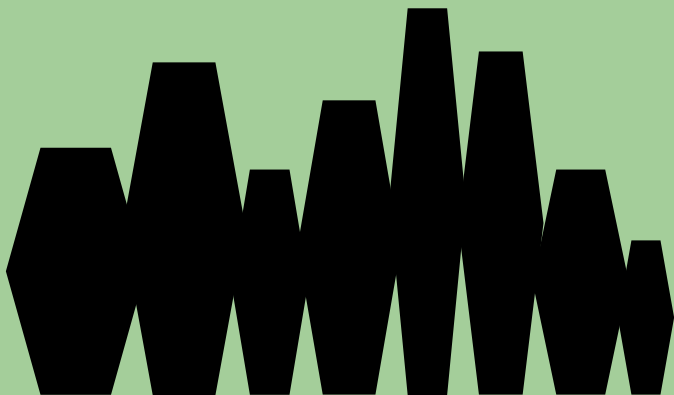


# WENSUM

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Literary Magazine

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# WELCOME

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David Sexton | Editor

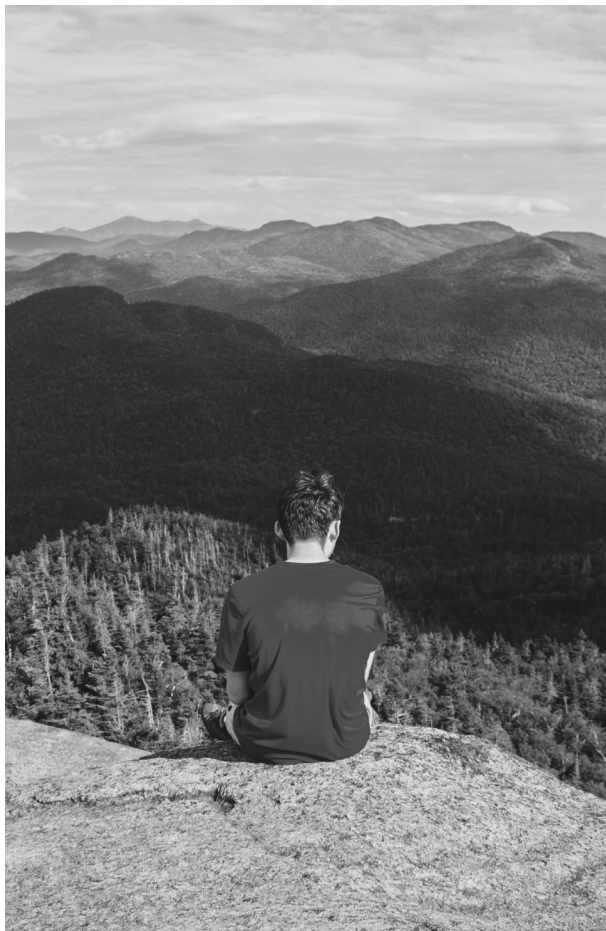
As the days get longer and we move from the cold, crisp winter weather into a mild and drizzly spring here in Norwich, it becomes all the more tempting to stay inside and read while rain trickles down windows.

Whether you're halfway through a monumental tome, beginning an exciting new series, or scrolling through our humble magazine, we hope the words provide comfort, excitement, and everything in between.

We're proud to present the second edition of WENSUM, featuring work from all over the world, so while it may be dull and grey where you are reading today, the sun will make its way to you soon.

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# *Worm*

M. L. Owen

Worm was three steps down the hallway when the voices reached past his ears to his brain.

“I’m sorry that I can’t get my patients to schedule their problems to suit your needs.”

“My needs? My needs?” Her voice went higher. “You’re the one who made the promise. You did, not me. You promised you’d be here.”

“If I could. If I could. There’s no way I can know in advance that I’m not going to be called on an emergency. There’s no way...”

“No! You didn’t say ‘if you could,’ you said you’d be here. And since when is Betty Whitacre’s acne an emergency? Well, if I’d known...”

“Betty doesn’t have acne, well she does, but that’s not what the call was about. Besides, that wasn’t what made me late.”

“Really? Because that’s what you said made you late.”

“No, it wasn’t. I was explaining the series of

events that ended up causing me...”

Worm changed his morning plans, retreating from the hallway back to his room, closing the door behind him. His parents’ voices faded a bit, but not completely. He grabbed a book from the nightstand by his bed; *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling. He curled up on the bed and opened the book to where he’d left off last night when his mother came in and told him he had to turn off his light and go to sleep. *Kim*’s voice grew, while the argument faded to ghost talk. He barely heard the door slam. A little later he barely heard the knock at his door.

“Worm?” It was a whisper, almost a whisper.

He closed his eyes and the book, and laid his head beside it. He could hear the door open. He could hear her breathing. A faint sniffle impaled his ears.

“Oh, my precious little Bookworm.”

After a moment, the door closed. He could make out the sound of the door to his parents’ room opening and closing. He waited forever, then reopened his eyes and, with great care, his book. He read to the end of the next chapter.

He closed the book and went to the door. He listened. He eased the door open. He listened again. No sobbing. No sound. He went out into the hallway, the front room, the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and studied the contents for a full minute. Then he made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, poured some milk into a jar, capped it, wrapped the sandwich in wax paper, grabbed his book, and headed for the back door. Then he stopped, retraced his steps and, casting a glance over his shoulder toward the living room and the rest of the house, put the peanut butter, jelly, bread, and milk away. He washed the knife and put it away. He brushed the crumbs off the counter onto the floor. Then he left.

He rode his bike, food in the basket, down to the Old Bridge Road, and then out along its dusty length to the rusty old bridge, two miles outside of town. He dumped his bike in the trees and walked out on the bridge with the jar of milk and sandwich. Halfway across, he sat and dangled his legs over the side. He could see the new bridge about half a mile south, with cars



crossing it at irregular intervals. Below him, the water coursed through the narrow opening below the bridge, dark and full of patterns. Reflections of the clouds above mixed with images from beneath the water, moving in counter directions. Animals seemed to appear: faces, unknown things in unknown shapes. Sometimes an actual fish, an actual stick. Maybe he'd see a corpse someday. Maybe he'd seen one and didn't know it.

He opened the sandwich and ate it without looking at it: drank the milk. He dropped the wadded up waxed paper into the water. It would sink. He put the cap back on the bottle and contemplated throwing it in too, knowing it would float, and he could probably retrieve it downstream, if he hurried, if he could get his pants off in time to get out to it, if no one from the other bridge could see him. Even if they could see him, he was too far away for them to know who he was, and they would probably assume he was wearing a swimming suit. He knew older kids came out here to skinny dip. He'd heard that. But he decided against it, all of it. He moved the

jar closer to his side and picked up Kim.

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The voices startled him awake.

“You were with that woman again.”

“Yes, if by ‘that woman’ you mean Jeannie. She’s a nurse. I’m a doctor. We work together. All the time.”

“Work together, play together. How convenient!”

“Keep your voice down. You’re going to wake Mark.”

“So what,” but her voice did go a bit softer. “Maybe Worm should know. God knows, everyone else in town knows.”

“Nobody knows anything, because there’s nothing to know, and don’t call him Worm. It’s degrading.”

“We’ve been calling him Worm since the first grade. Everyone does. He’s a bookworm. There’s nothing degrading about that. What he might mind is the fact that his father is fucking someone besides his mother!”

Worm pulled the cover over his head then stretched out a hand to grab *The Call of the Wild* from the nightstand and pull it under the covers. He reached out again and grabbed his flashlight from the lower shelf. The bunched-up covers emitted a soft glow, he knew, but he didn't think anyone would be looking in the door. He focused on Buck's troubles with other dogs, and the voices faded.

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Worm left his bike leaning against the garage and headed for the back door. He'd thought about going down to the old bridge, but the sky threatened rain, so he'd headed home. His father's car was in the garage, unusual for so early on a weekday. Maybe he'd had surgery this afternoon. The path from the garage to the back door led past his parents' bedroom window. He heard their voices.

"Well, you're not helping much with that!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I can't do anything right, can I?"

“Honey, you do a lot of things right, but...”

“But this sure isn’t one of them, right? Things weren’t always that way. You were all over me then. Now, you’d rather beat off by yourself than...”

He ran back to his bike, grabbed it and took off.

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The library was quiet. Mrs Heilberger would greet him and smile, and then ignore him. Even if he left the children’s section and went into the regular fiction section and looked through books there and maybe even checked one out, she wouldn’t say anything to him, except maybe how much she’d enjoyed that book. Even if he went into the medical section and looked at the anatomy books that showed everything, she wouldn’t notice, or at least say anything.

Sometimes he would just sit in the reading room and stare out the window. He did that now. There was a great deal of thunder and lightning, and then the sky opened up and

threw water at the earth. The lights went out. There were two other people in the library at the time, not counting Mrs Heilberger. They closed the books they were looking at and left.

Mrs Heilberger came over to where he was sitting. "The lights may not come back on for quite a while, Marcus. Maybe you should leave and come back later."

He looked at her, a little surprised to hear her speak. Then he nodded and got up. He put the clip around his ankle to keep his cuff from getting caught in the bicycle chain and headed for the door.

"Do you have an umbrella? Would you like to borrow mine?"

He looked back at her and shook his head. "I'm on my bike."

"Oh," she said. "Yes, I can see that would be difficult. Well, if you like, you could stay here. The lights may come back on right away, so I'll be staying around for a while, but in the meantime, I'm afraid it will be difficult to read."

"That's okay," he said. He turned to watch the rain on the windows. Everything looked

strange, familiar, but strange. It was easy to get lost in it.

“Would you like to talk about it?”

His eyes opened wide and turned toward the voice even before his head moved. Mrs Heilberger was sitting across the table from him. He swallowed twice, working his tongue around in his mouth. Finally, he managed a deep breath and asked, “Uh, about what?”

“When I sit and stare out the window, I’m usually thinking a lot about something,” she said. “Sometimes, when I’m thinking a lot about something, it helps me get it clearer in my head if I can talk about it. At least, if I can talk about it with someone who isn’t involved in what I’m thinking about. You know what I mean?”

He started to nod his head, but it twisted a bit sideways. His eyes squinched. “It’s kind of pretty, looking out the window with the rain coming down it. It’s quiet and peaceful.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding with more than her head, her whole upper body. “It can be nice to have some peace.”

“Yes,” he said.

# *The Glittering Skirt*

Swetha Amit

Back then, Aunt Martha would always wear this dark blue skirt with bright round objects resembling shiny disco balls. Every time she'd visit from the countryside, she insisted on dropping me off at school, wearing that blue skirt with an orange blouse and a hat too big for her head. Aunt Martha always prided herself in being well put together, with her dark curls falling beneath her shoulders and her carefully powdered face. Even the bright orange was passable. But that skirt elicited stares, smirks, and snickers. Piti-able looks darted in my direction, wondering how a sober fourth-grade bespectacled girl with two braids landed up with someone as garish looking as her.

That skirt earned many names, from the night sky to glittering balls to a Christmas tree decoration. Often I'd cringe, bury my head behind my thick textbooks, and smile sheepishly.

Tacky, one of the popular girls remarked. One boy asked if he could spot Saturn in my Aunt's skirt. Another asked if I could see Orion. I gently tried to tell my Aunt to wear something more subtle. She would not listen to anyone. Not my mother. Not my father.

Before she left, Aunt Martha gave me a skirt, just like hers, for my birthday. Navy blue with little stars and zig-zag patterns, and the shiny round objects resembled planets, the sun, and the moon. I tucked it away in my closet. And just like that, Aunt Martha stopped visiting. I missed her vivid chatter and resplendence, even though it made me cringe and feel embarrassed. The kids at school eventually forgot about her and stopped giving me a tough time. Life went back to being dull. A letter arrived saying she had succumbed to ill health.

As the years passed, I moved cities, graduated, and eventually settled with my family. One day my nine-year-old daughter quipped, saying she had a tacky day at school and had to find something to wear. Though I never wore that skirt, I kept it safe all this while. My daughter squealed



in delight when I held it, saying it was the perfect outfit. I found an orange blouse and a large hat. Later, she'd tell me she won the prize for best tacky costume and how her friends nicknamed her skirt being the night sky. I smiled and wiped the tears from my eyes clumsily.



# *The Colour of Lavender*

Merel Schreurs

She wore a bracelet of pale purple, and then there was the scent. A continuous bouquet of lavender that followed her like a natural cloud of perfume. He remembered this in particular, as if he had watched her wade through the corridors in her habit just a few hours ago. He had been only ten years old when he saw her for the first time. He could still hear the rustle of her uniform and her feet tapping away on the icy stone floors of the school building. Once, when she stood in front of him, smiling fondly and her oval face bent towards him, he noticed the purple bracelet that had slipped out from under her sleeve. She tugged it away with minimum effort and winked. It had been their little secret.

Years later, he decided to frame her picture and put it on the mantelpiece for everyone to admire, and even though he married and fathered two children, the picture stayed where it

was, in the centre of the room and in the centre of his heart. Whenever he walked into the field of lavender next to the old school building, his hands would caress the flowers and he would smell them, inhaling their perfume intensely, enjoying the secret they carried with them. The secret he shared with her.

He watched her picture now with calmness. The hazel brown eyes looked kindly upon him. The pale skin reminded him of a painting he had seen when, two years ago, he had slipped into a church unnoticed. A painting by a Dutch artist if he wasn't mistaken, one of the famous Dutch Masters. He had forgotten the name, but he vividly remembered the brush strokes and the colours, as vividly as he remembered her. The woman in the church painting had the palest skin. Her eyes were golden and with a gaze filled with love, she looked down towards mankind. Her hair was fair, the kind of fair one would only see in paintings, but he once saw it in real life, a long time ago, when a strand of her hair had slid out from underneath the coif that had tried to imprison it.

He got up from the chair and pulled something from the pocket of his trousers. Then he sauntered over to the picture, blinked and placed a small token in front of it. He breathed in slowly, returned and hurried to the cupboard. Only after he had poured himself a drink, he released his breath and raised the glass, towards the picture. He took a sip before putting the glass on a side table next to him where it was going to leave a watery ring on the wooden surface.

The eyes were smiling, as they had always done. Seemingly nothing had changed. But he knew that from this day on her eyes would only be smiling from his mantelpiece. The lavender-coloured bracelet lay silently in front of the picture. The secret was over. There was no need to keep it any longer.

# *Sunsets*

Erin Jamieson

I've never doubted that Chester is the love of my life, and yes, I hate phrases like that: love of your life, other half, soulmate. Especially the second two. What happens when your soulmate dies or cheats on you? Does having another half mean you're half of a person without them?

I grew up on a steady diet of telenovelas and my abuela's stories. You'd think that would make me a hopeless romantic. It did the opposite.

By the time I realized I needed Chester, my mother had more or less given me hope. I was 25, and, in her mind, getting old. She liked reminding me, every increasingly tense holiday, that it would be hard to have kids the older I got. Never mind that I was a miracle baby – that she had me when I was turning 40.

Then again. That may exactly be why she's been so obsessed about my age.

To say she wasn't happy about Chester is an

understatement. That was our last meeting - when I had the two of them meet. She travelled from Tampa to Ohio, wrapped in a winter coat despite it being Spring. I fixed spaghetti and a Caesar salad because I figured at least I couldn't mess those two things up. I had the paperwork on the table and photos from work. The garlic butter toast (one of those frozen ones) was just warming up when she came.

I didn't even get a chance to show her my work with the animal shelter. Or the time Devon and I visited the children's hospital with therapy dogs. Or how we managed to raise over \$5,000 for a new wing of our shelter in a dinky rural town where people care more about gas prices and the best fast food combo deal of the week.

"Do you think this is funny?" she asked, shoving away a plate of steaming (and congealed) spaghetti.

"I want you to see I am doing something with my life. Even if it isn't what you want."

"I travelled all this way... to find out you're not in love but obsessed with a cat?"

To his credit, Chester did his best. He groomed

before she came and, the true scaredy cat he is, managed to stay in the same room without diving under my bed to hide. Granted, that may have had more to do with me buying a can of salmon than anything else.

We had a fight. I don't remember much. Only that she ticked me off and somehow I ended up throwing spaghetti at the wall. I still have a small marinara stain on my ceiling. But she said something, right before she left and I knew it wasn't like our past fights.

"Dad's disappointed too, you know. He just won't say that. You were so smart, Mariposa. You had a better life than your abuela ever had. We did everything and you ended up like this. Working for an animal shelter. Barely above minimum wage. Alone. With a cat."

I told her to get the hell out.

I slammed my door twice. I don't know if she booked a hotel or found a last-minute flight. I didn't answer her calls.

A month later, my father tried to call me. I didn't answer. Even erased his voicemail. Aside from a quick Merry Christmas and Happy



Birthday, I never talked to him again.

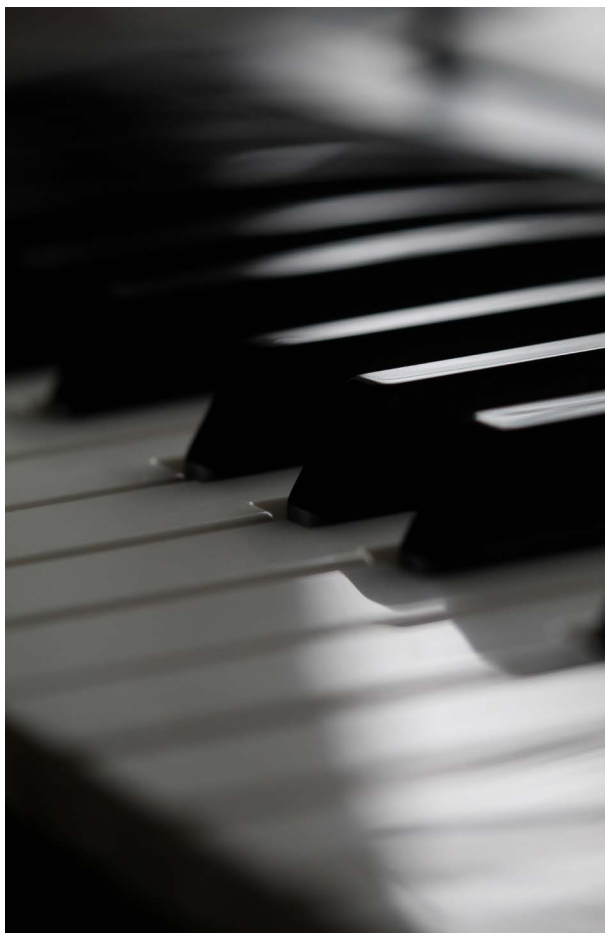
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At sunset, we spread his ashes.

The sky is streaked like a raw egg yolk, fading from crimson to golden yellow. Cicadas hiss in the humidity. I follow, barefoot, behind my mother, careful not to lose sight of her lantern as she hurries. For someone with arthritis in her toes, she can be quick when she needs to be.

And we do need to be quick. The sky is darkening, corners of midnight and indigo peeling away at the sunset. If we didn't have the lantern, we'd be walking back home with only the distant lit homes to guide us.

The sky is starless and brilliant and bleak all at once. It seems to stretch forever, that inky darkness. I know when I return home, Chester will be waiting for me. I know he will not ask me questions I don't have the strength to answer.



# *Four Hands*

Ruth Folorunso

“Miss, there’s something I’d like to show you.”

Miss Ogbemudia turned - a sharp movement of her upper body that cut her tailored shirt into creases. The winter sun was sinking, filling the room with its last light and with her face towards the windows, she glowed like an icon. Lola took in the image of light caught in the stray coils of her hair and held it deep within herself.

“What is it?” Miss spoke like she couldn’t dare to shake the air. In that inflexion, she had once explained tones and semitones while Lola watched her little finger fall and rise with the chromatic scale on the page. With remembering came words, rising from inside her, pushing into her throat like bile. *Miss, do you* – Lola swallowed. Instead –

“A piece I’ve been learning for a while. I think you’ll like it - well, you might not and that’s

fine, but I want to show you that I've not been a waste of your time."

Miss Ogbemudia smiled.

"You're not a waste of time, Lola."

Lola shook her head and did not wait for Miss's polite objections, pushing herself off the windowsill and weaving through the desks, past her teacher, who followed. They met in the shadow of the vast grand piano. Lola pulled out the music sheets from her blazer's breast pocket, unfolding and pressing the worn pages upright against the music desk. She knew her teacher was watching her, and her hands shook. She began to speak, but her mouth was dry and her words shook.

"It's sophisticated music," she managed. "I learnt it myself, but I couldn't have done it without you. I wanted to surprise you, on this day."

She was close enough to Miss Ogbemudia to see the faded mole on the left side of her neck. Half her face was still caught in the dying light - her right eye was a circle of gold. In Lola's mind, the melody was already striking up, illuminat-

ing the figure of a woman whose body burned like precious ores.

“This seems personal, Lola,” Miss was saying. She looked concerned. “Are you sure you want to give this to me?”

“Who else?” Lola replied, and she bit the inside of her cheeks before more could spill out, pathetically.

It was seven years ago when she had been eleven and lost in a world that was dissolving even as it attempted to rearrange itself into something new. Every face had grown strange, even her own – she did not recognise herself when she spoke to the children who were meant to be her friends. She could no longer trust the words coming out of her mouth. What to do then, except give her a new voice – the piano, the polite language of good middle-class children, had seemed a way to refashion her back into something human. The school’s new music teacher taught lessons at a steal – £15, half an hour lessons each term – and the woman’s face and manners were as polite as her instrument. So Lola’s parents offered their daughter into her

hands and hoped to see the girl again soon. But this Lola knew: Miss Ogbemudia had come to her as an act of grace and Lola, from the first instance, had clung to every part of her that she let within reach. It was grace so potent that it would overwhelm her – in lessons, Miss Ogbemudia's presence, endlessly sweet, would overwhelm her, driving away all sense until all she could do was move her hands up and down against the keys like an automaton, trying to be gentle with her fragile happiness. Happiness that was breathless, dizzying, like terror.

In the music room, she was happy and scared; outside, she didn't know what she was, didn't care either. She never returned to whatever she had been before eleven, and her parents might've mourned, but she didn't. And now things were changing again because she was leaving. University was all the way in Edinburgh, the head of this island. Miss was down here in Exeter, at its foot.

So Lola smiled at her as broadly as she dared, lips trembling, and the tight line of her teacher's shoulders relaxed.

“In that case, I’m honoured. A goodbye gift from my favourite student.”

Lola turned her face away. Her heart was a fist banging against its cage. She dropped clumsily on the piano stool and waved a vague hand at the music room.

“Make yourself comfortable, Miss. I’ll try not to take too much of your time.”

She pretended to study the sheet music whilst listening to Miss’s block-heeled footsteps tread the linoleum floor. She rubbed her sweating palms on her lap.

“I’m ready, Lola.”

The room was suddenly still. Lola looked over her shoulder, blinked against the sunset, and was stunned to see Miss sat at her pupils’ desks. Her back now faced the light. Her body had become a curving shape held by warm shadows, but even in the dark, Lola knew her eyes were kind.

Lola nodded and returned to the keys. Her hands trembled in her lap, but she pressed them together and held herself still. Once she could hear her thoughts above the noise of her heavy

pulse, she raised her hands and studied them. They were steady. So she let them fall.

So began Four Hands, by Lee Namyeon. The music was immediate – without warning, it dropped you into its gentle sadness. This arrangement was a shadow of itself - the original was a duet, two players sharing the melancholy between themselves. But here she was, carrying that weight alone, before the woman whose hands she had memorised. Lola stretched her left ring finger towards a black key and remembered Miss' own ring finger as it had once lingered on a white key. On that ring finger had been a band, a slash of gold against her skin. She had been Mrs Smith then, with two kids, anecdotes of whom she carried around like sweets in her pocket, ready to hand out to whoever would listen. Mrs Smith was 23, and seven years on, Lola still could not understand sharing oneself with so many wanting bodies before the age of 23. In class, Miss would twist the ring as she spoke; in their lessons, it would glint in the overhead lights as she stretched towards the farthestmost key. Mrs Smith, Mrs Smith, four soft



syllables on the tongue, soft like the lady who wore wigs with visible fronts, who hand-painted polka-dots onto her nails and who had lined her face early, with smiles.

Lola's eyes fluttered shut. The melody clung to her, leaden. Under the skin of her hands, her tendons tensed and pulled.

There was a moment in the music where it tried to rise above its melancholy – the tempo rising, the melody growing light – only to return, and fall much deeper and more intimately. In this moment, the ring disappeared – an omission, an empty space between words. Then the space revealed itself as a strike through the name *Smith*. Miss Ogbemudia did not wear wigs and her smiles were rare, though her eyes never lost their kindness. The others kept their *Smith* because they only knew disrespect. But Lola could wrap her tongue around the syllabic nuances of her names and in turn, Miss Ogbemudia said her name as it was meant – *lo-la*, two punches of the tongue against the mouth's hard palate. Lola, Ogbemudia, in their shared, secret language. Here, in this room, for the last

seven years.

It was coming faster now, all of it. The music was leaping away from her, insistent on something she would never put into words. Memories that she had calcified into hard certainties so she could return to them. Here was one, piercing her with urgency: Miss in lessons, with long black braids swinging over her shoulders. In their music room, she'd run her hands through them whilst her eyes smiled over Lola's braids. You inspired me, she'd said. And another: an evening like this, the sun long sunk, the cold seeping in under the doors and Miss with her back against the radiator, her eyes closed and her head tilted towards the radio as they listened to an interpretation of *Andante Sostenu- to*, a piece whose name she'd remembered only for the look it had put on her teacher's face. Faster and faster, rushing through her - no, stay, never end, but the music would not listen even as she tried to hold it down with all her might, to make it live longer than all its scant minutes.

And here it was - the final note. She drew it out, letting it hang tremulously in the air like

a wish. Her skin was bursting at its seams with seven years of memory. It was the tangible pressure of the keys against her fingers that kept her grounded - otherwise, she would dissolve into pure thought, unspoken words.

*Miss Ogbemudia, this is Four Hands played by two. I see your contours in its melody. Please – I want to return to you and play it by your side. I want to watch your hands move across the ivories again, next to mine. I want to see your ring finger reach across mine to pick at the penultimate note before the music ends...*

It was done. An echo of the last note clung palely to the air before it too had to end. Its finality filled the room, denser than silence.

Lola lay her hands to rest against the keys. Her fingers, always slightly too short, ached. Her skin was burning. She waited.

Behind her, Miss Ogbemudia wept.



# *Domino*

Anthony Ward

I preside in darkness. In this coffin. For what seems like eternities. Crammed like sardines with the other twenty-seven. All made of bone. Then, out of the blackness we hear muffled sounds of voices accompanied by coughing. We become weightless, knocking against each other as we rattle around in a quake. A shaft of light pierces those at the front as the lid slides open to expose their ivory complexion.

I hear the grumbling of the growlers. Hard done by their best efforts. Twisting this and that, with contorted chewed up faces slouching above me through plumes of smoke.

I'm turned face down, swept around, clockwise, then anticlockwise, scouring my face, before being laid on my side, scrutinised by old Joe. I never knew young Joe, nor even Joe. He plays me. I lie here, Double Blank, spotless, staring at the ceiling. The lamp shade is

still half-cocked. Been that way as far as I've known. Though I'm not sure about that crack in the ceiling. I think that one may have extended since last time I saw.

Blank six is laid to rest adjacent to me. Then Joe puts down blank two. I lose off what numbers played next, just lie staring straight up at the crack in the ceiling listening to the bouts of clacks and coughing.

"I'm knocking," says Ron.

"Joe lays his last domino." Then cackles into a wheeze.

"Well played." Says Ron rising from his seat with his half glass of stout.

Joe coughs himself into a choke. Flapping his arms as his face purples.

"You alright Joe?" asks the frantic barmaid.

"I'm fine lass," he replies, spluttering, "I'm fine."

The table turns over and I'm hurled under one of the chairs. A thud follows. Joe's red face swollen, his muffled eyes looking at me from the darkness where I preside for what feels like an eternity.

# *Ron and That*

Nick Black

Ron picked me up from school and asked what's new, I told him I have to write this journal and he laughed. "Mr Big Shot," he said, so I called him an idiot. "Your idiot, though," he said, which was sweet.

I'm growing my hair long like Ron's. He said I look even more like a girl than already but he showed me how to do a ponytail and called me Pony Boy. "Show me your muscles," he said. His are big and hard from cutting lawns all summer and he rips the sleeves off his t-shirts so you don't miss them.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Ron's thinking of changing his car so we went

to a lot to see what they had. They had one of those tall blowy men that whip around in the wind and I asked the sales guy if I could touch it, and he said "I guess so", and then when I reached out, Ron shouted "BANG!" which made me jump and they both laughed. The cars at this place were all cheaper because they'd been taken off criminals or people had died in them, things like that. I looked at the windshields and imagined people flying through them and their heads rolling off. Ron asked if he could take one for a drive. "I'll leave the kid behind as collateral," he said and winked, but the sales guy said he had to go with Ron, so we all went, but it was obvious Ron wasn't going to buy it, he was just killing time.

Ron gave me one of his old dumbbells. He left it by his door with a note, with my name on. "Knock yourself out," it said.





[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I caught my sister reading this. “Who’s Ron?” she wanted to know. I told her if she wasn’t careful, I’d grab her round the neck, drag her downstairs to Dad’s office and photocopy her head until she went blind. I wouldn’t.

Ron’s sick so I hung out with Lester and Will and we went to the skate park for the first time in forever. Lester’s family are moving to Europe but he doesn’t want to go. Will said he’d move to Europe and talked dirty about sex in France. Some other boys we kind of know came over and talked to us and they had beer, and the sun took hours to go down. It was OKAY.

I went over to Ron’s and rang the bell and threw stones at his window. I thought “Maybe he’s dead and his cats are eating him”, for a laugh, but he was probably just out.

I saw Ron. I said, “Where have you been?” He

said, "I was out of town for a couple of weeks." I said where, and he said "out of town." He wouldn't look at me and I wondered if I'd broken out really grossly and touched my forehead when I thought he wasn't looking, and my nose, and he kind of swatted my hand away from my face a few times and said "Don't do that." I asked if anything was wrong and he said "Everything's great," but then he drove me home soon after.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Will said good riddance. He wanted to go to a house party his oldest sister Jenna was at but I wasn't in the mood so I said he should go. He said no, but all weak sounding, so I made him leave. I had to shout to get him to go, and after that he was fine to go.

It's raining. I'm so bored. I'm going to go.

So I got to the house, and there's people on the front lawn, and inside, and they're all seniors and I found Will, he was inside, but he didn't look happy to see me, and pretended not to.

Then I kind of lost sight of him and was trying to find him, calling his name, and some boys blocked me in a corridor and they backed me into a bathroom and shut the door. “We hear you like older guys,” and I said “No,” but he wasn’t listening and then they took it in turns not listening and

[REDACTED]

Ron could be okay though sometimes.

# 24

Jessica Virnna Antipolo

My family dreads the number 24. All the men on my father's side of the family die aged 24.

On my father's 24th birthday, he was stabbed in the chest when he stepped into a convenience store while the red-masked robber sprinted out. Three years after my father's death, his brother perished from salmonella food poisoning two weeks before he turned 25.

"I do not believe in my family's omen", I muttered to my husband in a whisper while my mother narrated our family's morose history. "But I have to keep every object in our apartment well accounted for, below and above 24 to be on the safe side. Only the things that my mother can visibly count and track in case she appears unannounced."

That was the only time my husband and I got to talk about it. He never tried to find a plausible explanation for my family's uncanny tradi-

tion with death.

Unlike the men in my family, this number has dawdled a different fortune in my life. My husband proposed to me on our 24th date and I got pregnant on the 24th week after our wedding day. I feel like he is consciously turning our voodoo into his lifelong satire.

“Do you know the baby’s gender already?” asked my mother.

“Ma, Henry and I have decided that we will only know the gender of the baby when it comes out. Okay?”

“But what if it’s a boy? It is better to be prepared you know.”

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Adam was born exactly at midnight on the 24th of June. When the nurse put him on my chest, he slowly opened his hazel brown eyes like the first fluttering of a butterfly’s wings, cumbersome of the unknown horizon outside the cocoon. He stared at me unaware that he and I had shared the last nine months breathing the same air and

occupying the same space. His arrival brought a gushing flood of a looming fear, not for his 24th year, but with the uncertainty in my new role as his mother.

“He hasn’t slept since he was born eight hours ago”, I stuttered to the nurse when she entered our room.

“Babies are different, you know?” The nurse checked on the baby, placed the thermometer on his forehead and swiftly brushed his warm cheeks. Adam looked at her devoid of any emotion, “Some sleep a lot and some unfortunately do not. You need to rest, though.”

The next day the nurse told us to keep a log of his sleeping time. Day 2: daytime nap of 5 minutes for 4 cycles, nighttime sleep of 40 minutes. Day 3: daytime nap of 10 minutes for 3 cycles and 30 minutes nighttime sleep.

We were supposed to be discharged on the fourth day but our paediatrician was concerned with Adam’s short sleeping time, saying it was very unlikely for a baby to sleep only for an hour each day. All of his brain scans, blood tests, and other diagnostics turned out negative – We had

our green light.

“Maybe at home, he will finally sleep longer. He will feel at home.” Henry hoped.

No, he didn’t sleep any longer and the doctors still couldn’t find anything wrong with him. We consulted more doctors for a second, third, nth opinion, and even hired sleep experts but nothing worked. Adam had become our science experiment. We resorted to incessant rocking, essential oils, natural treatments, and sound therapy, but there wasn’t any improvement. Ma moved in with us to help with the baby. When I returned to work, Henry’s mother moved in with us, too.

Our friends started calling us the modern Addam’s family, gloomy and zombie-esque – a local newspaper even wanted to do a feature about it all. We skipped all of our social gatherings and special days. One of Henry’s close friends volunteered to pay for an astrologer or even a paranormal expert to bring an end to our exhausting predicament.

Henry and I were both too tired to love Adam as other parents would love their firstborn. We were too energy-depleted to even read aloud or play with him. I have ceased my search for identity as his mother without even starting my journey. “As long as he’s well-fed and never gets ill...” I remind myself.

In Adam’s first year, he learned to walk and talk, reaching his milestones at a normal pace. We had a small lunch celebration for him on his second birthday and I baked him a carrot cake. His first cake was noticeably poorly carved, unsuited for a celebrating infant. He usually takes a 10-minute nap once every afternoon, but that afternoon, he napped for an hour and slept for two hours in total. Two hours of sleep every single day for his entire second year.

We guessed right. In his third year, he started sleeping an hour longer. On his fourth birthday, he was sleeping four hours. Fifth year, five hours...



# CONTACT US

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