

VIRIDINE

LITERARY



CONTAGION

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Cover Art
“Microbial Smile” by Janina Aza Karpinska

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We're delighted to present Issue 04, showcasing an array of work on the theme of 'contagion'. It's bewildering to think we founded this publication over a year ago now; our first 'birthday' was in August. Maybe we should have celebrated?

In this edition, the poetry takes a somewhat gentler form. Each piece interprets contagion with subtlety, and offers a fresh perspective on what it means for something to spread. From the decay of memory in Frank William Finney's *'Summer Ghosts'* to the nuclear aftermath in Lucinda Trew's *'the gingkos of Hiroshima'*, the depth and breadth of reflection in each interpretation is nothing short of stunning.

In contrast, the fiction pieces demonstrate contagion in all its violence and unpleasantness. If the poems are a sensuous massage, the stories will take to your bones with a sledgehammer (or, in the case of Clay Waters' *'Show Me Your Skeleton!'*, a blade; take care with this one if you're squeamish or triggered by content involving self-harm). They explore the darker aspects of human existence with unflinching clarity, and use well-crafted prose that'll leave you thinking long after you've read the final lines.

Submissions were a little quieter this time around, with only a handful of essays and scripts (and ultimately none that really resonated with us). Hence this issue is a touch shorter than the last few. Nevertheless, we're incandescently grateful to every single writer and artist who chooses to submit work to us. As writers ourselves, we appreciate the time and soul that goes into your work, and we're always humbled that people trust us with something so precious.

We run this magazine because we believe in the love of writing and reading. We want to share amazing work with wider audiences. And we couldn't do that without you—the readers and writers who make our existence possible.

Long live the literary,

Romy Morreo & Roger Niven
Editors-in-Chief

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Ophelia in Water



Betty Stanton

Maybe her death was on my mind, her clothes spread wide, the weeping brook, her chanting voice until she

was dragged under -- pulled from her melodious lay by the weight of water. I run a bath, put on music, in the

water I close my eyes. When you drown, the need to breathe becomes so strong that even if you are awake,

even if you know that the darkness will pull itself into your lungs, it is impossible to hold your breath. If you're

lucky you slip from consciousness before your body betrays you. If you aren't, your lungs fill fast as you drag

in breath and fall unconscious in spite of yourself. It can happen in less than twenty seconds. It can be a calm quiet,

dreamlike. It can be painless, as mermaid-like they bore her up. Isn't it strange how ideas come -- I think about

how tired I am, how I should drag myself out of the water. I don't want to fall asleep here, I think, I could

drown. Then I am sinking below the surface, seeing how long I can hold my breath. I hold out until I feel heavy,

until lightheaded my reflexes force me to breathe and I suck in water instead. That is all there is to it. I jerk up,

choking, sputtering, I vomit water across the slick tiles of my bathroom floor and I can breathe again -- but that

moment, the moment before my body corrects itself, when my arms are still scrambling on the smooth porcelain

of the tub, struggling to hold my body under, that moment is intentional. I don't want to die, but for a thick breath of

time, when down her weedy trophies and herself, I do not do anything to prove I want to stop myself from drowning.

Summer Ghosts



Frank William Finney

Childhood's plague of rotten wood.
The human flume has run its course.
The mountain trail's been washed away
and robots run the funhouse.

Young valley girls bleed on the beach.
Old warlocks deck the benches.
Last year's flowers shed their dust
in rooms that smell of urine.

Let us stop here by the swing
and talk as if we're living.
The taunt of drilling
shakes the frames

of paintings
no one ever sees
by artists no one's
heard of.

The Delicious Electric Apocalypse



Doug Jacquier

My ancestors came from Mexico, where people did not fear us but loved us. They would wait a whole year to eat our fruit. They would smell us coming.

We did not stand on the shoulders of giants so much as piggy-back on them, so that we could be giants too as we wound around trees and poles. Thus we became *monstera deliciosa*, the ‘delicious monsters’, journeying to many lands and bringing joy wherever we went.

As with all other living things, humans wanted to enslave and control us. They found a way to grow us in pots inside their over-heated houses and cut us down to size if we threatened to unbalance their minimalist designs.

To keep us attractive and green, they fed us blood and bone fertiliser. Perhaps they were trying to improve on Nature. What they actually did was alter our genetic structure over time, inadvertently producing an entirely different sub-species. We evolved into *monstera carnivorosa*.

When we were in the wild, a sure sign of delicious fruit to come was that our scales started to drop. Humans were delighted that we continued to ‘fruit’ in our new form. They didn’t notice the scales on our fruit became airborne and formed foraging clusters that returned to the host plant in the dead of night, like bees returning to the hive.

No-one foresaw the environmental impact of this transformation. Occasionally a human might remark about the increasing rarity of seeing houseflies and mosquitoes in the summertime but, given that this was universally considered a good thing, it was ignored. And when the spiders and the mice and the rats disappeared, it was attributed to evolution.

An outcast group, called Scientists, raised concerns about entire species disappearing from the food chain. Fortunately for us, they were mocked and pilloried on social media, and then lost their research grants.

Then the cats vanished. Cat-loving humans harangued their leaders into action. Others, especially bird-lovers, were cheered by this phenomenon, although some did speculate that the business model of social media may collapse.

Then the same thing started happening to small, yappy dogs, and speculation began that small humans could be next. Outright panic spread like a virus across the human race.

The Scientists now faced accusations of being asleep at the wheel, and Governments demanded an immediate solution.

The mainstream media dredged up huge numbers of worried-looking 'experts' who expounded at length about what these extinctions might mean, while being suitably evasive about specifics in the interests of national security.

The Prime Minister called an urgent press conference to announce that whatever resources were required to deal with this emergency would be made available. He hinted darkly, without naming names, that certain hostile nations may be involved, but he didn't wish to speculate further. Largely identical press conferences were held in the capitals of all the human countries.

The Government established a Command Centre, where senior members of first responder organisations and the military engaged in heated discussions about the necessary weaponry to counter the threat. First, of course, they needed to establish the nature of the threat.

Social media was rife with speculative certainty that this was, amongst other possibilities, the first sign of the Second Coming, the symbolic heralding of the triumph of the One World Government, and Bill Gates demonstrating the launch of his Windows Of The Soul mind-control software.

Meanwhile, due to their contrary nature, the Scientists had not ceased to research and observe. Many were focused on the shadowy airborne orbs that had begun to appear at dusk.

Often, they struggled to describe their observations. The orbs were definitely discernible, but didn't have a shape that anyone recognised. It seemed to some that they had a colour, but they couldn't say for sure what that colour was, and they weren't even sure if there were different colours at different times.

They made a quiet, constant, and rhythmic noise. It seemed familiar yet unlike anything they'd heard before. And they were always moving.

The breakthrough came when someone rang the Police to report seeing a shape of indeterminate colour and composition, making a rhythmic noise, moving at random but currently trapped in an alley. A SWAT team swung into action and brought the orb down with what has become known as a bubblegum blaster: a sticky balloon that renders any object immobile.

Having something tangible with which to work, the Scientists quickly traced the components back to our species.

Early theories that we may have cross-contaminated other plant species, with the potential for vegetables to start eating humans rather than the other way around, were quickly dismissed by the Scientists but embraced by social media influencers with *monstera*-destroying products to sell.

The humans embarked on a persecutory abduction of our kind, including our deliciously innocent sisters. A convoy of sealed trucks transported us to a secret desert location and disintegrated us with a controlled atomic blast.

And that was the end of that.

Well, almost. A few irradiated particles were borne on the wind back to our home in Mexico. The radiation exposure morphed some of us into a new sub-species, *monstera destructa*, and they have thrived by climbing a very convenient host wall, which they are consuming as we speak. Their scouts have ear-marked the Three Gorges Dam in China, much of Lower Manhattan and the Kremlin as future host sites.

But some of us, like me, have transformed into *monstera electra* and we are slowly eating the internet. When we're done, we'll tackle the electricity grid.

You, my dear humans, are about to find out what it feels like to be powerless in the face of an enemy bent on your annihilation, simply because they can.



The Viral Run-Around
- Janina Aza Karpinska

French Fries, Fresh Cut



Katie Kenney

Your city is a paper legend
of painted dolls draped in fringed suede coats,

the mountain rumbles in summer's petulant storm,
a sea slushing blue ooze of glowing plankton,

the street lights burn white, blotting out
the unending sky, every diner a facade

in a movie's establishing scene, the cherry pie
twirls in a glass display, made of plastic

so real it makes the tongue gush ruby red,
each palm tree withered in exhaustive breeze,

here simplicity keeps the best company,
of a kind of blue that breathes forever.

Gathering Storm



June Gemmell

I haunt the entrance to the building, old suitcase at my feet, waiting for John to park the car. He always tries to persuade me to buy a new suitcase, and I always say no, the old one will do. I look down at my good shoes, which pinch my toes. The heels are too high for me now.

It's come back again. It starts small, but grows, spreads like a virus. A virus of the mind. It's a living thing—a jellyfish with hundreds of tentacles. Each sting takes my breath away.

John is 'being brave', although I can see the sadness behind his eyes, as always, but we keep up the pretence that everything will be fine.

The between-the-wars window frames hold no heat in the building. I know this from my last visit, and shiver. I can already feel the hard hospital bed, the rubber undersheets, the coarse blankets.

A nurse in soft-soled shoes pushes out through the door and with her comes a wave of disinfectant. I scan the pathways, looking for John. He can hold back the raging storm. I find a harbour in his common sense.

When I had my first episode, some years ago, I cried at anything and everything. Dreaded hallucinations kept me awake, faces leering at me in the darkness, coming so close I could feel their fetid breath on my face. I was brought to this place that time, too.

Panic rises with the memories. I bite my lip. Sometimes, I bite my lip so hard it bleeds, and I suck the salty blood until it stops. Where is John?

Two nurses in light blue scrubs walk across the open square arm-in-arm, their laughter an off-key tinkling. When I'm not well, sounds take on ominous properties. Small dogs howl like wild beasts and innocent laughter can sound maniacal. I'm getting that feeling now. The one I don't like. Pulsing. Taking over. The ground is roiling, a deep swell. My ship is unsteady, the waves roll and rock, heaving from the vast depths. The sky is tilting. I press myself against the damp wall. I slip down, drowning.

John's kind face is close. His brow is wrinkled, his eyes connect with mine. "Up we get," he says.

I gulp some kind of response and allow myself to be lifted.

He picks up my case and holds my arm tight. He doesn't mention the falling down. "I'll need to dig up the potatoes this week, you know," he says. I nod.

We go to the desk and he tells the receptionist my name, slowly spelling it

out. It's not an unusual surname. I don't know why he always does that.

He walks me to the ward. He tries not to look at the other patients with their drawn white faces and their hair askew. He just looks at me, tears held back and his face full of care and worry. There's a helplessness behind his eyes that only I can see.

The nurse who greets us has a soft voice and hair of red gold. She shines. She helps me unpack my toilet bag and my best nightdress and brings me tea. She squeezes my hand.

John leaves me there. He does not want to, and I do not want him to. But what else can we do? I watch his familiar back disappear down the corridor. His shoulders are rounded. He's wearing the jacket with the patches I sewed on the elbows, the trousers I pressed last night, and the brown hand-knitted cardigan I gave him at Christmas. Knitting soothes my 'jitters'. The click of the needles keeps time with my inner machine.

He will change into his overalls and go to his garden. I picture him there, digging his potatoes. I will be home soon. Soon.



Resurgence
- Vincenzo Cohen

Requiem for Svalbard



Gregory Dally

The townsfolk sprinkle petals on earth, to lie
as cryptographs that distort their forebears.

These tokens mimic gossamer, scattered
on ice which held its casualties

for decades until forensic ops disgorged them.
Ideas such as legacy turn out mute in shivers.

It's as if by sowing permafrost
they're hoping to landscape the frigid turf

so that the Fallen under it may revive
to colour monochrome left from legends.

Some minds transfigure this cache of humans
as their own private art reserve,

a gathering akin to Heaven's collection.
Eternity is an idea they've kept and grown here.

If their island shades an outpost of a new Valhalla,
then their kin arise, a vision staged in situ.

Mystics among them lean on a solace
contrived beneath the eruption of each aurora.

Vermilion from the sky might just
have hued their ancestors' tears, rouge mascara.

The Spanish Lady's makeover bled
their visages to a gurning, twisted

then frozen as the shape of curses.
From the living, a prayer to thaw static ones

and retrieve their hearts is stilled,
null in a zephyr that cools out any 'farvel.'

What Wants To Be A Tree



Barbara E. Hunt

(After Lucille Clifton)

yellow-jacket, bird. Live free of thought,
subsisting only on instinctual reach

for light. Surviving in togetherness.
For alone is no way to be alive. So as

world's cruelty cuts us into molecules,
scattered as stars in cold, expansive night,

how our hearts warm with yearning for
the bittersweet need to wing and branch.

See the Mayflowers Blossom



Emma Cliffe

I've always liked my showers on the hot side—my Aunt Jade says that I 'roast myself like a potato'. However, given the perpetual war in her little apartment between the smell of Marlboro Golds and microwaved fish, both vying to kill your nose first, I don't take advice from her on good habits.

Bless her soul, though. In those first few weeks after I got out from under Marcus' thumb, Jade was my guardian angel, telling me, 'Do not be afraid', between hacking coughs that rattled her tar-coated lungs. Without her, the guilt of leaving my siblings behind might have consumed me.

I trace the curves of my hips under the scalding water, then around, up my spine and dig my fingertips into the space between my shoulder blades, half-expecting to feel the unfurled wings of my new-found freedom there.

It's ironic that my fresh sense of life stems from death. Specifically, the death of my father, Marcus Mayflower.

Father, with a capital F, towering over me and telling me in capital letters that I'd never be enough. Father. He was never *Father* to me. He was always Marcus, part-time tyrant and part-time hero, and never *approachable*; I wouldn't have dreamt of asking him for help with my homework, or making a hot water bottle when I had period cramps. I asked my siblings for those things. Arthur, Maisie, and Kieran. Maisie once threw a bar of Cadbury's Dairy Milk through my window after Marcus had grounded me. It was wrapped up in old, tea-stained newspapers so it wouldn't break, even though my heart already was. Every belittlement from Marcus sent another crack splintering across my sense of self-worth.

Arthur, Maisie, and Kieran. They saw how Marcus targeted me for resembling our late mother and told me I needed to get out. My siblings, packing me a suitcase, saving up pavement pennies and coins from neighbours for cleaning cars and picking weeds to buy me a train ticket, and promising me before I left that they'd be alright.

It would be three long years until I discovered whether or not that promise, uttered in the crisp silence and weak light of a winter's morning, was kept.

I went to Marcus's funeral with every intention of spitting on his grave.

His coffin was at the front of a small church five minutes away from the house I grew up in. After two hours of speeches by men in tailored Burberry about how *'he was a good man'*, I was ready to march up, wrench the damn thing open, and throw up over the corpse itself. As one of his old business associates read out an excerpt from "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" by Alan Seeger, memories of dinners I wasn't allowed to eat and bruises I was forced to hide welled up in my throat like bile.

*I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.*

I laughed bitterly to myself, sitting near the back of the church. I remembered Jade sitting me on her knee and teaching me how to spell the surname Marcus chose for himself and his children. Mayflower: a flower that blossoms in May.

I never felt like I was *blossoming* under his roof.

I heard a humourless chuckle from behind me. He must have entered the church in the last few minutes, and he was now sitting on the back row, dark hair slicked back with too much gel, huddled in an oversized trench coat that practically consumed him.

It was my younger brother, Arthur.

Our eyes met. Arthur glanced around, then furtively came to sit next to me.

"I didn't know if you'd come," he whispered. He smelled of leather and ash. Had he started smoking since I left?

Since I left. The words howled in my mind, a swirling storm of guilt that enveloped my thoughts. I shook my head and whispered back, "I had to."

"I know. Me too." He looked around again and exhaled, hard. "Jesus, it's been three weeks since he died, Laurie. You should have got in contact with us. We've been worried."

He sounded like Marcus. The clipped syllables simmering with something that resembled disappointment; the tightness in his jaw as he spoke; the subtle guilt-tripping; *all of it.*

Arthur clearly realized it too. With both hands, he angrily scrubbed his face. "Fuck, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I guess I really am *his* son."

I couldn't tell if he was talking to me or to himself.

"You're trying to be better. That alone means you're not like him," I assured him.

"Thanks." Arthur dropped his shoulders. "But I can't stay here. I thought I was stronger, but I'm not. I can't be around *him*." He stood up abruptly, as if some invisible puppetmaster had yanked on his strings. "Good seeing you, though. You got a phone number now?"

I told him.

“Thanks, I’ll be in touch. We should meet up under... better circumstances,” Arthur forced a smile that didn’t meet his eyes as, with one last vitriolic look at the coffin, he stumbled out of the church.

I stared at my brother’s back as he left.

Seeing him had confirmed that I’d left at the right time—Marcus *was* a raging inferno; that the longer you spent around him, the worse you got burned.

The next Mayflower I met was Kieran, in a meeting arranged by Arthur a week after the funeral.

We met for coffee.

We didn’t get coffee.

We ordered two Diet Cokes as a silent *Fuck You* to Marcus, who had refused to keep any of that ‘artificially sweetened shit’ in the house, as if beer was better for you.

Kieran leaned back in his chair. “You did good getting out,” he said, pushing dark brown hair out of his startlingly blue eyes. He’d always had a film-star look to him, and now, nearing adulthood, he wouldn’t have looked out of place in Hollywood. “Marcus got worse after you left.”

“How?” I asked, sipping at my Coke.

“He started getting drunk most nights instead of just some nights. Insults became threats. He searched our rooms for money and grounded us without reason, if he thought we were hiding anything...”

“I’m sorry,” I said. The unspoken hung between us; he would have had to look after Arthur and Maisie even more after I left, given that I was the second oldest.

“Don’t be.”

“What are you all doing now, now that he’s gone?”

Kieran shrugged. “I’ve applied to a few modelling agencies, Maisie and Arthur have gotten full-time work at Reeva’s restaurant—Jade’s friend, remember her? Her triplets have just left for university, and she’s put us up since none of us can bear to stay in the old house. I’m sure you’d be welcome, too.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

He smiled at me, and behind him, illuminated by the sunbeams beating down on us, I swear I saw the outline of wings.

Freedom, I thought, and smiled back.

First- and second-degree burns hurt like hell. But third-degree burns go so

deep that they obliterate the nerves themselves. You see the white, charred flesh and the scorched muscles and bone, but you feel nothing, and that's the scariest part.

Maisie had suffered third-degree emotional burns from Marcus. Even after he died, there was a hollow space in her heart. Fear of him caused her to bury her feelings so deeply that she couldn't find them again, and by the time anyone else realized, it was almost too late.

I was standing next to her hospital bed when the doctor told us.

"Overdose," he said, eyes darting between me, Arthur, and Kieran.

"We should've seen the signs." Arthur grimaced. Guilt rolled off him in waves, and I couldn't pretend I didn't feel the same. Memories of Maisie and I telling ghost stories in hushed voices under the covers of our shared bedroom were bittersweet as I wondered if I could have done more.

If I could have been the older sister she needed.

"Hey, the only one to blame is Marcus," said Kieran, pinning both of us down with a stern look. "Don't blame yourselves. When Maisie wakes up, we'll work out how to be a proper family. It's not our fault that Marcus never taught us that."

A proper family.

Maybe one day, I'll know what that feels like.

I turn the burning water off and step out of the shower. The mirror is opaque with mist, and as I rub my hair dry, I inspect the products sitting next to the sink. Bleach, rubber gloves and a hairbrush full of coarse blonde curls. They're Reeve's, who's hair is such a sickly shade of blonde that it could blind a newborn. Not that I want to speak ill of her, since she's the reason the Mayflower siblings are together again once more. After what had happened to Maisie, she had let me move in. Us Mayflowers needed each other, and she had seen that.

Voices from the kitchen warm me like a flame in my chest. Not a raging, uncontrollable fire that singes everything it touches, but the bright, tender flames of a fireplace on Christmas morning. I dress and head through. Maisie has just accidentally added milk to Kieran's tea even though he's always liked it black, and the two are bickering by the table, matching grins on both their faces. Arthur is standing by the radio and flicking between stations. Rap blasts through the room, and all three of us shout at him: "Change!"

Laughter bubbles in my throat. Pure, unadulterated joy.

When the smoke clears and the fires die... this is what family feels like.



Clotting Agent
- Janina Aza Karpinska

You Once Asked Me How Long It Took Us to Fully Inhale

Evgeniya Dineva

You always dreamt of blue in vowels and hums
in prayer that later spilled in fear.
You always dreamt in exhales but never in complete words.

Sometimes stillness wipes away the stench of blood and salt,
of knees scratched on rocky paths.
Of dust settled in your throat.
You always dreamt in intersections
of that invisible line where the freezing, wide opening gapes at you.
It's where the shore ends and the drowning begins.
Ruggero has a word for it. *Calapertura* is sinking to the bottom
holding your breath until you open up and your lungs are flooded.
He says that's when you move.
That's when you come into contact with something alive.
Sylvia Plath lied to us. You don't shut the world when you close your eyes.
It's always there.
But every time you come back to the surface everything's blue for a while
before it goes back to normal.

Cornerman



Ben Fowlkes

Everybody knows that if you're working a guy's corner
and he comes back after a round weeping blood from some fresh
jagged smile in his forehead the thing you tell him is: it's just a scratch.

And if he just spent the last five minutes getting whacked like an old rug
you tell him hey you just took that man's best shot and look at you
still here.

In the event that he tells you his hand is broken you remind him that god
gave him two and if he says he can't see you tell him to shut up don't say that
don't ever say that just give it a goddamn minute.

And if he thinks he tore his groin you remind him
that no one
not a single wandering soul on the entire lost and abandoned earth
wants to hear that right now.

These aren't lies. No one would call them that.
Some things you say in one moment as a bridge

to the next. Because the next moment is a place none of us
has ever been and so who could say what waits for us there?

Here's some water. Swish it and spit. Then take the mouthpiece
tasting of plastic and coppery fear and fit it back onto your wobbling teeth.

Nothing has been decided yet. Do you hear me?
We've slowed the bleeding with Q-tips wrapped in adrenaline
and we've halted the flood waters of doubt with the stubbornness
of our shared and ancient faith.

Now get up. Go forth.
No one said you had to be
the only one to suffer here tonight.

Show Me Your Skeleton!



Clay Waters

That was it: the entire text of the meme. Four words plus an exclamation point. And yes, it was *my* meme, I suppose. One of those magic shower ideas that come when you're not thinking of anything. I dug up that screenshot of the girl with the crazy eyes and toothy grin, then pasted my text (yes, that was my text) over it. Nothing brilliant, just a reminder of the trivial fact that teeth are the only part of the skeleton visible on a human, unless something goes wrong.

Boy did it ever.

But before that it had to evolve, like memes do. Someone used my line over a reel of herself aggressively picking at loose skin under her feet, the kind you get after swimming. (The feet guys arrived on the scene quickly, Tarantino references in tow.) Then some rando took a picture of his own cuticles, the kind anxious people pick at until they get inflamed, also using the line. My line.

It kept mutating, getting less ironic and more extreme, solidifying over several business days into a pattern of compulsive peeling. Now it's three weeks later and it's just me, Typhoid Tyler (that's what they called me online, had to look up the reference), the lone uninfected soul. Now I'm driving my peeled neighbor's old-model Subaru down a pitch black highway, alone in a quiet wasteland of peeled skin. Most everyone is either gone or leaking away behind closed doors, and no rational explanation will be coming.

It was an odd way, really, for everything to end. Even as the contagion moved from online to the real world there were no mass mobs, no hysterical bleeding in the streets. The peeling itself was private, quiet, save for the skinstacks.

The peeling (don't call it cutting, please) spread speedily, breaking down any self-control barriers people, in their arrogance, had assumed they possessed. Everyone with hands could play, and even those unfortunates without them improvised. My personal favorite line was "When you think about it, aren't we all just one long hangnail?"

There was a boy/A very strange, enchanted boy

I had copied Renata's Nat King Cole playlist for the drive. When I have the music on I can forget the horrors on my phone. Outside my windshield, the

world appears almost normal, or at least COVID-era normal, especially at night. I keep the windows rolled up so the silence can't reach me, and to avoid the faint but unmistakable iron tang of blood in the air, and the—ah, skip it.

A little shy and sad of eye/But very wise was he

I'd like to think that I am the "Nature Boy," in the song, nudging people along to a better way of living. If I could succumb too, join the horde, then it means it was all meant to be. I wouldn't be a Satan but a Moses who makes it to the promised land, though Renata convinced me on one of her streams that the Satan of the Bible wasn't such a bad guy. Otherwise, there's nothing I can do to even things out.

I hit a billion followers, which is some monkey's paw shit. All presumably gone now, save the bots. Two weeks of the most crazed postings, too many to ever read in one normal lifetime. Before the internet became a nightmare, I read (with wretched urgency), about the orbitofrontal cortex (above your eyeballs, it's where OCD lives) and skin layers, looking for an escape hatch: epidermis, dermis, hypodermis, muscle, bone. Skin is thickest at the bottom of the feet and the palms of the hands. Women have thicker skin. Could have fooled me!

(Philosophical question: If there are no women around, is the joke still sexist?)

When the needle hits E, I stop at a gas station. It blazes with wasted light, like it's lonesome and trying to entice the humans out. The thought makes me sad, so I stop thinking it.

I take a piss, keeping my gloves on. I try to think how wonderful it will feel to take them off when I see Renata again.

The shelves are still stocked, so I grab a bottle of wine, an expensive one. Surprisingly, there had been no inclination toward looting during the peeling, just people buying out every variety of cutting tool, from fingernail scissors to potato peelers to hacksaws. On Day 4, I skulked around my local Wal-Mart's checkout area, blessedly unrecognized in a hoodie, while people stood in line to pay (credit cards, naughty naughty), chatting excitedly about different techniques, speculating about the great things to come after being released from their dirty, itchy, unclean skin.

I tried to work up an itch by rolling in the dirt, but it was no good. I tried to peel, but my red, inflamed cuticles left me nothing but nausea, and a need for ice and Vaseline. For now, I'm still a cursed skinful, lacking the necessary compulsion. Maybe seeing Renata will tip me over. Then I can put my special item to use. That's my plan, anyway.

But first, a little rest in the backseat.

It's not suicide. People don't kill themselves with such enthusiasm. There

were no death notes, no manifestos, no heavy speeches. People just got to it. Eagerly, sensually, too hurriedly, acquiring false confidence after shearing the first layer of dead skin before taking a fatally deep angle, joining the millions before them that had bled out in anti-climactic silence on livestreams long before approaching the goal: to show everyone your skeleton (yeah, that's on me). It's a fool's errand: no one can come close.

My backseat dreams are blessedly tame (they know they can't compete), and an hour and a half later I'm back on the road, pleased that my phone has fully charged while I slept. I'm on the homestretch, twenty-three miles away from what I am reasonably sure is Renata's house.

When I get closer to the city, the lights come back on. My GPS indicates I'm due to pass one of the skinstacks that had cropped up in the big cities. Such group efforts were unusual and perversely heartening. A slight detour takes me down a residential street; my headlights starkly illuminate the former playground, now housing a silent hill of flesh, piled tall as the adjacent jungle gym, ringed with bodies.

I don't think about the kids. The kids are the reason I keep the windows rolled up—not to block out the silence, but to silence the occasional sounds. I don't think I could bear to hear them again.

The skinstack is both smaller and scarier up close, and I hit the gas to overshoot the creepiness.

Nearly there.

Renata never responded to my messages, had blocked me in fact, but I was able to triangulate her residence by both verbal and visual clues: a mention of a nearby 7-11, a background street sign from a selfie stroll. Renata's stream ran out of battery six days ago, but I can imagine what I will find.

The door to the little house is locked, but there's no one to stop me breaking a window with a sidewalk brick, avoiding the glass while climbing in. Wouldn't want to cut myself.

(Psychological question: Is that even a joke?)

The house is dark but the lights still work.

There she is, right where I last saw her, on the purple sofa, her favorite posting spot. Her Ring camera stands dead on its tripod beside her.

Renata is spread across the sofa in two parts. A heap of herself sits uncoiled, piled neatly next to the main part of her exsanguinated body. The sofa bears a darker shade of purple where the blood has pooled and dried. Her unskinned face is serene, like a statue. The smell of the little den has not quite tipped over to rotten.

Renata had managed to liberate several feet of skin from her left hand, mostly shreds but a few longer pieces too—an admirable job, if not quite stellar. Her right hand, which had done the cutting work, remains unscarred, instead boasting flesh-caked fingernails. Two sets of scissors, one small, one

larger, lie unsheathed on the end table, caked with old blood.

Renata's hair has lost the curl she was so proud of; her pink bow hanging limp and loose. I sit down at the opposite end of the sofa. Just two old friends, hanging out.

Then I look at her all over again. She looks like that because of me. Something wells up and makes me want to start heaving tears and never stop.

It's not suicide!

I close my eyes until I calm down a little. When I open them again, something has changed.

Maybe my eyes don't adjust to the light properly at first, because I realize now Renata had actually done it, had succeeded where everyone else had failed. I can see her skeleton!

I strip off the gloves, letting my palms breathe again. Your skin is alive, you know; it's the largest organ of the body. Raising my hands to my face, I'm pleased to see my nails have retained the vampire sharpness I've been cultivating. For a while I just sit there with Renata's cold hand in mine, careful not to cut her with my nails.

At last I unsheath my own scabbard—well, a \$20 straight razor, a sleeker version of the thing barbers used to wield in Western movies. But I will start out the proper way, using my own fingernails first.

I dig into the cuticle of the middle finger of my right hand with the index fingernail of my left. At first, it hurts the way a paper cut hurts, annoying, but I keep digging until it isn't just annoying anymore. I'm piercing live skin, scraping the detritus out of my fingernail as I go. I'm merciless. No way out but through. The work is surprisingly exhausting. Between sessions I take deep breaths and watch my blood spilling out. It's calming.

My index fingernail dulls, so I switch to my middle finger, then the ring. When both hands are worn down I move to the razor (it isn't cheating), a swap which quickly rewards me with long thin strips of three, even four feet of translucent skin. Soon I have a rhythm and I'm peeling like I was born to do it, shedding the rot of the world.

Cutting is harm. Peeling is destiny.

Then in a breathy voice, familiar but richer face-to-face, Renata startles me by saying *Tyler, show me your skeleton!*

I do not look up. I keep working. I have something to prove.

the greatest thing you'll ever learn/is just to love and be loved in return

The pain is ongoing but my aim is true.

Then suddenly I am gliding my blade like scissors through Christmas wrapping.

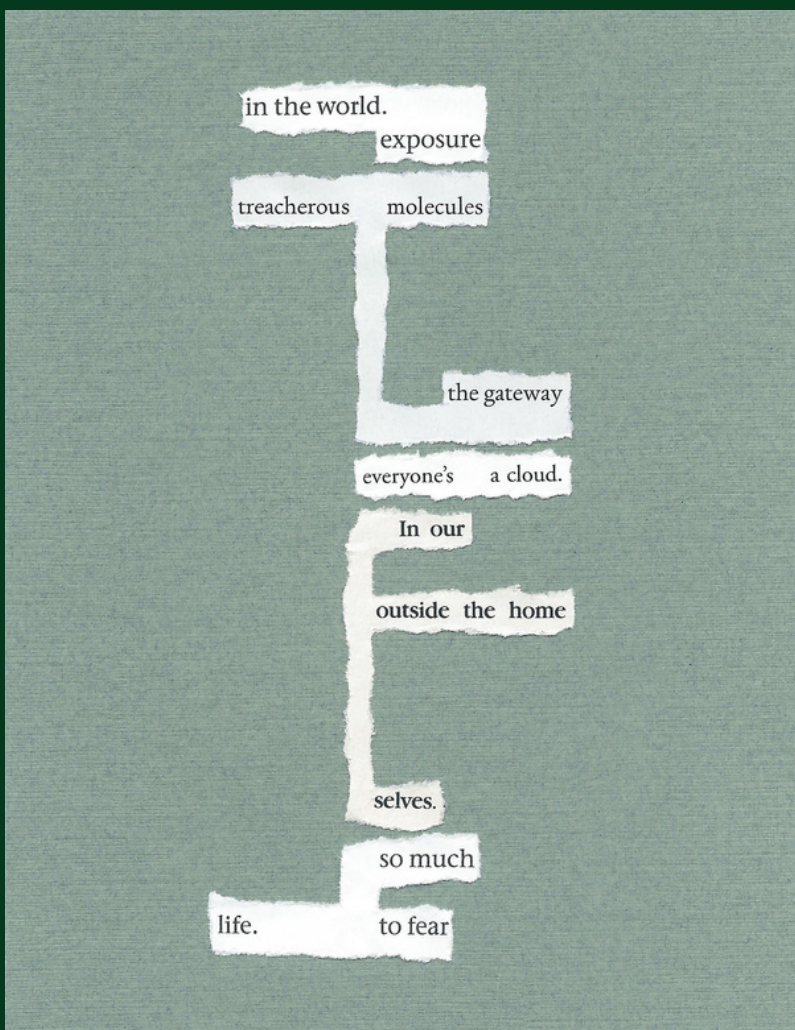
I am unwrapping. Somehow I am the final gift. To everyone, but Renata

most of all. I look up and she repeats: *Show me your skeleton, Tyler!* A little impatient now.

Did her teeth move on her skeletal face? No. Why would they? Say that sentence in a mirror and see for yourself. Trust me, it's possible.

My world is narrowing to blade and skin, but I will push through and come out clean, the guilt will melt away forever in the boundless glory of...

Renata, can you see me? Can you see my skeleton?



in the world
- J. I Kleinberg

Storm Chasing



Hoya Dolling

And I know
Butterflies with
Big blue eyes, yet it
With wings only of paper,
Delicate to a fault
And I always wanted to catch
One in a net,
But my arms faltered before
I could
And so
I laid my heart
On the stone

I was wrong, but
Only one day to fly
Seems like not enough time,
But can power the gale
To fly me to you—
Feelings
For you;
I could tell you I was scared
Not.
The tornado flew past—
To rest
Not in your arms

the gingkos of Hiroshima



Lucinda Trew

six survived
just six

muttsu – the counting
word for nothingness

yet there was something
before

before the nothing
a day a tree a city

before the day eclipsed
to black

before the city turned
to ash

before trees were sheared
of shelter

six survived
just six, stripped

of the veil of gold leaf fans
six bore witness

seizon – the being
word for existence

CONTRIBUTORS

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