

CHEAT RIVER REVIEW

FALL - WINTER 2018

Laura Long
Carla Sofia Ferreira
John Belk
Gabriel Furshong

Brenda Ray
Laurel Dixon
Philip Brunetti
Charles Rafferty



ISSUE 11

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Fairlane John Belk

There's a ghost in the garage
who looks like my grandfather,
his lanky arm lowering a cigarette
in front of his '56 Fairlane.

Right now he works on the carburetor,
but I couldn't say exactly
what he's trying to fix.

When he first showed up I tried talking to him—
a needy hello, a shout for attention.
At least once, I think, he said,
“Buddy.”

I cried both times he died:
in school when they told me
and again in my twenties
when Mom finally spoke of the farm—
the shotgun like a hollow leg he dragged around the yard,
the soft wet walls of the well where she hid—

But I'll get past the failings
and like old times, think
“I'm glad he's here—”
then
nothing. A yellow note under a wiper blade,

*She still won't start. I'm sorry,
you'll let someone down too someday.*

John Belk is an Assistant Professor of English at Southern Utah University where he directs the Writing Program. He holds an MFA in Poetry and a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing from Pennsylvania State University. His poetry has appeared in *Arkansas Review*, *Wraparound South*, *Habitat*, *Levee Magazine*, and *Pivot*, and his full-length manuscript was selected as a finalist for the 2018 Autumn House Press Poetry Prize. His scholarly work can be found in *Rhetoric Review*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Composition Forum*, and edited anthologies.

My Father Teaches Me How to Open Pine Cones *Carla Sofia Ferreira*

Place the pine cone close
enough to the fire not so close
that it burns there like that—*assim*

When you hear it crack then
you know it's time to move
them out take the *pinça* not

all the way not yet Okay, now
Agora, you peel back each one
to get to the pignole, you remember?

Espera I want you to remember this
that what you put to flame it won't
always burn sometimes like now see: there are seeds.

Carla Sofia Ferreira is the daughter of Portuguese immigrants and a poet from Newark, NJ. At Harvard College, she was selected to write a creative thesis in poetry and currently, she teaches English language development to first-generation immigrant students in the Bay Area. Recent and forthcoming poems can be found at *amberflora*, *Poached Hare*, *Likely Red Press*, *Bone & Ink Press*, and *Awkward Mermaid*. Find her on Twitter @csferreira08.

After Michael's Death, A Letter to Noora *Gabriel Frushong*

There is a cyclone fence between ourselves and the slaughter.

- Carolyn Forché

Our trip to Oswiecim.

We did not think ahead. Each door framed to open. Each brick laid for shelter.

I followed Michael past a sign. *Please be silent. You are in a room where thousands of people were killed.*

Cigarette smoking. Breath heaving. Tears dripping from his chin. A camera masked his face. It clicked.

Our return to London.

Iraq invasion underway. Each thing we did, a thing we did while bombs began to fall. Each day we asked the question are we helpless or at fault?

He gave half measures of his life to each end of the argument. Became a doctor. Killed himself.

I am writing now to let you know.

Our last conversations.

When you left for Doha, you explained, there were shopping malls before the sanctions, in Baghdad like Piccadilly. Before the war, a chance of going home.

When Michael left for Zagreb, he took a laptop and a pair of socks. He smiled and shrugged, wanting even less. Even then, wanting nothing left.

Our futures apart.

Looking back fifteen years, our closeness is a fantasy. No contrast between the brightness of a moment lived and a story heard.

I am writing now of him to you with words that work like weather. They come from far away. They touch everything. They move on.

Gabriel Frushong writes from Helena, Montana. A correspondent at Montana Quarterly, his prose has appeared in The Nation, Yes! Magazine, High Country News, and other publications. His poetry has been published in the Cossack Review, Dialogist, Natural Bridge, Cutbank, and other journals. New fiction is forthcoming at Saranac Review.

Child in Forgotten Orchard *Laura Long*

A child wandering in a clutch of apple trees
puzzles over the lichen that flakes the trunks

in patches of fur, the pale green echoed
on a penny she finds in the dirt. A bird

breaks into her wondering--flutters
down and disappears into the long dry grass,

rises to land on a twig and drops again.
She knows the bird as a blur as she waits

for the grownups next to the ruined house
to end their argument about who the hell

owns this place. Then, just before the bird darts
into sky, it flies so close to her eyes the wings whirr

--flitty as dust--through her heart. She stands agog
in a strange old world, broken open, breathing.

When I Consider How My Breath Is Spent *Laura Long*

"The universe is mostly empty" --astronomical fact

In spite of all the noise I hear, there's a hollowness
at the heart of the world I have to fill somehow,
or see it filled. Some call it a mystery. But
I'm getting old and haven't figured this out, so

sometimes I park myself at the nearest perch—
a street corner or kitchen window or mountain foothold--
and turn my back on the squabbling or singing,
the traffic or cicadas, to watch the wind

chase itself: the wind sweeps through valleys and alleys,
rips over mountaintops, and tears off wisps
of big fat clouds, only to leave the wisps
afloat, alone, unclaimed

as if the wind endlessly gathers for a nest
and every nest is abandoned as soon as it is begun.

Laura Long is the author of a novel-in-stories, 'Out of Peel Tree,' a Finalist for three book awards; and two poetry collections. She co-edited the 2017 anthology 'Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods: Fiction and Poetry from West Virginia.' Her work appears in magazines such as Shenandoah and Southern Review, and she teaches creative and environmental writing at the University of Lynchburg in Virginia.

Towards a Rain Lashing Chaos *Philip Brunetti*

1. Phone call. No, text message to soon-to-be ex-wife: “Tell your brother Harold he WAS being followed. And I know who was following him.” *Hahaha*. Laughter. That’s me laughing. I’m trying to keep up my spirits. Wifey’s in town, my soon-to-be ex. She’s on the other side of town, staying with her current lover. He’s not her lover—she says he’s not her lover. He’s gay anyway. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t love her. Maybe I don’t anymore.
2. Her brother Harold’s in Tucson. He’s building a ship in his backyard. Well, it’s more like an oversized rowboat. He’s waiting for the rains. The Tragic Indian Man, who claims he was born from a saguaro cactus, predicts the rainstorm will come even into the desert. Most especially into the desert. Yes, the desert will be hit most violently. The rain will last for 300 days and nights and Tucson will be lost at sea. Harold will be ready. Besides the constructed rowboat, he’s got plenty of canned foods, bottled water, tools, weapons, and a Hefty bagful of waterproof clothes, shoes, and bedding. He will ride out the storm. He’ll eat canned tuna fish and sardines on the banks of the Sonoran Desert. Birthplace of the Tragic Indian Man whose mother was a saguaro cactus, his father, a prick.
3. After the text to wifey, I’m met with only silence. Two or three days of it but it doesn’t stop me from thinking...I was out there, walking around by the West 4th Street Station when the idea came to me: I was being followed. I had breached a certain level of decorum or acceptable civility but I’d done it slowly over a course of years. In those years I’d become an outlaw and an avant-garde. I was at work on my no-go masterpiece: A book of 300 antipoems. These were the antipoems I’d be sending to Harold. I’d already written 208 of them. I was working on 209—but working’s the wrong term. I didn’t work on my antipoems, I radiated them like a personal sun or halo of light. Later I’d get round to writing them down. After all, the word was the *word*. I’d gotten around to writing down 208 of them, like I said. Ninety-two more were waiting to pour forth in a profusion of light. Then the light would become words pressed on the page. The book was also for the Tragic Indian Man. He was planning to go aboard Harold’s rowboat when the time came. I wanted them to read the poems to one another, one for each night. And then the 300th on the first fresh day of strict sunshine and blue sky, the end of the rain-lashing chaos.
4. There will be no end to the rain-lashing chaos. Or it will seem that way for a time. By day 100 half the population will have killed itself. By day 200 another quarter or more. Not to mention all the drowned, starved, broken...This may happen. It seems evident in the light that pours from my forehead. It’s part of the inner light—becoming outer. And part of why I’m being followed. Harold had this too, back in the 80s and 90s. He radiated a sheer light. A few got caught in the light and then made him an enemy. The FBI or some secret law enforcement

had started tailing him. They didn't know exactly why. He was an odd duck, someone radically against the norm. He was creating art—real art, and lots of it. Abstracts mostly. But abstracts bordering on the symbolical—like searchlights into the unconscious. A dead-dream-of-life art: *Here* art. Exploded more than painted for a time.

Harold is a dreamer. And he can't be touched. He exists in a withdrawn present. Still, he's building his boat. He might want to stay alive: He's not sure. He's even considering building a second boat for supplies—beer mostly. And he wants to be able to start a fire in the second boat, a small cooking fire. He needs a covered grill, something portable. Propane tanks, binoculars, fishing gear...

5. Harold was being followed when he was an artist in New York. He'd show up at a gallery of his work and have to look over his shoulder. Often there'd be a man on the other side of the gallery. The man wore a suit the color of dried blood: rusty brown. This was one of the agents. There were others. A man that carried around a palm-tree plant. He'd put the plant down in different rooms or strategic spots and stand behind the plant. He'd open a small flip-pad and write notes to himself. He was writing notes about Harold—Harold's art or Harold's presence. One way or another Harold was the topic. When the surveillance was done, the man would pick up his plant and walk out of the gallery. Meanwhile the rust-brown suit man would hold a miniature walkie-talkie the size of a cigarette packet. It may have been a cigarette packet except the man was seen and heard talking into it. Very few words could be heard clearly but once in a while the name "Harold" was unmistakable. "Harold this and Harold that..."

But anyway Harold was done. Eventually Harold was done and he left New York and he left the art world too. He liked to say "I used to be somebody." And when he said it, it sounded true—true enough that Harold would turn in his backyard and double check that no one was there. He'd reminded himself of what he was—or had been. But the rust-brown spies, the palm-plant spies were long gone.

6. The Tragic Indian Man came to stand in the backyard shadows for a while. He smoked a clay pipe and watched Harold engaged in his work, his boat building. The Tragic Indian Man had two strangled-to-death rattlesnakes in his pockets. One in his left front pants pocket and one in his right. The dead, diamond-shaped heads of the rattlers were stuffed into each pocket, fangs and all, and the rest of the snake hung out like a scaly hose that swayed gently in the breeze.

"These snakes will do for my meals eventually," he said. "But I'll skip biting into the poison pouches."

Harold heard him but didn't respond. He was too busy pounding nails and planing boards. The work was going well and the Tragic Indian Man was pleasant enough company if that meant anything.

“Unpleasant enough too,” the Tragic Indian Man said wryly. He inhaled on his clay pipe. He tiptoed to the edge of the yard and sat on a gray, sun-warmed boulder. The sun burned overhead but for how much longer?

“Two weeks or less,” the Tragic Indian Man said. “Then the rains—the 300-day rains that’ll feel like forever.”

Harold pounded 300 nails into place. This would be a boat to endure all torrents. Meanwhile I was having Thai dinner out with wifey in New York...I was telling her how fast the antipoems were coming, how much light was pouring forth from my head.

“You were always possessed,” she said, stabbing a crab cake with her fork. “I never held *that* against you.”

“276 and counting,” I said, a smidge of lemony butter trickling down my chin.

In Tucson 2,400 miles away, the Tragic Indian Man stood up to an undercurrent of rattling.

7. A few months later I will have to cry. If the 300-day rains come to Arizona and the Sonoran and Harold rides out the torrential waters in his rowboat, mast and all, I will cry. I’ll be in New York City still, awaiting our calamity—the next red explosion or protracted blackout. It’ll be a double dip into strange times. Pockets of the world will swirl into a frenzy of choked existence. Deserts will be reversed and clouds punctured. Death rains will come. Sandstorms and kinetic volts of wayward energy—windmills toppling, electrical lines collapsing, and the tumblings of more towers. Towers east, west, north, and south. A plunge into vast frenetic chaos and dismay...These may just be the panic dreams of the Tragic Indian Man. After all, his face is turned to the east tonight and his thoughts filter like mudslides of quantum particles that pierce my skull. I may be doomed—like him—or we may just ride out the crashing horizons and ill-wind cataclysms to come.

And when the prodigal rains come and Harold is not Noah...Well, he may just leap into the newfound sea, who knows? But when he planes the boards and hammers the nails, there’s a chance still. And the Tragic Indian Man is never going to eat those dead, pocketed snakes. He may use one to choke the life out of Harold. But more than likely he’ll extract the venom, slowly, carefully, and mix a lethal elixir. An anti-elixir—one shot and you’re gone.

“Just prepare the poison and shut your mouth,” Harold says, rolling over in sleep. It comes to me across the continent and I whisper the same to wifey who I believe is cocooned against me but is, in reality, long gone.

8. When I was walking around that other evening, downtown, light profusions intact...the spies were tailing me. Practicing their stealthy practice, creeping along. Not being my friends—not wholly being my enemies. Me Muttering: “But I love my enemies...I ought to love my enemies...”

The one with the palm-tree plant...he tailed me along 6th Avenue and down to West Houston Street. Then into the lobby of the Film Forum—a perfect place to put his plant down. Stand behind the high, broad palm leaves. Take out a Tic-Tac-container-size camera. Snap shots slyly. I won't smile or “cheese”...at best I'll balk and recall the forebodings of self-exiled Harold, gone west.

Dear Wifey. We are living through another round of end times. Some might say End Times. I won't. But Harold's right—and he's been right all along. They're following us. And we're following ourselves. We have become them and they have become us. If you don't believe me, carry a palm plant back across the country and visit your brother's backyard. Let him hear you creep quietly into the yard. Let him turn with his stock weapon and shoot you dead. After you die, and wake up again, then you will know what I mean.

9. When the rains come Harold and the Tragic Indian Man will not take a woman aboard the boat. Not even the second boat. They have no desire to propagate. They barely have a desire to survive. But they will attempt survival for the adventure of the event. For the longed-for invigoration. It's beyond biblical in its ramifications or could be tagged neo-biblical, whatever exactly that will mean.

The Tragic Indian Man will swallow an entire snakehead after extracting the venom from the glands. He'll cut the head off at the base and put it in his mouth like a scaly, cold-blooded slider. Then he'll swallow hard, *harrumph*. What is the purpose? What is the purpose of such instruction—what is the purpose of 300 antipoems, one per night?

“I'll swallow a snakehead for the sake of the poems,” the Tragic Indian Man says.

“The antipoems,” Harold corrects.

“Oh, yeah.”

Later the snakehead will be shat out intact. It'll float on the newly formed sea—the Sonoran Great Lake. The cactus thorns of the tallest cacti will brush the boat bottom. The Tragic Indian Man will hang his savage ass off the starboard side. He'll grunt and count to ten before the deed's done, part two. Harold will hear about it—a snakehead-free second shit. Harold will whistle into the wind, hard rain pummeling his face, the sea's surface, everything that was once bone dry and beat to dust.

10. *From the waterproof pen of Harold Stetson:* We are not the rulers of the universe and we have damaged our livers. We've drunk up everything in the second boat and regretted not having a third boat. It's evening 298 as I write this. The Tragic Indian Man is a flashbulb in my forehead. He'll keep going off now but will soon turn into the sonic scream of a siren. There are no other survivors from here to Bisbee that I've encountered. The southern part of the Sonoran along the Mexican border is mud and slop. The snakes, lizards, and other reptiles have been drowned and their bloated corpses rush like cadaverous logs along the streams.

I've been given the name Harold earlier but I am not Harold. I'm the man who tried to shamanize during this portentous event. Or perhaps I'm still in the process of shamanizing—like the Tragic Indian Man did. But he was cut to psychical pieces by the masked-world nightmares on day 288 and leaped into the water's depths. He had all of the things I didn't want to have to have stuck into his face. A rattler's fangs punctured each cheek and a crown of cacti thorns and fish bones pierced his forehead. He'd also cored out an eyeball and socket with a serrated bottle top. It was all necessary because rebirth is necessary. There is also the need and the obligation to record—in words. I hope I am up to the task. I have used my waterproof pen and pad and worn the equivalent of the Gorton's fisherman: black rubbers. Some fool in New York, my sister's ex, has been channeling with me. He thought he was ready to meet the Tragic Indian Man in mid-dream. He had the audacity to attempt to save him. But nothing, almost nothing can be saved with a pen, with poems, with words...Alas: the antipoems came and went. They struck me as excellent but minor. Simple migrations into the margins, becoming marginalia. And yet all the while being bombarded from above—the Chicken Little falling of a sky.

There is one can of beer left in the rucksack. I mean to carry it onto the peak of the first-spotted land. Drink it in the purple sunset. If there is ever a sun again. These were the plagues and pressures of the antipoems. But I think I learned nothing from that fool and his scribbles. I can't believe my sister was once his wife. Then again he did have a predicted calamity or two up his sleeve...And so let's hope the day after tomorrow the sunny bitch of dawn will finally come.

Philip Brunetti writes innovative fiction and poetry and much of his work has been published in various online or paper literary magazines including Word Riot, The Boiler, decomP magazinE, The Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Identity Theory, and Lungfull! Magazine.

trigger warning: violence, sexual content

Colonel Sanders in Extremis Charles Rafferty

Colonel Sanders stood outside using the glass door like a mirror. He straightened the black necktie and brushed a bit of lint from his sleeve. “Fucking white suit,” he said. Then the old man cleared his throat and entered the restaurant door, which he shed like a magician’s handkerchief. He became the smiling grandfather, full of good will and good chicken. A five-year-old boy saw him first and hid behind his mother’s leg. It was a good spot, Colonel Sanders thought, like crouching behind a plaid oak stump.

“Thank y’all for coming to try my chicken,” he intoned. His voice did a good job of filling the room, but few people made eye contact. Sometimes it was like that.

Johnson came up from behind and practically goosed him. “Work the crowd now, Colonel, work the crowd,” he said, as he sailed over to the condiment island and began replenishing the napkins.

“Johnson can suck my old gray cock,” the colonel thought. Then he paused to make sure his face still fit the mask of the southern gentleman, the man with the secret recipe. “My chicken is always crispy,” he croaked. “I do declare.”

The women were more tolerant of his presence than the men. He knew it would be otherwise if he was just playing at being old. But he was 79 that month. No need to bleach his goatee white, no need to add gravel to his voice. He sidled up to a young woman in her thirties. She had large breasts, which is what the colonel liked best. “Well that chicken looks finger-lickin’ good,” he said as he stared into the half-devoured bucket she was sharing with her friend. He circled around to see if he could sneak a peek down the undone buttons of her blouse. “Those thighs look delicious.”

“Why thank you, Colonel,” she said, giggling to her friend.

The men could be cruel, and it was unnerving how often they zeroed in on the goatee. He had worn it for decades. It’s what got him the job. “Do the ladies like the feel of that goatee as they’re sittin’ on your face?” they’d ask. “Your sister liked it mighty fine” was the answer that got Johnson to report him, but there were no backup colonels to be had, and so, as with most things, there were no repercussions.

Johnson looked up from the now fully loaded napkin dispensers and twirled his finger in the air beside his face. It was the signal every store manager used to convey that Colonel Sanders needed to keep moving around the dining area. The colonel headed to the next table, but only to try his luck from a different angle.

The colonel was on loan from corporate. He spent an hour a day at six different KFCs in the Hartford area. It was a publicity stunt, though “stunt” wasn’t the right word. It had all the agility and surprise of a body double losing his balance and hitting one branch after another as he

plummeted to the ground. When his hour was up, he'd get into a van shaped like a fried chicken leg, and head to the next KFC.

"KFC," he thought. "Why did they change the name? Goddamn initials. Do people want IBM to make their dinners?"

When he was done interrupting people's meals and leering at the women, he left without saying anything to Johnson. He was pleased to know he'd never have to see his pimply neck again. Out in the parking lot, the colonel snuck a smoke beside the dumpsters. He'd already been reprimanded for smoking in the van, but he refused to give it up entirely. His departure routine also included a swig of whiskey.

Finally, before he got into the van, he took out a handkerchief and cleaned his glasses. His eyes were still good, so headquarters had given him a pair with flat lenses. He was forever having to wipe the dandruff off of them. He considered popping the lenses out, but he had heard they check for that. The whole point of the promotion was to let people meet a real Colonel Sanders. Everything had to be authentic, which is why he didn't feel bad about splurging on the flask — stainless steel, with a rifle and a dog etched into it across a silhouette of Kentucky. He filled it each morning with sour mash. "Something befitting a colonel," he said to himself.

On the way to the next restaurant, he got caught in traffic. It happened every day. People were always honking and pointing, laughing at the man who hadn't planned well for retirement. On this occasion, he got mooned by some Catholic school girls headed home on the bus. That part he didn't mind. They were all cute, and their smiles were both wanton and chaste. He believed their future was bright.

Colonel Sanders pulled into the last KFC of the day. In fact, it was the last stop of the entire promotion. He had half a flask of whiskey left, and he drained it on the spot. "Let them fire me," he said out loud. It was dinnertime on Friday, just outside of Cheshire. He was a little late, and the manager met him in the parking lot. "Come on now, Colonel. Let's get moving."

"I got caught on 84," he said in his native, New Jersey voice. It was an effort, sometimes, to speak the way he'd been born. Even when he wasn't wearing the suit, he felt the drawl creeping into his voice. The campaign had been going for two straight months, weekends included, and he felt like he was living the part. Of course, he could never get away with his Sanders voice in the actual south. Corporate had real southern gentlemen for that. But here in Connecticut, the diners never questioned his adopted voice, even though he had arrived at it simply by trying to sound as stupid as possible. He imitated the woman from Georgia who lived in the apartment beside his own. She was a bit of a hag, and she was forever screaming at her kids about their lice and the loud TV. She said things like "hoppin' mad" and "crooked as a dog's hind leg." He tried to use these expressions when he was in character. He was an actor, after all, and he knew that every role required study — however small, however meager the recompense.

Inside the restaurant, a small crowd was waiting for him. The women all had children, and a couple of flashes went off as he came through the glass door. "Well, well," he said. "Looky what we have here." He said this last word in two syllables. It was the kind of exaggeration that would get his ass kicked in Kentucky, but here among the Yankees, it went unremarked. To them, his

accent was just as good as the clothes, and the clothes were authentic. Initially he worried they would make him wear polyester, like the cooks and cash register girls. But he was a man apart. His costume had to be dry-cleaned — and they made it clear that it was his bill to pay. It was for this reason he never ate the chicken they sometimes offered. It was just too messy, and he was always in a rush. What did he care about a ten percent discount anyhow?

Colonel Sanders shook hands with the toddlers, and paid extra attention to the kids with good-looking mothers. He was feeling the whiskey now, and he asked if they might have any questions, figuring he'd get the same old stuff about the secret recipe and where his first store opened. He had memorized all the answers off a laminated sheet taped to the dashboard of the van.

One kid called him Captain Sanders, and he corrected him. "I'm a colonel, my boy. A colonel from the south!"

Another kid piped up: "Were you in a war?"

"Why yes I was, son. Yes I was."

"Was it the Civil War?" he asked, and a small tittering arose among the mothers.

"No, no, no," he pretend-laughed. "I was in the Korean War," which he pronounced as "KO RE un" in his pretend accent, realizing as he said it that he had broken character. He whipped around to see if the manager had caught it.

"Did you have to kill any Koreans?" a boy of about 8 asked, pronouncing the strange new word exactly as the colonel had.

"Bobby!" hissed his mother. "That's not polite." She gave his shoulder a pinch as she held onto him, and it was plain he got the message — he looked like he might even cry. Colonel Sanders usually couldn't be bothered with such children. But the boy's mother was practically falling out of her blouse, and he admired the blush that spread across her bosom. Plus, she was wearing yoga pants, and Colonel Sanders was curious to see what she looked like from behind.

"That's alright, my dear. The young'uns always ask the most pointed questions. Their innocence commands them!" He liked the way that sounded, especially with the accent.

In point of fact, Colonel Sanders had killed people in Korea. On several occasions, he had fired into throngs of charging enemy soldiers, and though he shot wildly, he had always assumed that some of his bullets hit some of the people headed toward him with silvery bayonets. But the only person he was really sure about was when he had checkpoint duty. A woman was running toward him, as if she were scared of something behind her in the dark, but he worried that she was a saboteur. When she didn't stop on his command, he shot at her. The third bullet took her down twenty feet in front of him, but the adrenaline and fear made him keep shooting. He was a private at the time, and she turned out to be just a girl. Maybe 15. He'd gotten a formal reprimand for that.

“There are no good choices in war, son,” he drawled. He was feeling the full effect of the whiskey now, and he stumbled against an empty chair. He started to get misty, standing in the middle of a dining room, surrounded by the town’s soccer moms, a toddler in every lap. He wasn’t actually crying, but it was enough to ruin everyone’s appetite for the extra-crispy special they had going.

And then, because he was tired, and because he was suddenly very drunk, he said in his real voice — his cynical, New Jersey, know-it-all voice — that men go to war despite the shame and the terror, because they believe the women they leave behind will remain faithful to them, that they won’t take up with men who have bone spurs and heart murmurs. “But expecting women to keep their legs crossed is folly,” he said. “Sheer and utter folly.”

The manager was staring at him now, drawing a finger across his own neck to make it clear the colonel should shut up. Despite everything, Colonel Sanders recovered himself. He was a professional after all. He forced the drawl back into his voice and began to say farewell as the women collected their children and headed for the door. He took a last lingering look as they departed. It was touching how they had arranged themselves, like they were the audience, like they were watching a little play. Now they avoided his eyes, and some of them seemed to pity him, which was a foreign and not altogether unpleasant thing. The women had looked delicious as they sat there listening. They were yet another thing he would not have time to taste.

Charles Rafferty’s most recent collections of poems are *The Smoke of Horses* (BOA Editions, 2017) and *Something an Atheist Might Bring Up at a Cocktail Party* (Mayapple Press, 2018). His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *O, Oprah Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Ploughshares*. His stories have appeared in *The Southern Review* and *New World Writing*, and his story collection is *Saturday Night at Magellan’s* (Fomite Press, 2013). He has won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism, as well as the 2016 NANO Fiction Prize. Currently, he directs the MFA program at Albertus Magnus College and teaches at the Westport Writers’ Workshop.

The Ghosts *Laurel Dixon*

Mrs. Norris paced in front of my bedroom wall. She laid her paws against the plaster. She howled.

“She’s plotting a mob hit against me,” I said.

Laura petted the creamsicle-colored cat. It took a swipe at her. “There’s probably a ghost in the wall.”

We laughed as the cat jumped a full two feet in the air. My brown, sausage-shaped dog lay sleeping next to me. I patted his head. “The dog is not a Ghostbuster.”

Two hours later, Laura pressed her fingertips to the wall, like she was feeling for a pulse. “I think the cat is right. There’s something in there.”

I cupped my ear and leaned against the painted gray surface. It smelled like age and the stink of chemicals. Inside, I heard tiny scuffling sounds, punctuated by puffs of air. The cat stared up at me, gloating with her keen yellow eyes.

Throaty chirps started to echo from behind the wall. The dog sniffed along the baseboard. A ridge of hair stood up on his spine, his brown eyes sharpening with a primal hunger. He howled. He tried to dig a hole in the dirty beige carpet.

Laura and I studied the wall. The watery winter light formed a rectangle on the blank canvas. I sat my hand square in the center of it.

“I think our ghosts are birds,” Laura said.

Laura’s voice singed the receiver of her phone with fury, her hair a wild golden cloud. “Well, when *can* you get the birds out of the walls?”

I turned around at my desk to face Laura. “At least there are two of them in there. At least they have company.”

Laura frowned. “I suppose.”

“We should name them,” I said, “They’re ours now.”

She sighed. “The apartment office won’t call me back, so I guess they are.”

“I’m calling mine ‘Mark Wall-Bird.’”

A smile flitted across Laura’s wan face. She’d lost her summer tan. “John Wall-Bird.”

“WALL-E the wall bird.”

She clasped her hands in front of her. “Dear God, make me a wall bird, so I can fly far, far away from here.”

We shared a grin.

Pest control came. A somber old man in a tool belt skimmed his gloves across the wall. “You ladies definitely have birds in there.”

Laura rolled her eyes behind his back. Her tone was polite when she spoke. “How do we get them out?”

“I’m going to have to cut into the wall.”

I sighed. The dog sitting at my feet wagged his tail. “Okay.”

“But your apartment complex will have to give me permission.”

I watched a vein in Laura’s forehead threaten to burst. “But the apartment complex told me to call you.”

The man shrugged. “Those are the rules.”

The olive oil snapped in the pan as I made us fried eggs. It sizzled, painting my arm with needle-pricks of pain.

“All in all, you’re just a... another bird, in the wall...” I sang under my breath.

Laura rolled her eyes at me. She held out a chipped plate for her eggs. “Don’t quit your day job.”

The dog yawned. He curled against Laura on my white comforter, the ghosts in the wall forgotten. Overhead the fan swung in dizzy circles. We watched its furious beating with our lids

half-open, hiding our cold hands in our sweater-sleeves. The wall emitted feather-soft thumps and thin cries.

Laura patted the dog's head, whispering in his ear: "I'll actually miss you when you move out, Fitzel."

I avoided her eyes. "He says that he'll miss you too."

I woke up at midnight. Alone, I slipped out of my silk bedsheets. I pressed my sleep-starved body against the cool expanse of wall, listening. The noises were fainter.

I felt a lurch in my heart, as subtle as a wingbeat.

"We'll get you out soon," I whispered to the plaster. "Live. Live. Live."

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Mark From Iowa *Brenda Ray*

Maybe six months after her husband died, my sister Cassidy met a stranger in a bar. The guy offered to fly her to Iowa and she said yes because what really did she have to lose? For two weeks they played house: shooting guns, making dinner, falling asleep in each other's arms.

I guess one night the stranger came home from work and said, "I have a surprise for you." And because all the curiosity had already filtered out of her bones she said, "Okay" and followed him to the truck.

They drove through sweeping fields of corn, neither one of them saying much to the other. I imagine being a widow is much like being swept in with the tide, you cling weakly to a rock, knowing that the sea has been so cruel to you and now suddenly it's being kind.

Cassidy says she bounced along, watching the cornfields yawn before her like gentle waves of undulating light. They were getting further and further from town. There were times after her husband died when Cass was content to feel *okay*. As if we couldn't possibly know this contentment until we've lost something. We are spoiled, I think, to want happiness, all the time, to want heaven. Maybe heaven is just a drive through a cornfield where nothing hurts anymore.

Soon the stranger pulled to the shoulder near an opening in a field. Not knowing what lay ahead, my sister climbed out but when the stranger rounded the far side of the car, she saw that he held in his hands, a baseball bat.

How well do I really know this guy? she asked herself.

He took her by the hand, and led her into the field. Cassidy did not protest, and like a lamb, wove through the stalks behind him.

They walked a few paces, far enough from the road to not make a sound. All the better to kill me, she figured, and for the briefest of moments, she hoped that he would. The stalks parted into thin wisps of bending stem and there in the center was a single desktop computer.

"For you," he said, handing her the baseball bat and turning and walking out of sight. About the fact that he did not kill her, Cassidy felt neither shock nor relief, just the calm steady nothingness that accompanies the depths of grief. Sometimes I think that's when life keeps you alive, when you are most indifferent to it.

Cassidy waited for his footsteps to disappear into silence. And when she was certain that she was alone, when she was certain that she stood with the sky and the field and God as her witness, she wound the baseball bat over her shoulder, and swung hard.

I don't know how long she was in that field. I don't know how many swings it takes to un-do all the stories inside you. I try to imagine the motion of it, the momentum of bat against metal, the violence in the swing. I imagine myself screaming. I imagine howling and sobbing and wheezing, my blood and slobber all over the pieces. I picture a voice I don't recognize, which is my voice, which is a primal, guttural noise coming from some place inside me, the sound of cattle being herded, or the mass carnage of tearing flesh. I think of God, and my past, of loving, and losing, and being born.

When Cassidy finished, she dropped the baseball bat, and turned and wandered out to the road. It was sunset and she kicked rocks under her feet, tears stinging and drying in the glow.

She was walking for some time and along the way her face slackened and drained. When the sun slid behind the stalks, she heard car wheels behind her and she did not have to turn around to know that it was him. Without a word Cassidy stepped to the side and let the truck pull in front of her. She reached for the passenger door and slid in.

Driving back to town, she and the stranger said nothing to one another. But Cassidy says she looked over her shoulder and caught bits of computer and debris bouncing in the backseat. This is my favorite part of the story. He had gone back to collect the pieces. He had waited some place far away, knowing what my sister was doing, knowing she needed to be alone to do it.

I like to imagine him coming back to the scene, the abandoned bits of plastic, blood, and slobber, scattered through the grass. I see his gentle hands gathering each of the pieces, one by one, cradling them into his arms, carrying them back to his truck. "Mark from Iowa" my sisters and I call him.

I see him driving down the road and finding my sister walking alone, her gentle back fragile in the sun. He pulls over and she climbs in and he says nothing. He's the sort of person who knows that speaking is a form of giving, and he doesn't ask her to give anything at all. So they drive home, and when they get to the house he makes her dinner, and together they wash the dishes, and climb upstairs, and fall asleep in each other's arms.

Brenda Ray is an MFA student and professor of writing at The New School University where she studies with John Freeman and Brenda Wineapple. Previous publications include Brooklyn Magazine, Four Chambers Press, and SoFar Sounds New York.