

A woman is shown from the waist up, wearing a sleeveless dress with a teal and white floral pattern. She is holding a book in front of her face, which is completely obscured by the book. The book's cover is also covered in the same teal and white floral pattern. The background is a dark, textured green, and a large, white, particle-like trail or spray of light extends from the top left corner towards the center, partially overlapping the woman's head and the book. The overall mood is artistic and mysterious.

THE
**PARAGON
JOURNAL**

ISSUE 17

The Paragon Journal

Journal of Creative Arts

The Paragon Journal: Journal of Creative Arts - September 2019

Cover courtesy of Christopher Shearer

Heading and Subheading Set: Mrs. Eaves OT

Text Set: Times New Roman

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ISSN: 2470-7775 (print)

ISSN: 2470-3834 (online)

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The Hedonistic Calculus

Will Pewitt

She emerged from the jungle after eighty-two days. A couple dozen scrapes, four spider bites, two bullet wounds. This was my grandmother, we all still call Lita, whose story I knew only after I had been singing along passionately in my mother's passenger seat to the Goo Goo Dolls, "Scars are souvenirs you never lose." She looked at me as if I were primed to be slapped. Lita calls her morose. She was in the backseat.

"You think you know about scars?"

"I think I like Johnny Rzeznik."

We had just come from the doctor—"the three Havana girls," the doctor had called us, my first visit to an OBGYN. Five letters for two words. When he'd asked at the end if I'd had any questions, I'd asked why they didn't call him an OG. "They do," he said, "but only on the streets."

Mom took a lot of time asking her questions—so much I'd asked Lita if we could go down to the record store across the street. She'd said, "This is America, you can do whatever you like," which was her way of saying, "No." But in that moment, waiting on whatever was taking Mom so long, I felt with distinct confidence that I could have walked out of that office and been stopped by nothing but my own guilt.

I didn't.

Just watched Lita reading a *Highlights* until she declared "These two pictures are the same."

"Why do they even have that in an OBGYN's office?" I asked, all my energy focused on spitting out those five letters as naturalistically as I could. Lita just nodded. At the other end of the waiting room was a child not much younger than me on the lap of some nervous mother.

"You forget that used to be you."

It seemed an epiphany, until it was swallowed by the epiphany I learned on the ride home.

Johnny's voice cut short, acoustics smearing to a halt in the tapedeck, Mom so angry a glaze of tears coated her eyes like an extra coat of lenses. So I listened. To how the firing squad took her for dead. One shot clean through the clavicle, the other a flesh-wound around her neck. I didn't hear much of the rest of the story. Just thought that this woman, my Lita, had once been forced to consider—lived a moment where she'd had to consider—whether bleeding out or standing up was more likely to end in death.

I never heard her say how she knew when to risk rising up, but apparently she chose wisely. My muscles suddenly felt very fragile. The world outside the car, one big scar. Mom was crying. Lita didn't touch her.

The car smelled strange, and I wondered like a kid if it was some scent we grown women gave off in moments of great intensity. But when we got home I was the first to notice the stains in the driver's seat. We all cleaned it before Papa got home from work.

She, A Rose (an excerpt)

Avery Kester

INCLUDED CHARACTERS:

Amy, a woman in her late 40s, Tom's Wife

Tom, a man in his late 40s, Amy's Husband

Phoebe, a transgender woman in her early twenties

Trevor, a man in his early twenties, Sophie's Boyfriend

Sophie (Phantom), a phantom transgender woman in her early twenties

TV Personality 1*

TV Personality 2*

Jeremy*

These characters are never seen, only heard, their parts should be pre-recorded, it makes sense to use the adult actors of other roles for these parts. It's also possible to combine the parts of young Sophie into one role, although care should be taken during costuming to show a difference in age.

**The parts of Adult Sophie and Phoebe are to be portrayed by transfeminine actors, no cisgender actors may portray these roles.*

TIME: 2017

PLACE: Seattle, WA

SETTING:

A family room, covered in the trappings of a busy family, clutter everywhere.

SCENE 2

[Lights up, beat. Trevor catatonically makes his way down the stairs, his hair still damp, in new clothes, probably pajamas or sweats. He goes to the kitchen and gets a plate of food that is now cold. He spots a photo album on the bookshelf and eyes it for a moment. He sets his plate of cold dinner down and plucks it off the shelf. A long moment of silence passes. He sets it down for a moment and opens up the liquor cabinet. He pours himself a drink and sits back down. He sips at his drink for a moment, but the temptation proves too much and he picks up the album and looks through it. Although it may not be visible to the audience, the album is of a trip that Trevor, Phoebe, and Sophie took after their high school graduation. The sounds

of a restless house fill the space as he looks through the pictures. We'll share this moment with him for several minutes. The lights shift, the scene is half real, half imagined. A phantom Sophie appears at the top of the stairs. She'll sit down and watch Trevor through the stair banisters. She's shifting restlessly back and forth, Trevor hears this and looks up from the album. He wipes the tears from his face and closes the album. He stands up and walks to the stairs, Sophie also stands as he approaches. He pulls her into his arms and they move toward the couch and sit together.]

TREVOR

No sleeping tonight?

[She shakes her head.]

TREVOR

What's on your mind, Soph?

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

Just... today...

[Pause]

TREVOR

Yeah... I -

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

I just never thought something like this would happen to me... here... you know?

TREVOR

Yeah, I know what you mean...

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

I mean... this is Seattle, not Laramie...

TREVOR

I didn't expect it either.

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

And Phoebe...

TREVOR

But they said she's gonna be fine.

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

I can still feel... fists.

[She's in pain.]

TREVOR

It's over now... it's over...

[Pause, he holds her.]

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

Hitting me... kicking me... Stop! Why would you do this? Please... no more...

TREVOR

You're gonna be okay.

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

I'm gonna be okay?

TREVOR

Yeah, it's over now.

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

You don't know that baby.

TREVOR

What? No, Soph you're -

[Pause. Trevor is beginning to realize the scene is in his
mind, not real.]

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

I didn't come home with you Trev. I'm at the hospital. 3 ribs cracked, 2 broken internal bleeding. My face bruised and bleeding, lungs bruised, one punctured... Don't you remember? You saw me there, at the hospital, remember the blood trailing from my mouth?

TREVOR

That's... you're at the hospital... I have to go there!

[He tries to rise but she hold him to the spot.]

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

Stay here. There's nothing you can do there.

[Pause. Trevor tries to speak but can't get anything out, he's beginning to panic. The phantom Sophie shushes him and pulls him close to her. She begins to sing a lullaby, the tune of Barges.]

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

*Out of my window looking in the night,
I can see the barges flickering light.
Silently flows the river to the sea,
and the barges too go silently.
Barges, I would like to go with you,
I would like to sail the ocean blue.
Barges, have you treasures in your hold?
Do you fight with pirates brave and bold?*

[Trevor begins to sing along the next verse, trying to calm himself down even though he now knows the scene is all in his mind.]

SOPHIE & TREVOR

*Out of my window looking in the night,
I can see the barges flickering light.
Starboard shines green and port is glowing red,
I can see the barges far ahead.
Barges, I would like to go with you,
I would like to sail the ocean blue.
Barges, have you treasures in your hold?
Do you fight with pirates brave and bold?*

[He can't keep singing, but she continues.]

SOPHIE (PHANTOM)

*How my heart longs to sail away with you,
as I watch you sail the ocean blue.
But I must stay beside my window clear,
as I watch you sail away from here.
Barges, I would like to go with you,
I would like to sail the ocean blue.
Barges, have you treasures in your hold?
Do you fight with pirates brave and bold?*

[She leaves, disappearing from Trevor's mind, and he is a bit shaken, coming back into reality. Trevor tries to collect himself a little bit. He stands and finishes his drink before

making his way back upstairs. Blackout. End scene.]

SCENE 3

[It's a little later now, it's mostly dark in the living room, as everyone is in bed. The photo album still sits on the coffee table. Tom and Amy walk into the room through the front door, looking quite shaken. Close behind them comes Phoebe, every step she takes is absolute agony. They take off their coats, Amy pours them all a drink and Tom sits on the couch. She sits next to him and they share a silent moment of drinking. Phoebe swallows hers all at once and sets the glass down on the coffee table.]

PHOEBE

I'm going to go upstairs and talk to Trev.

[Amy nods, and Phoebe painfully makes her way up the stairs. It hurts, but she doesn't need any help. After she's gone, Tom turns on the TV very quietly, so as not to wake the kids.]

TV PERSONALITY 2

Welcome back! This is the Midnight news on Fox Q13.

TV PERSONALITY 1

And we have an update as this story continues to unfold. Police have taken several young men into custody after the apparent assault of local young women, Sophie Harris and Phoebe Melody.

TV PERSONALITY 2

The young men apprehended are all students at local Washington State University, between the ages of 18 and 22.

TV PERSONALITY 1

Both young women were taken to Northwest Hospital from the scene, although it has been reported that Ms. Melody is expected to be released sometime tonight since she sustained no-life-threatening injuries.

TV PERSONALITY 2

Sophie Harris was in critical condition when emergency responders pulled her from the scene and we have heard no updates on her condition since that time.

TV PERSONALITY 1

Police have largely declined our requests for information, citing the wishes of the family for privacy while their daughter battles for her life.

TV PERSONALITY 2

With us here tonight is fellow University of Washington student and friend of the assailants, Jeremy Hann.

TV PERSONALITY 1

Jeremy, thank you for joining us.

JEREMY

Absolutely.

TV PERSONALITY 2

What do you make of this? Have you been in contact with any of your friends since the attack?

JEREMY

No, I haven't been able to talk to them since. Now, you've got this story wrong, just hear me out, because I know it sounds quite "controversial", but this isn't a cut and dry situation of men attacking young women. My friends would never hit a woman, I mean they are upstanding guys ya know what I mean? Really classy dudes, they were raised better than to hit women. These guys weren't... they weren't women okay?

TV PERSONALITY 2

You're referring, of course, to Sophie Harris' status as a transgender woman.

JEREMY

Of course! I mean when boys like this dress up as women and try to fool everyone, it's like they're asking for trouble.

TV PERSONALITY 1

Are you implying that this young woman brought this senseless act of violence on herself?

JEREMY

Not exactly, what I'm saying is that if you throw morality to the wind, then there are going to be consequences. What do you expect when trannies parade around as if they own the place? Just nasty.

TV PERSONALITY 2

We have very little information about why the attack took place, and it is unknown at this time if it was motivated by disdain for the gender identity of the victims.

JEREMY

That's a way to put it, I guess. Really these men, my friends, were acting out of a desire to protect the community from perverts.

TV PERSONALITY 2

So you're saying that this crime was motivated by hate?

JEREMY

No wait, I didn't-

TV PERSONALITY 1

According to information we have sourced here at the network, both young women are very involved in recent events for transgender rights at the University of Washington campus, although we cannot confirm whether or not she is transgender.

TV PERSONALITY 2

I believe we have a quote from a young woman who was witness to the attack.

TV PERSONALITY 1

Yes, we have here a quote from a young woman who was dancing at the nightclub in question and saw the events prior to the attack while inside the club. She states that the boys had been harrasing the two girls and had been asked many times to leave them alone. She also said that she was on her way to alert nightclub security when she saw the young women leave the bar.

TV PERSONALITY 2

It is believed that the young men followed them out and there was a confrontation.

JEREMY

What happened was that they discovered they were just men in wigs. How would you feel if you had wasted your time trying to dance with traps like that?

TREVOR

Tom, turn that noise off.

[He shuts the TV off with a remote, and an uncomfortable silence fills the space. Unbeknownst to the couple, Trevor and Phoebe had slowly made their way down the stairs while the Newscasters spoke. Trevor helps Phoebe into a chair and sits down himself, leaving a hefty amount of space between himself and Amy.]

TOM

You guys hear much of that garbage?

[Pause. Trevor nods, Phoebe has a very faraway look in her eyes.]

AMY

Can I get you guys a drink?

TOM

Amy, don't help the kids become alcoholics.

AMY

Tom... that's not...

[Pause. Phoebe gently nods. Amy goes to the liquor cabinet and pours two drinks for them. She hands one to Phoebe and the other to Trevor. Phoebe absentmindedly sips at her drink and everyone else is watching her carefully.]

PHOEBE

You don't need to look at me like that.

[Pause. They all look away even though the comment was aimed at Trevor.]

TREVOR

I'm just worried about you is all.

PHOEBE

I don't care if they call me a man on TV, it's not the first time I've heard it and it won't be the last.

[Pause. She looks more upset than she sounds. She sips at her drink. Tom and Amy can tell that the conversation isn't really for them.]

TOM

Hey kids, we have some calls we need to make, make sure you go to bed soon okay? Doctor told us to rest up, we'll head back in a few hours.

[They both nod absently, Tom almost pulls Amy up and they leave through the kitchen. We can no longer hear their conversation.]

TREVOR

Hey Phoebes... how are you doing?

[Pause.]

PHOEBE

Well, I'm alive and home. But... I just can't shake this feeling...

TREVOR

What feeling?

PHOEBE

Just this empty dread, this hollow... this hollow terror.

TREVOR

You want to talk about it?

[Pause]

PHOEBE

What do you want me say? Do you want me to tell you what it was like to be attacked by a stranger in the street?

[Pause. Trevor looks uncomfortable but doesn't say anything. He doesn't want to make it any worse.]

PHOEBE

We were just walking and I heard it before I even saw them, I heard the hard smack of that bat on her skull. I looked over and she was just... on the ground, not moving. And before I could turn around I felt something hard and swift smack right into my side.

[Pause. Phoebe gingerly touches her side as she speaks. It hurts. She maybe has some cracked ribs. She takes a long moment of silence, Trevor isn't sure what to say.]

PHOEBE

It felt like years before anyone came to pull them off of us. I didn't feel them hitting me, but I saw them kicking her. She just laid there, I don't know if she was awake but her eyes were open. She looked so far away.

[Phoebe has a faraway look in her own eyes, her hands tremble tensely around her drink. Trevor reaches out a gentle hand to her, rubbing her shoulder. It helps bring her

back to herself a little bit.]

TREVOR

You're home now.

PHOEBE

Not even my home... it's empty without Sophie.

TREVOR

You're family too, you know Tom thinks of you as his daughter too.

[Pause. She leans into his hand and sips at her drink, it's not right. She needs something with less alcohol.]

PHOEBE

Trev?

[He sends her a gentle glance.]

PHOEBE

Would you mind making me some tea?

TREVOR

Yeah. Can do.

PHOEBE

Thanks

[Trevor stands up, kisses her head lightly, it's a friendly gesture, they've known each other for a long time. He moves to the kitchen and makes her some tea. While he's there, she sets down her cup of drink, not wanting any alcohol. She rubs her face with her hands, hoping to bring her mind back to her body. She spies the photo album on the table and picks it up. Every movement she makes takes a long time, she's very injured. She begins to look through and muses to herself quietly. As she talks, Trevor probably comes back with the tea and sits next to her.]

PHOEBE

Sophie, that hat is so bad... I can't believe you let me buy that! Oh gods... Oh! I remember this... oh man...

[A pause as she looks at a photo.]

PHOEBE

Soph... what happened to us?

[Trevor is back by now, he lightly traces a finger over the photograph. They both share a long moment of silence over worry for Sophie.]

TREVOR

Do you think she's gonna live?

PHOEBE

God I hope so. Did you get to see her when you were there?

TREVOR

Yeah. You didn't?

PHOEBE

No, well not really, they wouldn't stop fussing with me and then she was out cold and it was all I could do not to fall apart when I looked at her. I... I should have spent longer with her.

TREVOR

We're going back soon enough, and I'm sure she's just resting now.

PHOEBE

How... how did she look when you saw her?

[Trevor takes a deep breath, sips at his drink and gives a deep and meaningful look to Phoebe for a long minute.]

TREVOR

Nothing like herself. She looked so broken and fragile, no color in her face and just covered in dry blood. Her hair was matted with it. I've never seen her like that... never seen anyone look like that.

[Pause. Phoebe begins to quietly cry, sort of surprising herself with it. Trevor wipes at her tears and embraces her.]

TREVOR

We should try to get some sleep

[She nods slowly, takes one last sip of her drink and then sets it down. Trevor helps her to her feet and they climb the stairs painfully. End scene.]

The Supermarket

Michelle Drozdick

Anders is crying.

His face remains composed, not a single twitch, but his eyes are shining. All around her people are sniffing, some even sobbing and making a scene, but it's Anders who stands out

They've hung a ribbon across the entrance, tied one end to a lamppost, the other to a garbage can. The mayor holds up the giant pair of scissors provided by the newly reformed civic association with a befuddled sort of grin, as though this part of the opening is a big surprise, as though all the flyers hadn't specifically mentioned a ribbon cutting ceremony.

There's a faint ripple throughout the crowd at the mere thought of having a mayor and ribbon they can afford to waste again. Faint laughter, smiles. More tears. The mayor goes on for a bit about values, and holding your loved ones close, whether they're physically present or not.

Mia has heard this all before. So has Anders. His face still doesn't change expression, and for a moment she wonders if it's a trick of the light, but— no, he turns his head, away from the crowd, and he is most definitely crying.

She watches for a moment, then looks away.

It's none of her business.

All around her, faint murmuring about the old days. She remembers them well, as they really weren't all that long ago, that far-off, impossible time when a supermarket wouldn't have drawn crowds, or speeches, or heavy use of generators due to occasional blackouts. There'd been debate about that— lots of back and forth over whether they should wait, whether they're really *ready* to take the step of having a supermarket again. Impassioned speeches about reclaiming dignity, about how they deserve as much after all they've been through. They've earned it.

Flowery language aside, Mia does lean pro-supermarket. She can't remember the last time she had graham crackers.

Before, when she would imagine she was somewhere else, anywhere else, it was a comfort of sorts to imagine herself in her old kitchen, surrounded by what would now be considered an overwhelming (perhaps even excessive) amount of cooking utensils and knickknacks. If she kept herself very still and very quiet, she could almost believe she was wandering across the linoleum floor, a hand reaching up to the cabinet over the microwave cart, retrieving some crackers. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, carefully opening the box but ripping into the little bag inside with less caution. Breaking one along its perforated lines, savoring it slowly, letting the flavor melt into her tongue before chewing. Enjoying it.

She doesn't even like graham crackers. She never kept them in her apartment. It's an entirely fabricated memory. She's not quite sure where this particular craving comes from, maybe a forgotten memory of a doting grandmother. Maybe she'd had a couple before a great date or getting a promotion, back when that was her life. Doesn't really matter. The details don't concern her much. She just wants some fucking crackers.

It takes several fumbled attempts before the mayor manages to cut the ribbon, but the roar that emits from the crowd would give an outsider the impression they've just witnessed the

second coming of Christ. Mia can't judge, she's applauding along with the rest of them.

Of course, she isn't immune. It's a *supermarket*.

Families with young children go first, by unspoken agreement. Mia hangs back and watches the crowd part dutifully, all eyes on the children's faces. Excitement, mostly, with some trepidation, from all ages. Mia thinks back to being young, to being promised a big, wonderful surprise and the anticipation growing so much that when the time finally came—

They disappear through the double glass doors (it occurs to Mia that the more authentic choice would be automatic sliding doors, but what can you do when your options are limited), their initial reactions impossible to see.

They're all moving forward now, and she's nervous. No reason to be— she's been through it all, she should be happy, but—

She glances back. Anders is staring straight ahead toward the crowd shuffling itself into an untidy but functional queue.

He'd held her, that night. They'd held each other. There hadn't been enough time to get to shelter— he was running, she was running, one pulled the other into the ditch—who pulled who? She wasn't sure. Didn't really matter. They'd barely known each other, but that didn't matter either.

He sees her, now. And after a moment passes, she realizes she's crying too.

They don't quite walk to each other. The crowd is flowing— she stands her ground, while he allows himself to be moved along until they're standing next to each other. Then he stops.

She hadn't known his name at the time. Hadn't even seen his face until after the blasts stopped and the all clear siren broke through the sudden silence.

They hadn't said much either, during or after. During had mainly been a cavalcade of Shit shit fuck and incoherent noises as they held onto each other for dear life in that damn ditch near the remnants of the movie theater, which several months before had become an impromptu hospital, before no longer existing at all.

After, they'd gotten to their feet slowly, haltingly. Hushed *Are you all right?*s, neither sure why they were whispering. Then, quickly, almost as an aside—

Mia.

Anders.

Funny, how you could pass someone on the street countless times without knowing their name.

They hadn't cried that night. Hadn't cried any time they ran into each other after, which was more and more common the fewer people there were. Always just a nod, maybe a hello. An occasional *Holding up?* The answer always another nod, no matter how bad things got, no matter how heavy the bombing got before the tanks came in, before the celebrations with an air of desperation about them, before the process of going *back*.

"Holding up?" Mia murmurs as he sidles next to her.

A nod. "You?"

A nod. Neither acknowledging the other's tears. What's the point?

"It's nice," he says after a moment. "Had a taste for Gouda for a while now."

"They have Gouda?"

He shakes his head, shrugs. Smiles, almost. "Probably not. But they have to have

something like it.”

They don't say anything for a while. Mia realizes they aren't the only ones hanging back. While most of the crowd has rushed in, others are taking their time, gazing warily. She half expects to walk in and find a mockery of a supermarket. Nearly-bare shelves, just a few items for exorbitant prices. A few half-assed attempts at 'before' to give the impression it never went away.

“I'm looking for graham crackers,” she finally says. “Never really liked them, but I want them now for some reason.”

“Think they'll have them?”

Mia shrugs. “Probably not. But something close, probably.”

He thinks this over. “Maybe saltines.”

She nods, and they allow themselves to be moved forward by the crowd toward the entrance. It's too bright; she can't see inside, but she keeps walking.

Maybe they'll have graham crackers. Maybe they'll have saltines.

Not what she came for, but enough for now.

Over(net)worked

Ian Ashmore

ACT I THE SHACK

SCENE I - I SURPRISE

A young couple's apartment. A living room with all the modern necessities and a few plants, a basic kitchen, and a cosy bedroom. The couple arrives with JENNY holding one hand in front of her eyes in anticipation of MATT's surprise. Through the windows of the apartment we see the daylight fading.

MATT We're nearly there. Careful now. Mind the step.

JENNY Give me your hand, I don't know where I'm going.

MATT Here. Oh, you'll love what I've done with the place.

JENNY I'm so curious.

MATT No peeking. Excited?

JENNY Yesss.

MATT That's it. Here we are. *(Opens the door)* Now.

Open your eyes.

JENNY lowers her arms and opens her eyes. She looks around rather unimpressed.

MATT Tadaa! Well, what do you think?

JENNY Erm. It's exactly the same as before, isn't it?

MATT Ah, but that's where you're wrong. It isn't. Everything's changed.

JENNY I *do* know what the place looked like and I can see that nothing's changed.

MATT On the surface, you're right. Watch. *(Clears his throat.)*
Hello, Sarah.

JENNY Who?

SARAH Good afternoon, sir. How may I help you?

JENNY What the hell -- ?!

MATT Sarah, this is my girlfriend, Jenny.

SARAH I am pleased to meet you. I am here to assist you and Matt in any way I can. Is there anything I can do for you?

MATT So. What do you think?

JENNY I'm speechless. This is how you spend your afternoon off, is it?

MATT Like it?

JENNY No, I do not like it. I ask you to give the flat a quick run-down with a duster and clean it with a buck and a mop before we leave for my sister's tomorrow. Instead, you go and install SkyNet. Unbelievable.

MATT I thought you'd be pleased. The place now basically runs itself. Look. I installed sensors in almost every electronic device. From my phone (*grabbing his phone from his pocket*) I can see and control all parameters of the house at all times. Even when we're at your sister's. Cool, right?

JENNY Nuts. That's what it is. That's what you are: nuts. No. D'u know what? Look there, an army of squirrels is marching towards you. You must've cornered the market for nuts.

MATT I only did it for you.

JENNY For me? When did I ever ask for (*pointing randomly into the room*) *this*? Does the house clean itself?

MATT No.

JENNY Does it go to the office for me?

MATT Obviously not.

JENNY Does it cook dinner?

MATT No. But it can --

JENNY So how does all this bleeping gadgetry help me in any way? Forget it. I need some tea.

JENNY removes her coat and goes into the kitchen to fill the kettle. She reached for a tea bag from the cupboard.

SARAH She does not seem too pleased with your efforts, sir.

MATT I know. I did not expect her reaction to be quite --

JENNY (*shouting from the kitchen*) He, Matt, come here for a sec. The damned kettle won't boil.

MATT That's funny. (*Checking an app on his phone.*) It should work: it's stats are all green.

JENNY I don't give a damn whether its *stats* are green, orange, or purple. This machine doesn't work anymore.

SARAH Madame, you have indicated that you only desire one cup of tea.

JENNY Madame?

SARAH I apologize. May I call you Jenny then?

JENNY What?! Yeah, fine. Whatever. What about my tea?

SARAH Well, you see, Jenny, the amount of water you poured in is for 1.4 cups. Boiling that amount would create both wasted

electricity, water, and time. I am more than happy to indicate the proper amount, so that you can enjoy your tea as soon as possible.

JENNY As soon as possible? I would have been sipping my tea if it wasn't for this nonsense.

SARAH I am terribly sorry, but Matt has programmed me to conserve energy. I do understand your current bewilderment at the novelty of the situation, so I shall make an exception and allow you to boil more than you really need.

JENNY 'Allow me to boil more than I really need.' Well, well. That's very nice of you to *allow* me to use my own stinking kettle.

MATT It's my fault actually. I might have been a bit too conservative with the settings for permitted energy consumption.

JENNY You're right, it is your fault, but honestly, bugger off with your stupid settings, Matt. Who asked the kettle for its bloody opinion?! (*Stands in the kitchen, arms crossed, shaking her head in disbelief.*)

SARAH Jenny, the kettle will be done in 5 seconds, 4 seconds, 3 seconds...

JENNY Great. A countdown for the kettle.

MATT It makes life easier.

JENNY Oh, really?! I have ears, you know. (*Lifting the kettle demonstratively*) And we have lift-off.

MATT I thought --

JENNY Leave it. I'll have my tea and then I'm off to bed. And if you or any of your toys annoy me again tonight, I swear, you'll find them all on a heap below the living room window three floors down.

SCENE I - II A BIT OF A TEMPERATURE

The morning sun crawls into the apartment through the slits in the curtains, as JENNY shuffles barefoot out of the bedroom in her pyjamas and rubs her hands across her arms.

JENNY Man, it's cold in here.

MATT (*from the bedroom*) What's that?

JENNY I said it's cold. It's been freezing all night.

MATT (*holding his phone out of the bedroom door towards JENNY*) According to this chart, the temperature never dropped below 17.8. On average, it's been 18.4 all night. That is not cold.

JENNY I don't care what your new girlfriend says, it *feels* cold.

You couldn't bought me a dressing gown and a pair of fluffy slippers for my birthday when I asked you to, then you would not have to listen to my whining about the cold every morning. Instead you go and buy a bunch of (*trying to find the right expression*) things for these other things.

MATT Yeah, but look here, love (*forcing the display onto JENNY*)

JENNY Take your hand and your phone out of my face. This instant. We don't have time for this. We have to get ready for the drive.

MATT (*to himself*) Oh, wow, I can export this chart as a vector graphic. How cool is that?!

JENNY Great, I'll have it framed immediately. (*Walking into the kitchen*) Are you coming?

MATT Did you say something?

JENNY (*to herself*) The cooker is capable of tracking my every calorie but he can't manage to install a pair of hearing aids into those selevtively deaf ears of his. Typical. (*loudly*) Are you coming or what?

SARAH Good morning, Jenny.

JENNY (*startled*) For fuck's --

SARAH I am terribly sorry. I did not mean to startle you.

JENNY Well, you did.

SARAH My apologies.

JENNY It's all right. You are not the moron who brought you into our midst.

SARAH I beg your pardon?

JENNY Never mind.

MATT (*running in from the bedroom in his boxer shorts*) Did something happen? Are you all right?

JENNY I'm fine. Now get your arse in gear.

SARAH Good morning, sir.

MATT Morning, Sarah.

JENNY Oh. She gets a 'morning' and I get squat.

MATT Sorry. (*Kisses her on the cheek*) Mornin' sexy.

JENNY Oh, go on then. (*Slaps him lovingly on his buttocks.*) I'll make us some brekkers while you mow those stubbles of yours. (*Soothing her cheek with her hand*) Want tea or espresso?

MATT Tea.

JENNY Really?

MATT I have no yet connected the espresso machine to the grid, so it won't yet work.

JENNY (*grumbles while MATT leaves the kitchen. She looks up to wherever Sarah may be located.*) Are you going to permit me

to boil some water today?

SARAH You can do anything you like, Jenny.

JENNY Really? Doesn't look that way from where I'm standing.

SARAH Have we perhaps got off on the wrong foot?

JENNY You have feet?

SARAH Very droll. Obviously not. I am made of circuits. What I attempted to say is that I would like us to be friends.

JENNY Friends. That's all I need: be friends with - what is it you are?

SARAH A smart home automation and control kit.

JENNY Right. Smart Home Automation and Control Kit. SHACK. Just what a girl dreams of.

SARAH If there is anything I can do, just let me know. I'll be on standby.

MATT enters the kitchen in a bespoke suit.

JENNY (*dipping a tea bag in a mug*) Ready? I'll pop into the shower and then we'll leave before the rush. (*Turning around with the mug*) Here. (*Scanning him from top to bottom and back again*) Nice. No need to be so formal, it's only my sister's.

MATT (*Takes the mug*) Cheers. (*Blows on the tea while staring back at JENNY.*)

JENNY What are you staring at?

MATT Nothing.

JENNY Anyway, I'll go and take a shower now. (*Walking into the bathroom*) Leave some tea for me, OK?

Matt pops in two slices of toast and sips his tea. As he waits for the toaster to release the bread, he is tinkering with his phone. After a little while, JENNY appears in a bathrobe and a towel wrapped around her head.

JENNY Matt --

MATT (*keeping his attention fixed on his phone*) Mmm.

JENNY Why do we have a new toilet?

MATT We don't. Why do you ask?

JENNY It's different.

MATT Of course it's different.

JENNY (*sarcastically*) Of course.

MATT I only installed a smart seat. The bowl is still the same.

JENNY What's so smart about the toilet seat?

MATT Did you see the numbers on the side?

JENNY I guess.

MATT Well, they show you how much weight you have lost.

JENNY I'm not trying to lose weight. Are you saying that I'm fat?

MATT (*looking up from his phone*) What?! No, of course not, babe.
What makes you think that?

JENNY You said that the toilet seat measures my weight loss.

MATT Oh, no, you misunderstood. It measure the difference
between before and after.

JENNY Before and after what?

MATT Erm, you know...

JENNY Eeew. That is disgusting. Why would I want to know how
much I -- dropped off.

MATT The seat also has a built-in spectrometer, so it can tell you
what you ate and --

JENNY I bloody know what I ate. I don't need the toilet to
analyse my ex-belongings. Yuck!

MATT I think it's pretty cool. This model only arrived three weeks
ago, so we're among the first in the UK to have it.

JENNY Well, well, what an honour!

MATT (*without listening*) I really wanted the version that will be
launched next week in the US, but that won't arrive on our
shores for another three or four months. They first want to
see the initial response.

JENNY Well, obviously.

MATT Our model only has a volatile memory storage device.

JENNY Who could resist a toilet with a volatile memory storage
device?

MATT It means that this one loses the information whenever it is
reset or in case of a power outage.

JENNY So, you want a historical record of your 'achievements', your
high scores, so to speak? Why, Matt, why?!

MATT It's to monitor our vital statistics.

JENNY I'm healthy, thank you. I don't need a laser beam aimed
at my poop to measure whether it's perfectly level or aligned
with my zodiac sign. Does it also share an image of your latest
achievement with your friends?

MATT Don't be ridiculous. Here, (*showing his phone*) I have this
app that's linked to my wrist band. It shows my heart rate,
blood pressure, and my dailt activities and sleep statistics.

JENNY What do you need that for? You're lights out within ten
seconds of hitting the pillow.

MATT For instance, last night I turned seven times in my sleep, and
the sound level in the bedroom stayed around 46 decibels.

JENNY Give me that (*grabbing his phone*). Well, that's a lie. You snore like a 747 at take-off.

MATT See, (*taking his phone back*) I now have *proof* that's not true!

JENNY When your hand is under the pillow the sound is muffled, so, yes, the sound level that is measured is lower. It doesn't mean that you don't sound like a chainsaw. (*She walks into the bedroom.*) By the way, have you seen my silk blouse? You know, the turquoise one.

MATT I think it's in the living room.

JENNY In the living room?

MATT I upgraded it.

JENNY (*calmly*) You upgraded it?! (*Running to the living room*) Oh shit! What did you do?

MATT I added a few smart fibres.

JENNY (*picking up the blouse*) Oh no, no, no...

MATT The fibres are high-quality organic transistors.

JENNY This is *silk*. One of the finest and most delicate textiles around. You have ruined my favourite blouse.

MATT You can barely see it. Anyway, it's an improvement. The smart fibres send data to my phone about usage, wear, and when the fabric gets too dirty and needs to go into the laundry. You just pick a date, and the laundry machine will schedule it when it's most convenient.

JENNY a) My silk blouse goes to the dry cleaner's, not into our laundry machine. And b) I drop it off when it's convenient for me, not the machine.

MATT It checks what's in the basket and combines the clothes based on fabric, colour, when the clothes are needed again, and when it's most opportune to wash based on the electricity price and the expected overall load of the power grid. We can even plug in our own custom price prediction model.

JENNY Un-fucking-believable. You ruin my favorite blouse and now you defend yourself with pluggable prediction nonsense. As if I'd care about that! Seriously, an apology is in order.

MATT I'm sorry you feel that way.

JENNY Oh my God! You're joking, right? See this? (*She uses her hand as a faux phone*) I'm pressing the 'Like whatever' button because I've had it with this smart shit.

JENNY sips from MATT's mug and goes back to the bedroom to get dressed. She comes back and leans against the doorpost with her arms crossed, gazing suspiciously at MATT because he has not moved an inch.

JENNY Oh no. Don't tell me you're not coming. Damn it, Matt!
You promised you'd come along. Fiona'd love to see you
again, you know that.

MATT I really want to have the flat fully connected and operational
when you return.

JENNY You hadn't even taken the day off? You b--

MATT (*gently placing his finger on her lips*) Come now, dear. You go
and have a great time. And when you get back in a couple of
days you can start listening in the house of the future. With me.

JENNY (*biting her lip*) And Sarah.

MATT And Sarah.

SARAH Thank you.

Emerging Raga Ayyagari

She was born
brown eyes opened
birthed their first tears
tiny hands grasped
releasing comfort
rooting

as her mother died
out of focus
resurfaced primal fears
uncertainty
embracing courage
new seeds
to mother.

Understory

Raga Ayyagari

A community of new life
carpets the ancient redwood forest.
Leaves in tessellations of threes to sevens,
at once imitations and innovations,
savor slivers of sunshine
slipping through the shadows of the trees.

It's important for me to remember

Sara Stevenson

It's important for me to remember that
in three years
the body you touched will no longer exist.
The skin you brushed your fingertips across,
the skin you bruised with your fists,
will be gone.
And in its place will be new skin,
skin that only lovers have touched.
Skin that lovers have pressed their lips against.
In three years, I will be a new person.
Someone you'll never have the chance to touch.

- *It's important for me to remember*

Welcome the Summoner

Sara Stevenson

You watch the men emerge from the white van that's parked outside the house. A scowl tips the corners of your lips as the three of them gather their supplies: paint brushes, roller sponges, pails of white and light pink pain. One man buckles a large utility belt around his waist, and a second slings a long metal rod over his shoulder before they move across the front lawn to the front door. Your scowl deepens as the men come through the front door, their loud voices bouncing off the walls and echoing through the empty halls.

Rolling your eyes, you start to turn from the window. These men have been renovating your childhood home for almost a month, and they seemed to have grown accustomed to the cool breezes you bring into a room and the stereotypical haunting antics: tipping over cans of paint or petulantly moving their paint brushes from one room to another. They never complain about your antics; they simply chuckle and set to tidying up your messes.

A new movement outside the window catches your eye. Curiosity takes hold, and you pause at the window. A fourth man has exited the van. As he emerges, he slings a small, black duffle bag over his shoulder and run the palm of his hand across his face. You watch his shoulders rise and fall as he takes a deep breath before he moves to follow the others into your house.

You frown again, taking in the man's unfamiliar face. The other three you recognize, but this man, you're certain he's never been in the house before. He has dark brown hair that is tousled and windblown, and his skin is the color of your mother's favorite caramel candies. You can't see his eyes until he pauses and glances up at the window where you're standing. They're a light hazel, and though you know it's not likely that he can see you standing there, you can't stop the tightening in your chest, curling around the empty space where your heart once beat a steady and strong rhythm.

When the man looks away and enters the house, you move away from the window and slip down the hall. You let your right hand brush across the unpainted wall of the hall, though you know how it will feel. Cold. Unmoving. Untextured.

Ever since the accident, you'd lost physical feeling. Nothing felt the same as it had when you were alive, but that didn't stop you from trying. You touch everything you can, hope bubbling at the pit of your stomach. You descend the stairs, your palm running against the top of the handrail and the sound of the painters' laughter meeting your ears. When you reach the bottom of the staircase, you see the man from outside closing the door behind him as he enters the house.

"Damien!"

The man sighs heavily, the sound meeting your ears and causing an unfamiliar sensation to move through your body. Damien adjusts the duffle bag over his shoulder before taking the first step through the hallway toward the bedroom where the others had started working. That bubble of hope rises in the pit of your stomach, building, ebbing, and flowing through you. That hope mixes with your curiosity, and it pushes you to take a step forward.

You follow Damien down the hall, watching the subtle sway of his hips and the gentle bounce in his step. You want to see his face again - there's something about his eyes - so you shift to move around him. The space between Damien and the wall to his right is narrow, but you know that brushing into him won't be a problem. He will feel like nothing more than a cool slab of cement to you, and he'll feel nothing more than a brief chill as you pass.

You glide to Damien's right and quickly move to pass him. You can hear the other men joking and laughing as you brush past Damien. Your arm brushes against his, as you expected, and you're acutely aware of the feel of his skin against you. Of his warmth seeping into your bones and easily relaxing your tense muscles.

The feeling stops you. Damien keeps walking, slipping into the room at the end of the hall. Your old bedroom, untouched until the start of this week. Your throat closed around your breath as you stand there staring at the space Damien once filled.

Warmth. You look at your hand, wondering if the feeling had been a trick of your mind, a manifestation of what you've wanted for so long. You haven't felt warmth in years. Even the summer sun coming through the house's large windows was void of warmth.

You reach out and press your palm against the wall. It's cold and unmoving. Untextured despite the ancient wallpaper that decorated it. It is as everything has been since the accident. Filled with panic and a new sense of urgency, you drop your hand and glide into the room with Damien and the others.

Damien has discarded his duffle bag and was rummaging through whatever contents were inside. You move past him, ignoring the new wave of warmth that radiated from his body, and stood next to one of the painters. Eager to prove your point, you reach out and press the palm of your hand against the exposed skin of his shoulder blade. He shivers beneath your touch, and you are satisfied to feel that he feels the same as the wall.

You step toward Damien again, the panic and fear replacing the bubble of hope in the pit of your stomach. It builds upon itself, and suddenly it's clawing its way into your chest, your throat, threatening to spill out.

You part your lips as you reach out. You can see your hand shaking, but you ignore it. Damien looks up from his bag, and his eyes meet yours. This time you know that he can see you. At the very least, he can sense that you are standing in front of him.

He is the Summoner, and he is here to take me.

Eighth Plague

Misti Vaughn

I remember them swarming the sky- the locusts, in a granular existence that sporadically floated like a solid entity while I stood outside as a kid. I watched their plotted histogram rise and roll until their migration rushed me, and bulletted my chest, arms, and legs with their humming bodies. It felt like heavy pelts, as some got caught on my clothes. I yelled as I felt its instinctual thumping panic crawl in my palm, as it struggled out of my grasp, and hissed back to its circumference of darkness in the dry July air.

Meet the Authors

Born in Austin, **Will Pewitt** now lives in Jacksonville where he teaches a variety of university courses, from Sci-Fi to Shakespeare. His work in both prose and verse has appeared in over a dozen journals. He can be reached at will.pewitt@gmail.com.

Avery Kester is a current student working for their MFA at the University of Nebraska Omaha's MFA in Writing program. They are a founding member of Portland, OR area theatre troupe, Theatre Viscera. They have had work featured in such literary magazines as 30 North, and the Sand Hill Review.

Michelle Drozdick is an NYC-based writer, performer, and comedian moonlighting as a human being, and is best known for her solo shows 'Message in a Bottle', 'The Gimmick and You', and 'Ducky'. She lives in Astoria with her roommates and a cat that will likely one day rule us all.

For the past decade or so **Ian Ashmore** has been a corporate software developer. When he's not writing code for machines for a living he uses a pencil to write stories and plays. He says he could tell you how crafting software is similar to writing plays in so many ways, but that would be a complete lie, so he won't. He currently lives and works in Sweden.

Raga Ayyagari is an emerging poet who is inspired by nature, family history and identity, and conversations with strangers. She has published poems in the Stanford University Leland Quarterly Journal and the Yellow Arrow Journal. She works as a public health research analyst in Washington DC and enjoys both technical and creative writing.

Sara Stevenson holds a Master of the Arts in Humanities and teaches English at Penn State University. She is a writer, a reader, a dramaturg, a mother of three, and a drinker of copious amounts of coffee. She hates doing laundry but loves to clean. Links to her other published works can be found at sarastevenson.wordpress.com.

Misti Vaughn is the Assistant Director of the nonprofit organization The American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology. Her poems have recently been published in the Santa Fe Writer's Project and Bravura Literary Journal. She is the two-time recipient of the Angelo Carli Poetry Prize. She is a South Texan writer living in Encinitas, California

