brought him! And the dogs."

"His name is Anthony. He's my husband."

"That's fantastic! Really, really, really fantastic." I said it too fast. I could feel bits of tuna salad slobbering from the corners of my mouth. But I meant it, I was sincere. I wanted him to know I was happy he had someone.

With his index fingers and thumbs, Greg pulled on the tips of his shirt collar and blinked in slow motion. "Okay, dad." Then he shook his head, just barely.

"I mean it! Fantastic news - "

But Greg held up one hand, stopping me. He lifted a triangle sand-

wich with a sigh and took a small bite, chewing, chewing, chewing. I watched Deb over in the yard making bubbles with a wand the size of a frying pan, dipping it into a bucket of soap. Waving it in the air till a giant bubble took shape, wobbling and shining. Josh jumped up and popped it, but before Jessie could cry, Deb was waving the wand again, directing the turn-taking. She was a good mom. But so was Diane, I thought, watching Greg and his sandwich. And what about me? When Greg was six like the twins, I was one of the T-ball coaches. I took him to Indian Guides. And lots of other things, too, and where? Where's the credit?

"Did you invite them to the wedding?" I said. "Mom and Megan?"

Slowly, very goddamn slowly, he put his sandwich down and picked up his napkin to wipe his mouth. He shook his head no. "It was destination. Turks and Caicos. Just a very few guests."

I brushed at the breadcrumbs on my shirt, patting my heart. Rubbing it. "Like who?"

"Just a very few close friends. And Anthony's foster mother who raised him."

"Anthony's mom. Wow. Okay."

"You and mom and your new wife stuck on an island together? I wouldn't do that to you, dad." He tried to smile, which I appreciated. I mean, at least I wasn't the only one left out, but it still hurt.

I said, "Gee. No family of your own there to toast you."

He shrugged. "I guess you made that choice for all of us."

At first I couldn't believe my own ears. Me? I was the only one to blame, still? After all this time? My hands gripped the edge of the small round table. I could feel them starting to shake.

Greg pushed his chair back, like he was protecting himself in case I flipped the whole table over, and maybe I would have, but just then Deb jogged up the porch steps, saying "hey there, guys," rushing past us through the back door and popping out again with a dish towel to wipe off the twins' soapy hands before they went to play with their toys on the patio. She slung the towel over one shoulder and smiled her smile at the two of us. Greg stood up, but I was still attached to the table. Holding on for dear life. The one-sidedness, I was thinking. Jesus Christ.

Greg took a step closer to Deb, smiling back. He said, "Debbie?"

She wrinkled her nose at him, sort of laughing. Nobody called her Debbie. Only Deb or Debra.

"Debbie!" Greg repeated. "I think you were my swimming teacher."

Her mouth made an O. “Crystal Lake?”

That’s the crazy thing that I was talking about before. My new wife used to be Greg’s swimming teacher. Although I guess it’s not really so crazy. Cloverhill is a small enough town, after all.

“Three summers,” Greg was grinning now, like in the photo he sent me. “Tadpoles, Minnows, and Intermediate. I guess they couldn’t figure out a fish name for the third level.”

“Oh, my God, that is hilarious! Let me look at you.” She stared at Greg, searching his face. “I was a swim teacher and lifeguard every summer all through high school and college. I taught so many kids.”

“I’m one of those people who don’t look like their kid self. I had a buzz cut and chubby cheeks.”

“He was husky,” I interjected, but they didn’t look at me.

“I was scared of the water,” Greg continued. “I almost had to repeat minnows, but you said you knew I could do it.”

I said, “You weren’t scared of water,” but it’s like they couldn’t hear me.

“I remember you, Greg!” Deb exclaimed. “I do! You had to float to graduate to the next level.”

“But I kept sinking.”

“And finally one day I took my hand away from your back really slowly without you knowing it, and you were doing it.”

The two of them had drifted together down the porch steps, as if pulled by a gentle current, to the patio. The twins were sprawled there on the play mat with their matching laptops, and Deb and my son sat down in the swivel patio chairs nearby.

“That’s right,” Greg nodded, smiling fondly. “You said something about the clouds. Look up at the clouds, Greg, or something like that, and then I realized I was doing it. I was floating.”

“Do you remember what you said?” Deb swiveled her swivel chair and put her hand on his knee.

Greg shook his head, blushing, and he looked a little like himself again. His kid self.

“You said, ‘I’m free!’ That’s why I remember you, Greg, because it was so cute. ‘I’m free!’”

Greg laughed and spun his chair around, calling in a funny high voice, “I’m free!” And then Deb did it, too, both of them spinning in their swivel chairs with their arms raised, and that got the kids going, jumping up from their laptops and twirling around shouting along, “I’m

free! I'm free!"

And I'll tell you, it was weird. I was sitting there on the porch watching them going around, around. My arms were just dangling by my sides now. I felt something that's hard to describe, an aching from my chest to my fingertips. My vision went blurry, and it looked for a minute like the four of them were twirling slow motion in a giant bubble, shimmery and out of focus. I thought for sure I was having a stroke or something, but probably it was just tears in my eyes – I've always been an easy crier for a man – because in another minute or so I was okay again. But I can't seem to forget it. That's the crazy thing. The sight of my grown up son and young wife and new children spinning together inside an opaque sphere, cloudy and iridescent, with me on the other side of it.

# If the Odds Don't Change

---

*Eric Aldrich*

"I always play the same numbers in the lotto," Mickey slurred to Simon as they left the bar. Mickey's giant, balding head rocked back onto the headrest of Simon's old Subaru as they pulled into traffic. It had been senior skip day at school and many of the bad kids weren't there, so Simon, the school librarian, reshelved books uninterrupted and removed video games from all the hard drives in the computer lab. He had enjoyed the day until Mickey demanded a ride home and then insisted they stop for drinks. Simon just wanted to get home and see Carol. Even though she encouraged him to get out, Simon never stopped thinking Carol must feel lonely. He didn't really like watching Mickey get drunk, but he had let himself be bullied into stopping. Again. That was two hours ago.

"How is it fun to play the same numbers every time?" Simon asked, more to himself than to Mickey.

"You just don't understand," Mickey rambled. "I'm a math teacher. A hyper-rational creature. If the numbers are random, and the odds don't change, why change the numbers?" Mickey rested his hands on his gut sticking out of his overstretched blue velvet polo shirt. This was one of three he rotated through weekly, two days per shirt. His wife did his laundry until she left him almost ten years ago. Mickey claimed that since he didn't move around much, he didn't get the shirts sweaty. Simon and Mickey had worked at the high school for almost twenty years. Had Mickey's hygiene always been so low? Did he always yell at the kids like he did these days? Simon remembered when Mickey used to brag about being a good teacher instead of his lotto strategies. He watched sweat bead on Mickey's forehead and roll down to his grey beard. The traffic lurched and stuttered.

Simon envisioned getting home to Carol and telling her about his plan to make falafel half the usual size and see how many fit in the pita without ripping it. Then, without warning, the blue Jeep in front of them slammed on its brakes. Simon jerked to a halt inches from the rear bumper. Mickey careened forward, his stomach bumping into the glove box. "Fuck," Mickey cursed. The Jeep's top was down. The driver was the only person in there and from the back of his head he looked like

a regular guy, gray hair and a collared shirt. There was nothing in front of the Jeep. Maybe the guy didn't want to kill a squirrel or something.

"Goddamn diaper-brain," Mickey griped. He was pissed. Like always. Like how he crumpled his lotto tickets when he lost. Like how he belittled students who couldn't find the area of a dodecahedron. Like how he complained when Simon didn't want to stop at the bar.

Simon ignored Mickey and tried to focus on Carol. He remembered decades back, coming home to their first apartment and how she used to make those vegetarian casseroles. Maybe he should swing by her favorite take-out place, Ciao Bella, and get her lasagna. She'd appreciate it. Maybe he'd get pasta puttanesca. Simon would have to get Mickey home first, otherwise Mickey would want something, too, but he'd have lost most of his cash on lotto tickets and he'd be a buck or two short and he'd turn to Simon and show him an empty wallet and take Simon's money and promise to pay him back. By the time Simon got Mickey dropped off and picked up take-out, Carol would have already microwaved a TV dinner. Maybe Simon should just have a TV dinner too.

They were going about 35 miles per hour when - BAM! - the Jeep driver locked his brakes again. Simon's car rocked forward hard, but he didn't rear end the Jeep.

"Fucking droolwipe!" Mickey roared.

This time Simon griped, "Oh come on." A solid row of cars in the right lane prevented Simon from moving over.

"I'm wise to what this pissbag is doing," Mickey snarled. "He gets some poor schmuck like you to rear-end him. Then the bloodsucking tick pretends to have neck and back injuries and he goes to a crooked chiropractor that charges your insurance tens of thousands!"

"Maybe he's drunk," Simon offered. Or perhaps there was something wrong with the brakes or maybe Mickey was right and he was a scammer. Maybe the driver was having a stroke. Maybe he was suicidal. Perhaps he thought brake jacking was funny. Maybe the guy suffered from crippling anxiety like Carol and it took him all day to gather the nerve to drive himself to his doctor appointment and now he was braking unpredictably as a physical manifestation of his fear. Carol eventually gave up her license, but she was terrified to drive for a long time by that point. She would have puked when she got home if she had been stuck behind this brake jacker. Or if she had been in the car with Mickey.

“You just gonna let him get away with this?” Mickey huffed. The Jeep’s brake lights flickered again, but now Simon was leaving two car lengths between them.

“What should I do?” Simon asked. “Run him off the road?”

“You didn’t even honk!” Mickey scolded him.

“Why would I?” Simon shook his head.

“It lets the guy know he’s an asshole,” Mickey said.

“Just take it easy, Mickey,” Simon mumbled. Half of society was malfunctioning at least some of the time and there needed to be more explanation than everyone being assholes. Simon tried to tell this to Carol and she said she knew, but she said it didn’t matter if people meant to behave badly or not, the problem was in her, not them. She couldn’t deal with them. Somehow Simon was the only person who could convince Carol that he cared about her enough not to hurt her. Or maybe she just had to trust someone in order to survive. But the driver up ahead had no idea Carol depended on Simon, he had no idea they had been together thirty years, or that she hadn’t left the house more than three times this year. The Jeep driver’s foot came down on the brake again, as if only his life mattered.

Simon watched a van zoom up in the rearview. He looked into his own blue eyes framed in creases and bags. He noted the brown mole on his scalp where his black hair was thinning and remembered Carol wanted him to get it checked out. The van zipped into the right lane and then cut between Simon’s car and the Jeep. One second later, it was screeching to a halt. The van blared its horn at the Jeep and veered into the right lane, cutting off a motorcycle.

“Fucking beep at him!” Mickey yelled, reaching over as if to hit the horn. Simon honked. It was probably just encouraging the guy in the Jeep. Or maybe it startled him and got him nervous. Simon felt his ears heat up. If he had been alone, he could just hang back and listen to NPR. The brake jacking would be a forgettable moment, not as stressful as Mickey was making it. Damn Mickey. Over the years, Simon had stayed home with Carol so much that his other friendships had withered. He wondered if Mickey was better than no friends at all.

“Someone oughta waterboard that guy,” Mickey growled.

“Oh come on,” Simon realized he was clenching the steering wheel.

“Don’t come on me...” Mickey pulled his beard.

“Just stop,” Simon told him. “You’re making it worse.”

“I’m not even driving!” Mickey protested. When Simon didn’t

reply, Mickey sarcastically conceded, “Ok. I’ll shut up. You want to listen to your liberal talk radio until you hear the crunch of metal on metal. I get it.”

Simon wouldn’t tell Carol about any of this. It would upset her. And why shouldn’t it? The brake jacker had no regard for anyone. Mickey had no regard for Simon, even in spite of the rides and loans. No wonder Carol had given up on people. Yet, she considered herself messed up and everyone else normal. Doctors and professionals had affirmed her disorder. Simon knew that he had also played along with that understanding of her, that she was exceptionally dysfunctional. But, he thought, Carol’s anxiety wasn’t something she inflicted on the world. She stayed at home. Carol read to Simon and scratched his head and taped his favorite shows and said she loved him every morning and again as they were falling asleep each night. Years ago, she had encouraged him to leave her, but he loved her too much to consider it.

Clearly, Mickey couldn’t handle being around other people, either, but he held a job, he shopped, he went to the bar. The brake jacker endangered all the other motorists, but there he was on the road. Like Mickey, he functioned in society, if barely. But it was kind, decent Carol who stayed home away from people. She ceded her world to people who litter, braggarts, people who leave frozen food in the cereal aisle, parents who let their kids pull things off shelves in stores, people who don’t clean up after their dogs, people who smoke with their kids in the car, people who talk in movie theaters and cut in lines and use their hands at the buffet and steal and fight. Most would consider themselves functional people, Simon suspected. Mickey considered himself a “hyper-rational creature.” Yet, all of them made the people around them suffer, and for what? Because they couldn’t be bothered to get along? Or because of something deeper, more pervasive, more human than decency?

The Jeep lurched to an abrupt stop as they approached a traffic light. Simon noticed the left turn lane was empty and felt the electricity of a plan. He could, for one moment, without Carol knowing, be an instigator, a prankster, maybe a hypocrite. He had a good day at work and he wanted to bring home lasagna and a smile, not exhaustion from drunk Mickey or frustration from this brake jacker. Simon coasted into the turn lane, slowed to stop next to the Jeep.

“Here’s our chance!” he slapped Mickey’s chest. “Go get him! Before the light turns!”

“What?” Mickey’s mouth flopped open.

“That asshole! Go get him!” Simon urged. The suggestion possessed Mickey. He swung the door open, looked back at Simon, slapped the dashboard, and stormed toward the Jeep. Simon waited until he could hear Mickey screaming at the driver, then he leaned over, quickly shut Mickey’s door, and turned left through the intersection, running a red light. He glanced in his rearview at Mickey’s swollen, perplexed face standing in the road as he swung the Subaru onto a side street.

Mickey and the Jeep receded in the rearview. Simon turned up NPR on the radio. “Welcome back to All Things Considered,” came Audie Cornish’s soothing voice. Simon’s hands shook on the wheel. He was either grinning or gritting his teeth or both. He didn’t know the name of the street he was on or where exactly it went, but it clearly wasn’t a dead end. He would weave his way home to Carol, somehow.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Eric Aldrich's** recent work has appeared in *Weber: The Contemporary West, Hobart*, and on [Terrain.org](http://Terrain.org). His novella, *Please Listen Carefully as Our Options Have Changed*, is featured in *Running Wild Novella Anthology Vol. IV*. You can find more about Eric at [ericaldrich.net](http://ericaldrich.net). "If the Odds Don't Change" was written in memory of Eric's friend, Bill Sweeney, who passed in 2016.

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