

Figwort Literary Journal

Volume 3



September 2023

Lea Storry

Sophia Lucia

Patricia Bingham

Patty Somlo

Mary-Rose Abraham

Dr. Favour Okechi

Ethan Liaw

Megan Wildhood

Nova Warner

Indigo Chong

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## Editor's Note

*Hazel Lockey*

In this volume, the work of ten marvellous artists and authors delves into seas and skies, and the world waiting in between.

You may find yourself planted in Lea Storry's ravenous bog or liberated by the horizon-bound canoes of 'Black Gold'. Perhaps you'll beat your wings in Ethan Liaw's 'Icarus', only to become ensnared within the birdcage of Megan Wildhood's 'Flight'. You will be privy to Patricia Bingham's most unusual wardrobe and you will finally peer into Indigo Chong's blood-soaked performance space.

Whether you end up following a trail of sentient rocks, the bend of a river going out to sea, or the unpredictable flightpath of an astronaut, I hope you will find something at once utterly grounding and surprisingly soaring in Volume 3 of *Figwort Literary Journal*.

*September 2023*

# Devoured

*Lea Storry*

Stuck.

Up to its four knees in mud. Every time it pulls at a leg, it's sucked deeper into the pit.

The unicorn's body quivers as it sinks into the ravenous bog. The horn disappearing last.

It's almost like the animal never existed.

## Running in Circles

*Sophia Lucia*

I had never seen a perfect circle until grandpa's nickel coated silver dollar. He kept it in the centre of his palm, which had sunk in from the pressure like a tired couch. I never wanted to touch it. I barely wanted to look at it. It left a green tint in the middle of the hand, perfectly shaped, perfectly gnawed. I don't recall him ever applying any sort of ointment on it but I always thought Cortisone might help. Or not. Birthmarks are sometimes invited guests.

Grandpa grimaced most of the time. He was also tender, at times.

I have never found myself sleepier than the day grandpa asked me for a favour and I said of course grandpa and he said take this dollar and hold it for me and I said how long and then he handed it to me. I went home and I did everything I meant to do (the laundry, putting away dry dishes, matching black socks to the right black socks, setting things down and then forgetting where I set them, et al.) but somehow it all took double the time and before I knew it, I was passed out on the bathroom floor. The heater is located directly below it and makes the floor a gateway drug to fanciful dreams. I keep a notebook with me whenever catnapping in the lavatory.

The way I see it all is this:

There was a beach and rocks and crawfish and catfish and the sun and lawn chairs with fat pale roundies oozing in their summer strings and wetted brows. They smelled of meat. But I digress. The rocks. The rocks wanted desperately to be the fine, silky seduction that was the sand beneath blankets and between toes. How omniscient, thought rock. How everywhere it could all be. Here I am, a lump. Not even smoothed edges, not close enough to mother tidying her bed. I am a fucking lump, thought rock. Tell me how to be the beach. I don't want to be atop. I want to be grains galore. Patience, said sand grains. We'll be brothers yet, just a couple million more years.

My palm developed an incessant itch that could not be itched. The itch was a powerful force, and I wanted to talk to it and tell it to lay off. But one cannot reckon with an itch. So I reconciled instead. I'd keep my ill-fated arm behind my back and pretend we were strangers, and I was merely empathising. Empathising like the dickens. But alas this was my shaking hand and I met an awful lot of people in my life and to offer the other hand to shake may as well just be saying not to meet me at all.

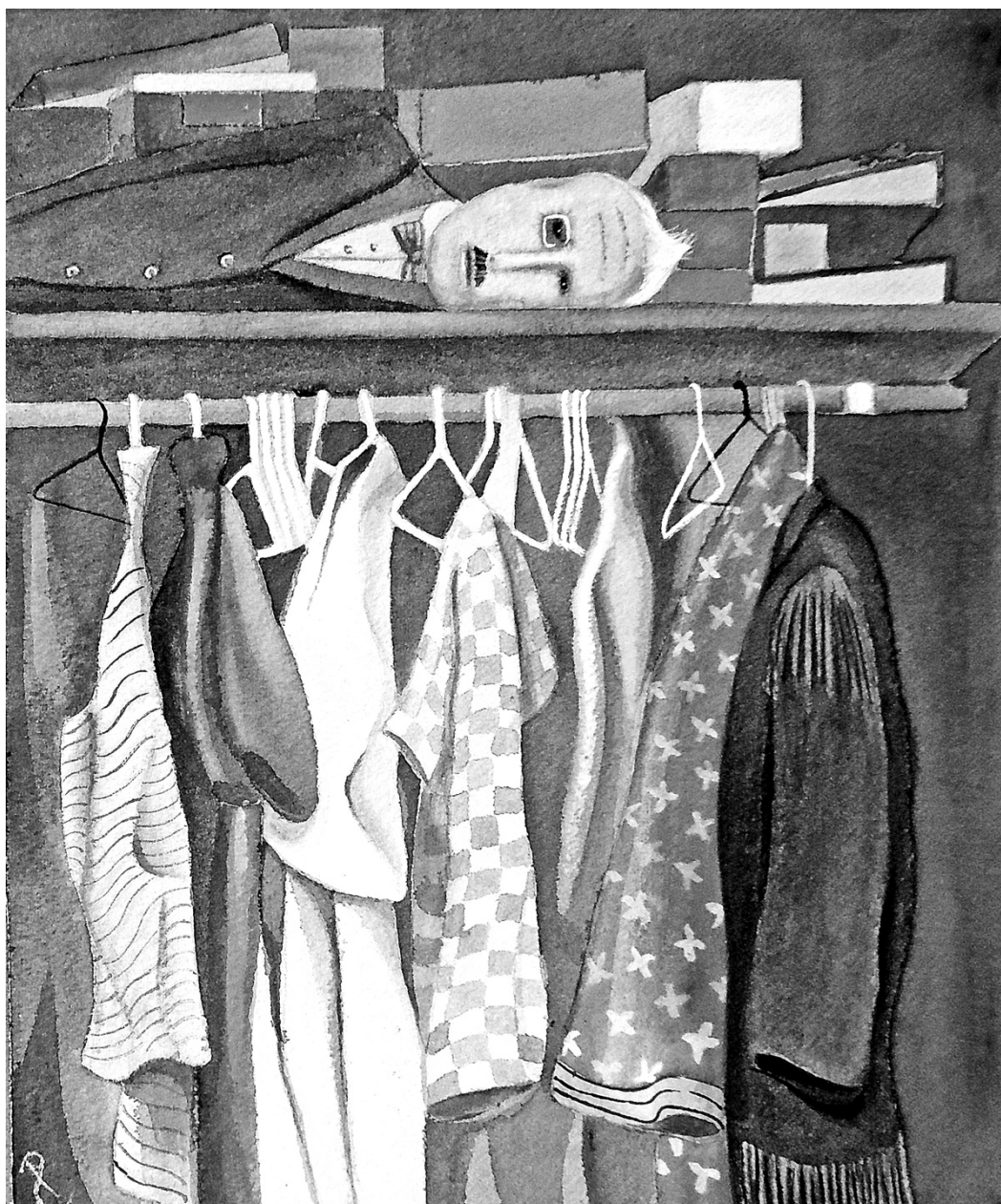
Grandpa told me not to do anything he wouldn't do. I said really, Paw Paw? Grandpa didn't do much of anything at all. I was so young and full of ideas and wonder. I wanted to learn to dance salsa and eat butter cookies and stay up so late I didn't have my wits about me for the next day. I wanted to see Guinea-Bissau and Mount Vesuvius before I died. I wanted a gym membership.

So I went and sat next to Paw Paw on the couch and shouted **YOU CALL THAT A SPIN and JUST SOLVE IT, YOU GREEDY ASSHOLE** at the TV when *Wheel of Fortune* came on. I ate dry chicken and a mush that was once a carrot and I took all sorts of different coloured pills that reminded me of the candies that did not go unmissed after supper. I combed through proverbial wiry whiskers with untrimmed yellowing nails, ragged at the rims. I fell asleep sitting up and let drool slither down my side. I let Maw Maw change my clothes and put me to bed. I did not say thank you.

I cheated one day. I looked at the nickel coated silver dollar and I said, why? Silver is golden and would feel like a million dollars. Nickel is a cheap bitch and I'm sick of accompanying myself with all this green eye shadow and emerald medallions. I found a quarter behind my dresser and I began to scrape, like a lottery ticket. Looking for an upgrade, a simple pleasure. But it was to no avail. The nickel had fallen asleep on the bed, and now this was its home. Round and round, I will take care of this child. How heavy responsibility can hang. I never even wanted a dog.

## Someone is Sleeping in My Closet

*Patricia Bingham*



## No Mistaking the Loss

*Patty Somlo*

You meet a guy on a blazing blue-sky day in San Francisco, of all places, where it's more often foggy. You've been down this road countless times before. The first stop is attraction, like a shot of tequila, you think, though you've never touched the stuff.

Decades later, the road has taken you far. You've considered turning back at times, or even getting out of the car. Yet you kept on, even when the route was uncertain.

You look back. The view is open and wide. Not a breath of wind stirs the leaves and there's not a single cloud in the sky. You wonder, since he is gone, where the road will take you now.

\*

We don't like to talk about death. The subject is unpleasant, best kept in a dark corner of the closet, with jeans you hope will one day fit again but probably won't. Next to death, we shove serious illness, since it's only a few degrees shy of that eternal darkness.

I used to dream repeatedly of walking across a bridge stretched low over a misty, murky river or lake. As I moved to the centre of the span, hands reached up from the water to grab me. I don't recall if they ever succeeded in dragging me down. It's not hard to wonder if that was death I kept managing to elude as a child.

\*

When I was single, I didn't know how it felt to be loved. In those days, I could drop in and out of people's lives, and they in and out of mine. Of course, I suffered when a relationship I'd wanted to last ended. The tears were brief, before I started looking for a new diversion, and remain unscathed and free.

The love of my life happened late, when children were almost impossible, though I didn't want children anyway. My husband Richard and I were complete, a family of two, which month after month, year after year, became more like one.



I knew that, and yet I didn't. We were separate beings, different in so many particulars. He was the oldest of three boys. I was the youngest of three girls. Though we were only five years apart, Richard had come of age in a different era. He still loved what I called *Fifties Food*—meatloaf and mashed potatoes, chicken deeply fried, everything bad for the heart. I hated those dishes, even when I was young.

We seeped into each other's beings in ways I'm not sure I can describe. Never the least bit practical, I gradually stocked up on Kleenex and toilet paper to make sure we would never, even after an earthquake, run out. Though Richard had a fear of flying, he nevertheless agreed to board planes again and again, to accompany me on vacations to British Columbia, Washington and Hawaii.

For almost three decades, I feared he would leave me. The first man in my life, my father, did just that, for long and short stretches of time. He was a career Air Force officer. When I think back to my early childhood, I picture him in his olive-green flight jacket, out on the flightline.

I have racked my brain without luck for hours trying to recall a time when my father and I had a conversation about me and my life. I haven't been able to dredge up a single one.

\*

You meet a man on a heartbreakingly beautiful day in San Francisco, the city you love. It's a blind date. When you reminisce, you can't quite believe you gambled like that, meeting a man you'd only spoken to once on the phone. You placed all your chips on his number and ended up winning the jackpot.

An afternoon that began with lunch on a deck overlooking San Francisco Bay, with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge, turned into a lifetime of shared meals. You started each day asking if he'd had any dreams, since his leaving you behind while he slept was one of the few times the two of you were apart. Later when he became ill, the first thing you wanted to know in the morning was how he felt.

\*

I have read a long list of ways people act when they are grieving and must confess to nearly every one. As I did for decades, I sit on the bed and talk to Richard each morning, though I no longer expect a response. I don't wish to make him feel

guilty for dying, but I let him know how much I miss his living presence in my life. I imagine my tears each day cause him to well up too.

\*

Not long ago, I didn't know which was which. Widow or widower? Male or female? Who would I be if Richard died? I've now seen my name on official letters from financial institutions and the government, and somewhere in the correspondence I find my new label: widow.

For the longest time after Richard and I married, I couldn't get used to the idea that I was someone's wife. Neither did I completely believe I had a husband.

Every morning, I wake up and remind myself that Richard is gone. I don't, though, tell myself I have become a widow.

\*

You can't remove a great love from your heart, even if that person has died. For days after his passing, I thought Richard might still be alive. The last year, he'd been cold much of the time, a side effect of his treatment. I worried about him at the funeral home, fearing he might be freezing. His wishes were to be cremated, and that, I learned, takes time, and even a government permit.

I picked up the death certificate and read it over several times. There was no mistaking the loss now. The words were there on a pale green and tan sheet, officially certified.

\*

No one prepares you for death, neither your own nor that of a loved one. It's astonishing really that for something so momentous, we are left to figure it out alone.

I was warned by the hospice nurse that I would be better off leaving the room when the two men from the funeral home carried my husband out of the house. She forgot, however, to advise me of something else. If I wanted to keep the clothes he had on, we needed to remove them and slip him into one of the gowns she kept for that purpose in her car.

A few weeks before Richard died, I ordered him a pair of cute flannel pyjamas online. He never wore the top, as I assumed he wouldn't, but stayed snug in the bottoms the entire last week of his life.

The memory of my greatest love is seared in my mind: his legs bent, hands curled, eyes closed, as he sailed into the last moments of his life. Those pjs, crimson and turquoise on his far too thin legs, add a brightness to the picture I will keep with me for the rest of my life.

Lights in the funeral home were appropriately dimmed as the director led me through a bottomless stack of forms. I signed and initialled, here and here and there, as if instead of agreeing to the final treatment of my husband's body, I was purchasing a new home.

When the last of the forms was signed and the director handed me my copies in a white embossed folder, I asked, 'May I have the pyjamas back that my husband was wearing when he died?'

The director gave me a look that suggested I'd said something wrong.

'We don't normally do that,' he crisply replied.

Fighting back tears, I explained how much those flannel pjs meant to me, because Richard had worn them in his last days.

The director stood up and said he'd see what he could do. I felt like a misbehaving child about to be carted off to the principal's office and punished.

A few minutes later, the man walked back into the room. Without a word, he handed me a see-through plastic bag.

\*

After Richard died, I told the other members of my caregiver support group that I was going to be one of those old ladies who every day has a long conversation with her dead spouse. I said this not in shame, but as a fact. When I ponder what I miss most about my husband, I find it's our wonderful talks, which grew more meaningful the closer he was to death.

Richard wanted to live. For four and a half years, through treatments that made his bones ache, robbed him of his appetite, messed with his digestion, stripped him of hair, and eventually numbed his hands and feet and stole his ability to hear, my husband hoped his life would go on, exactly as he'd assumed before the stage four cancer. Even when the treatment failed, he held on to the hope that like a practiced magician, his oncologist would pull another trick out of her hat to save him. As any person would, Richard feared what might happen

when he died, both for himself and me. I tried assuring him that everything would be all right, sharing my belief that after death, he would float into a place where pain was no longer welcome.

I feared what might happen when Richard reached the end of the road.

From the moment we met, I loved his easy ability to change. Year after year, he remained open to new ideas, thoughts and plans. He would always hear me out when I suggested a better way. Being his caregiver for four and a half years, thrust into the untenable roles of doctor, nurse, dietician, therapist and friend, I advised him on everything from what to eat to which questions to ask his oncologist. And he trusted me.

I tried to prepare him for what was coming next.

I shake my head, realising how unnecessary my efforts turned out to be. As Richard's pain increased, and his energy and strength diminished, he didn't need me to tell him where he was headed. In the end, he didn't mind.

A life well-lived, I learned from my beloved husband, can bring about a good death. I grieve the loss of too much to say. But the sorrow is tempered by relief. Richard and I did not waste a moment of the beautiful life we shared. And that life was made more precious with the days we spent together preparing for its end.

## Black Gold

Mary-Rose Abraham

*‘The Muziris papyrus provides unique details about the trade between Roman Egypt and India ... Muziris was a port in the Malabar region of southwest India (Kerala), which Periplus of the Red Sea, from the mid-1st-century CE, says was visited by large ships from Egypt to acquire pepper and malabathrum ... and also pearls, ivory, silk, nard, and gemstones.’ – Oxford Classical Dictionary*

\*

‘You will go to the port tomorrow.’

The tall man pointed at Velli. He did not know her name. His voice made her look up. Her hand still clutched the vine, fingers poised to remove the peppercorns strung like rows of beads.

Velli was surprised; she had never made this trip. It was always the other young girls who picked much faster than she did. Perhaps they were all going together. She hoped so. Velli did not want to go far on her own.

The man walked away. Velli’s hands traced the coils of the vine as it wrapped around the tree. She picked it clean of its jewelled fruits, some red, others still a raw green. A taller girl picked the next section.

Velli’s mother woke her early the next morning. It was still dark outside. Stars twinkled through gaps in the treetops surrounding their hut. Her mother lit a fire and stirred porridge. Velli warmed her hands around the steaming bowl. She tipped the lumpy mass into her mouth, ignoring how it burned her tongue, and felt its heat travel down her throat.

A chill breeze blew outside. Velli and her mother walked in silence, holding their thin wraps tight around their arms. No path had been cleared, so they stepped over exposed roots and crowded saplings. The chorus of frogs and songs of birds would not begin for a few hours.

They emerged into a clearing lit by torches. Bullock carts lined the pebbled road that curved down the hill. Men heaved sacks into the nearest carts. Rough coir string secured the sacks but they still emitted the sharp aroma of pepper. Somewhere in these lumpy bags were the peppercorns Velli had picked, now dried and sorted and bound for a long journey from these mountains to the port.

A group of girls clustered near a cart. Velli squeezed her mother's hand and then ran towards her friends. They smiled but did not speak. The only sound was the soft thudding of sacks.

The girls climbed into a half-loaded cart. The driver laid a light crop on the stocky bulls. They started forward, last in the caravan. The workers remaining behind snuffed out the torches. The bulls' pearl-coloured horns curved high above their nodding heads and glowed in the semi-dark. Velli yawned and lay her head on a sack. The steady rhythm of the cart soon put her to sleep.

\*

Light pulsed against her eyelids. The sun suffused everything in brightness, heating the dampness that settled on the wild grass by the roadside, the sacks of peppercorns, and her own skin. Velli felt tired, though she had been sleeping for hours. She looked at the mountains behind them. Her mother was there, and the cool, dry air she knew.

The other girls stirred as well. The caravan stopped near the riverbank. They were given a late breakfast. The driver of the cart scrambled down to the river and scooped from the gushing water. The girls drank from the half-shell of a coconut scraped clean and passed it around until all six of them had their fill.

They followed the river for the rest of the day. Later that night, she fell asleep to the sound of the current. When she woke, it was early morning and the cart had stopped. The caravan had arrived.

Women sat along the roadway, baskets full of fresh-caught seafood at their feet. They haggled with customers and wrapped glistening fish in banana leaves. A man shouldered a heavy coir bag and balanced another overhead, a coiled cloth cushioning his head. An awning of dried palm leaves shaded a pack of sleeping dogs.

Most surprising of all was the water. The river they followed had entranced Velli as it meandered past large boulders and weaved through clusters of huts. But here at the port, it had widened to ten times its size. Velli could barely see the other side of it. Even the trees opposite seemed as small as the splinters that sometimes lodged in her fingers while she worked. Men paddled long, wooden canoes in every direction.

Velli watched from the cart, until a worker told her to get down. The girls were divided into pairs. She held the other girl's hand tightly and they followed the worker to a row of brick warehouses. Velli stepped inside. Sacks were clustered

into piles. The air was pungent. Velli's nose tickled so much that she had to let go of her friend's hand so she could pinch her nostrils.

The worker untied one of the sacks and turned it toward the floor, showering peppercorns over a mat spread the length of the warehouse. He did the same with sacks from different piles.

Two men walked toward the mat. The ship's captain had a light tan glossing over skin as pale as bull horns. Velli had never seen anyone like this before. But it was the merchant, nearly as dark-complexioned as Velli, who transfixed her. Threads of gold formed intricate patterns along the folds of cotton cloth draped around him. Gold hoops hung from his earlobes, and matching necklaces looped from throat to chest. The jewels on his rings flashed as he gestured toward the mat. Every peppercorn she had picked, every sack carried from the mountains, the entirety of the caravan, this was all his.

The merchant crouched down and grabbed a fistful of peppercorns. He ran them through his pale fingers and smelled them. He pinched them until they became powder-like and tasted them. Then he tossed the rest back onto the pile and nodded to the captain with a satisfied smile. Both men walked out the door. Before Velli could look after them, a worker shoved her towards the mat.

'You girls! Every one of these has to go back into the sacks. We cannot lose a single one!'

The girls scrambled about the room on hands and knees. They searched after peppercorns which had rolled into corners and crevices, under sacks. Velli's hands were full.

\*

Afterwards, while the workers were busy tying up the sacks, Velli's friend stopped to watch the fish sellers. Velli walked toward the wharf. She saw the two men preparing to board a boat. She hid herself behind a pile of sacks and watched.

They climbed into the canoe and sat on planks facing each other. The light shifted. Velli saw that she had missed a peppercorn. It was nestling in a curl of the merchant's thick black hair. She giggled. It had probably bounced away from the rest and landed softly without the man realising.

The rowers steadied the boat with their oars. The merchant nodded and they pushed away. Velli watched the canoe glide into the river. The workers on the wharf propped themselves up against the sacks.

‘His biggest shipment yet! So many weeks on the *Hermapollon*, all the way to the land of the Yavana.’

He turned to the other. ‘What is the place called?’

‘The ship is going to Berenike. But master will go on to Alexandria.’

‘Ah, yes. What a treasure the master will get. Truly, our pepper is black gold. When he comes back, he will be dripping with even more jewels!’

They laughed and waited for the next boat. By nightfall, all the sacks had to be transported to the ship anchored out at sea.

Velli watched as the men in the canoe receded. She thought about the peppercorn in the merchant’s hair. Would it make it to the ship? Or would it fall into the water? As she wondered, the rowers steered the boat through the current, and soon the merchant appeared as small to Velli as the errant peppercorn.



## Mirror

*Dr. Favour Okechi*

You will wake up one morning, like you've done on all the mornings before it. You will stretch and attempt one hundred pushups, and stop at seventy-nine, as you do every morning. You will look out your window and stare, unseeing, at the world beneath, as you do every morning. You will then go into the bathroom, as you do every morning. Work waits for no one, after all, and unlike most of us schmucks, you're paid by the hour, so your time is money.

You don't usually give in to hysterics, but your scream will wake your partner, who works nights and doesn't like to greet the sun. You will attempt to explain the fact that there are protrusions of keratin growing out of your head, and your irises have turned the colour of Fanta orange. Your partner will look at you with ill-concealed irritation and warn you to stop disturbing his night rest. Your heart will race, and your palms will get wet. And you will look down to discover your sweat is blue.

You will attempt to go through the day as normal, with a humongous baseball cap, gloves and photochromic lenses. You will ask your coworkers how their weekends went, and receive the same bland, mundane answers that you got the weekend before, and the weekend before it. You will stare unyielding into their faces, examining their eyes for hitherto unseen signs of wariness, of furtiveness, of unwelcome alertness. You will find nothing you've not seen before, and your heart will begin doing the Dakar Rally against your lungs and ribcage.

You will eat fufu and okro soup at your favourite roadside bukka, and you will marvel at the fact that your comfort meal still tastes the same. You will look at your tongue in the reflection of the water bowl and find it slim, purple and forked. You will gnaw the fish that comes with the soup and not find any perplexing desire to munch on the bones. You will attempt to walk away from the establishment, and find yourself floating on a canvas of air. You will look down, and see two feet of empty space between your new hooves and the steaming tarmac below.

You will see the eyes of the doorman twinkle and glaze over when you return post lunch. His viscera will stand out clearly to you like a photograph, and you'll see that the cigarettes have turned his lungs to tar. You will look at your manager in the office, he with the happy family of wife and four children, most now domiciled in the UK for secondary school, and you will see past his creased linen trousers to the black, worn boxers. You will close your eyes, but the walls of your office will close in on you until you reopen them.

You will hear, over the evening breeze, a crow accusing its mate of losing one of their chicks. You will be privy to a sibilant but raucous cacophony of a nest of snakes planning their attacks on a family of rats in the rubbish dump at the end of the street. You will stretch out your hand and the chair in your office will move back by six and a half centimetres, with no one else in the room.

You will end the day in the psych ward of the local hospital, the consultant psychiatrist having convinced you to spend the night and tell him more and more stories, while placing you on drugs with names that you obviously cannot pronounce. You will drift off to sleep, and you will wake, heart pounding, in your own bed, grateful for the end of the kind of nightmare no one bargains for.

Until you get up to wash your face, and you look in the mirror.

# Icarus

*Ethan Liaw*



## Flight

*Megan Wildhood*

When my friend I've known since high school became homeless, I took her birds in. I offered about a hundred times to take her in, too, but she turned me down. At first, it seemed weird—she'd taken the money me and my folks had given her, no problem, but she wouldn't take a room. After some thought, I realised I'd probably have responded the same way. I hefted the vintage cage into my spare bedroom I'd been trying to rent out for a year, the seven parakeets screeching their little heads off. Turns out, they didn't actually settle down when it got dark—or for the ensuing four months.

My brother asked about the tweeting in the background on our weekly meeting about our aging parents. Things weren't checking out, but then again, I'd known her thirty-five years and my memory's never been great. When I tried to explain the situation to him, he thought something was weird, too. He was quick to put the kibosh on help from both me and Dad, who'd been giving her what I thought was just a few hundred bucks here and there at my request.

Molting from Tweety, Tweenkles, and the others framed a perfect rectangle on the carpet. I'd moved the cage to the floor over a month ago to wipe down the desk in the room getting it ready to show. The guy never came to see it and two weeks passed before I tried to remember the last time I'd fed the birds. They didn't look any thinner when I rushed in to feed them, but their tweets seemed angrier. *Sounds about right*, I thought as I frantically scooped seed into their bowl. During the brief quiet while the poor buggers gorged themselves, my shoulders relaxed for the first time since they arrived.

The day she came to collect the birds, she didn't have time to talk. I didn't tell her that my brother had stopped me from seeing my parents because I'd been involved in her swindling them out of more than just a couple hundred bucks here and there. I just let her stand in my warm living room while I threw the bird things together.

I waited until her engine faded before I turned from my ivy-clung window to finally vacuum the room. I'd waited months for *this* moment to clean things up. I victoriously plugged in my old vacuum, and started at the south side. Just as I finished sucking up the small mountain range of feathers and God knows what else, the bag exploded, flinging thunderclouds of dust and little knives of orange, blue, green and white to the four corners of the room.

I yanked the plug out by the cord, slugged the damn machine as if on the shoulder and walked out. *Looks about right*, I shrugged as I turned away from the room before closing the door, finally releasing that phony smile.

## In the Yellow Ocean

*Nova Warner*

Two hours behind the till repeating the same lines in a voice that chipped away at my brain.

‘Next, please!’

‘Would you like a bag?’

The thought of saving some energy by playing a recording of my voice was initially tempting, but doing even less at work would only make my shift drag on longer. Only four more hours to go—a relatively short one. It could’ve been worse, all things considered.

The customers provided some entertainment at least. Most notably, one man with a yellow stain on his jacket spent the entire transaction on his phone saying ‘No, pistachio’.

Some customers had the gift of mundane annoyance. A woman struggling to decide between two nearly identical chocolates by weighing them in her hands with care deserving of holy relics. Or the retail cowboys, sauntering up to the till only to, at the last second, mosey on down the alcohol aisle. If they switched out the tracksuits and baseball caps for assless chaps and cowboy hats they could’ve stepped straight out of a Western.

Then there were the friendly ones who’d have a bit of banter with you. They did make my day better—even if they were generally unremarkable and quickly forgotten about.

Yet as I stood there, a third of the way into a six-hour shift, an unusual customer caught my attention: they only had one eye.

A living Cyclops.

Its pale-yellow iris consumed the entire front of its face while the back and sides were a milky white. Its body was resplendent in international orange.

No one else seemed to notice the creature. The customer whose change I had just returned shuffled away with their toilet roll, while the next had casually placed five family-sized crisp packets on the counter. As I scanned each one, the sound of the Cyclops’ heavy boots filled the shop, oscillating back and forth as it supposedly searched for whatever mythical item had stolen it from its Mediterranean paradise. Perhaps a thunderbolt to be gifted to a deserving deity, or a club fit to fight with?

A giddy smile leaked onto my face as the possibilities raced through my mind. The differing tales of the Cyclops I’d read about during an overenthusiastic

mythology phase had long since melded together, but I still had a general idea of the creature. In my excitement at the appearance of the Cyclops, I welcomed a customer with enthusiasm for the first time that day: a university student with eyebags as large as her hooped earrings. While she showed me her driver's licence for the vodka she was buying, I was distracted by a loud grunt from the aisle.

The Cyclops had found its treasure.

Moments later, I saw it appear behind the next customer queuing for the till. I tried to stay patient and managed to finish the transaction, but I was trembling with anticipation throughout at the prospect of meeting the creature. When the customer finally vacated the counter, I looked to the Cyclops in expectation. With the chance to see it more clearly, its visor angled towards me, I realised I'd been wrong. It hadn't been a Cyclops, but an astronaut. A space wanderer. One who reached for the stars.

I knew much less about astronauts.

'Next, please!'

And its treasure, not to be brought back to the Mediterranean, but to the moon?

An energy drink.

Clumsily, I went through the necessary motions, observing its orange suit as I did so. Patches of various hues and designs dotted the front, but it was the garish orange that held me.

I peered inside its yellow visor, and made out the face of a terrible creature.

'Would you like a bag?' I heard myself asking.

Its skin, tinged yellow with red blotches, looked as though it would melt if I held a candle up to it. Its eyes popped out of its face, like a frog, and its arms were twig-like, unnaturally long. I imagined it ripping through its suit and strangling my neck in a vice.

What a piteous thing, wallowing in joylessness, peering through a yellow visor: a wandering traveller of the cosmos, currently making a layby in Peterlee, County Durham.

After I'd waited for a reply, and none came, I wished it a good day. Then I added: 'And safe travels.'

The astronaut muffled what I assumed was a word of thanks before snatching its energy drink off the counter and leaving. Outside, I saw another clunky white astronaut join it. Their rocket must have been close by.

I looked up at the clock.

the devil is a bunch of small things that live inside you.

*Indigo Chong*

## I

### I. Psalm of Letters.

Listen to me  
 if I were to write a letter  
 and send it to the moon  
 on a rocket made of lice  
 in a body made of blood  
 and flesh  
 and bone  
 I would tell the man on the moon  
 to jump to Mars  
 the blood-rust red planet  
 maybe then  
 he'd catch a fish in a sea of dust  
 and feast.

My body is made to move in ungodly ways.  
 My body is made to move in ungodly ways.  
 My body is made to move in ungodly ways.

If I were to write a poem  
 My mouth would spit it out  
 into a sea of syllables.  
 A worm in the blood is worth two rats in the gullet.  
 Are you listening?  
 This is the story of a letter I wish I wrote  
 to the man on the moon.  
 And if I scream it loud enough  
 I hope he might hear my cries.



## II. Psalm of Frogs and Women.

*The stage is on fire. A pillar of salt stands in the middle, untouched.*

Gomorraah too  
burned that day  
that it rained frogs and fire on the city of women.

I was a traveller.  
I came from another city.  
In search of the city of women.  
But all I found was fire.  
And frogs.

I was a traveller.  
So I stopped at the pillar of salt.  
And waited for water to spill forth.  
Because every traveller knows.  
That when it rains fire.  
And frogs.  
Pillars of salt cry pure tears to wash the land clean.  
I was a traveller.  
I heard there was a house.  
Where I could become a woman.  
But holy fire.  
Left nothing but ashes.  
And frogs.  
Nothing but ashes and frogs are left to the traveller.  
Thus is the justice of the Lord.

*Water begins to pour from the pillar.*

I was a traveller.  
And I broke my fists.  
Pounding the earth.  
Hoping.  
Praying.  
That anyone had survived the onslaught.  
To no avail.

### III. Psalm of Blood.

*A worm lays in the centre of a stage that is a man that is a body.*

My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.

And if a worm

a worm!

If a worm were to find itself in  
 the heart of a man  
 that is first a body  
 the man may protest

a worm!

My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.

But the worm  
 would not notice him  
 how could it  
 he is not in its world.

My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.  
 My world is blood-rust red.

The man would wretch  
 he would ache  
 he would scream

a worm!

But the worm would not hear him  
 it would simply writhe  
 as is right for a worm

a worm!

My world is blood-rust red.

To be a worm is to be a body  
 that is not a man  
 to be a man is to be a body

that is not a worm  
and is not not a worm  
for to be a man is to be  
a body  
and to be a body is to be  
a worm

a worm!

#### IV. Psalm of the Astronaut.

*An astronaut floats in the middle of the stage. Her breathing is laboured.*

In and

out and

in

and out

and out

and out

and out

If you breathe out enough you vanish, you just up and disappear. I was twelve when I first vanished. I breathed out and out and out until I turned to breath and sent myself out into the wind. Into the world. Into the world become wind become breath. I was a traveller then, I had heard there was a city of women, with a house that could turn you into one of them but when I got there, I was met with only smoke and ashes.

Thus is the justice of the Lord.

So I breathed out and out and out and out and I vanished. I was always one for vanishing, I always waited and wished to disappear, I always faded and I liked to fade. I would pray to the man in the moon that if he was fishing he could pull me up by my dreams and take me to space. I was twelve when I vanished again, not three years later, I breathed out and out and out and I vanished because I liked to fade and I wished it would go by quicker.

Now I am fading and I am scared.

I am scared that I breathed out too much and too fast, that I turned myself to breath before I was ready, that I travelled before I was grown that I saw fire and frogs at the gate of great Gomorrah before God was finished. I am scared because the man in the moon never answered the letter I failed to send. I told myself I would mail it to him by next Christmas but when his hook lowered to the ground I chickened out. I was twelve then, it had been six years since I last vanished. I was a good girl. I clothed myself in the wreckage of the city and I was a good girl for a moment and I was proud of who I had become and I thought I didn't need to vanish anymore. But whenever I breathed out I could feel myself fade. Even when I held my breath tight inside like a little balloon there was a leak eventually. There's always a leak eventually, and I continued to fade, slowly but surely.

I am almost gone and I am so scared. I was twelve when they shot me into space. I was small enough that I could fit in the gut of the spaceship without

worry, without upsetting its stomach. I worked my way up, until I sat like a worm in its heart, my world a blood-rust red. I was no longer breathing out, I was holding my breath but then—

Take-off.

The force took the air out of my lungs. I started to vanish because that was all I knew how to do, and I was good at it and we do the things we are good at. I faded until I slipped out of the heart of the spaceship and into the void. And stars. I looked around for the man in the moon with his great fish-hook but he was no-where to be found. So I tried to get back to the spaceship but it had left me far behind, on its mission, and I was here all alone floating in the void. And stars. I can feel myself breathe, in and out, but my lungs are not what they once were, I was a smoker for twelve years and my lungs have all but withered away. But I am still here.

And I am still breathing.

Scared. But breathing.

## V. Psalm of Anguish.

*The stage is covered in water, blood-rust red. Two women stand, mopping it up furiously.*

A WOMAN

We've got to hurry.

ANOTHER WOMAN

We need to make haste.

A WOMAN

We must speed up.

ANOTHER WOMAN

The both of us need to expedite things.

A WOMAN

We've got to hurry.

ANOTHER WOMAN

We need to make haste.

A WOMAN

We must speed up.

ANOTHER WOMAN

The both of us need to expedite things.

A WOMAN

We've got to hurry.

ANOTHER WOMAN

We need to make haste.

A WOMAN

We must speed up.

ANOTHER WOMAN

The both of us need to expedite things.

*They continue this until the stage is clean. The women drop to the ground, exhausted. A single drop of water, blood-rust red falls from the sky to the middle of the stage. They wail.*

**VI. Psalm of Deliverance.**

A fish-hook is naked without a worm.

I am naked without my pretences.

I am a man when I love a man

and a woman when I love a woman.

I am an empty pit in the bottom of my own stomach.

I ache for them to fill me up.

Up up up, till I can't take it anymore, and I burst.

Exhale.

And vanish into the air, into breath.

Up to the moon.

All heaven for the fallen angels.

All heaven for the fallen angels.

All heaven for the fallen angels.

**End of Act I.**

## II

### I. Psalm of Grief.

The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.

*The stars begin to weep.*

The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
The astronaut has died and the man in the moon has vanished.  
I know this now.



## II. Psalm of Worship.

I never searched for Sodom.

Is that bad?

I felt I couldn't.

No words wasted on Gomorrah.

I'm sorry.

I knew I couldn't.

No words

wasted on Gomorrah.

NO

WORDS

WASTED

ON

Gomorrah, the sister city.

I longed for her air in my lungs, I ached for  
a taste of her breath.

No  
words

wasted on Gomorrah.

No words wasted  
on Gomorrah.

No  
no  
no  
no

I wished I could breathe out for a thousand years.

I wished I could slay the setting sun I

wished I could stop the turning of gears I wished

I could write a word that would last forever I wished I

could sing a song to an angel I wished I could

I wished I could.

No words wasted on

Gomorrah.

### III. Psalm of Dying.

*Two fishmongers sit, smoking.*

A FISHMONGER

I heard she burst to pieces. Like a balloon.

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

No, that's not right, she melted into the void. An ice cube.

A FISHMONGER

How about that.

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

I saw her too, you know.

A FISHMONGER

She was too far away to see, liar.

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

Nope, saw her go, clear as day.

A FISHMONGER

Bullshit.

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

Way up there, in the sky.

A FISHMONGER

I heard the man in the moon tried to save her.

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

Didn't budge.

A FISHMONGER

An inch?

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

Not an inch.

A FISHMONGER

How about that.

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

At least I'll remember her.

A FISHMONGER

For a day.

ANOTHER FISHMONGER

Better than we'll get.

A FISHMONGER

How about that.

*They put out their cigarettes and exit. A star goes out.*

#### **IV. Psalm of Healing.**

Break a vase and feel it shatter in your palm.

Gouge out your eyes and let them see the back of your head.

There is infinity out there.

Beyond our words.

Maybe she's out there.

Maybe she's reappeared.

A traveller on the road to Gomorrah.

To become a woman.

A worm in the heart.

Writhing as is her wont.

An astronaut among the stars.

A child.

Vanishing in the cold.

Clothed in the ashes of the fallen city.

She writes her letter.

To the man in the moon.

And stuffs it in a garbage can.

He looks down and he cries.

A single blood-rust red tear.

**V. Psalm of Ending.**

*Two women stand centre stage, mops in hand. They clean the performance space. The stars go out.*

**End of Play.**

## About the Authors

**Lea Storry** has the best name for a writer. She runs a writing business and lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She can throw a Frisbee and fly a plane but not at the same time. Connect with her via Goodreads or ourfamilylines.ca.

**Sophia Lucia** is an experimental musician, performer, and writer. She is based out of Chicago & Paris. She makes conversational and surrealistic Punk-Cabaret/Rock & Roll/Alternative Americana music. She writes and produces a one-woman show titled, 'Freak Show Cabaret!' which is a variety show including (but not limited to) theatre, poetry, burlesque, performance art, improvisation, and original music.

INSTAGRAM – @freakshowcabaret

SPOTIFY / YOUTUBE / ITUNES / SOUNDCLOUD / ETC – Sophia Lucia

**Patty Somlo**'s most recent book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, was published by Cherry Castle Publishing, a Black-owned press committed to literary activism. *Hairway* was a Finalist in the American Fiction Awards and Best Book Awards. Two of Somlo's previous books, *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), were Finalists in several book contests. Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Gravel*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Under the Sun*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and *The Nassau Review*, among others, and in over 30 anthologies. She received Honourable Mention for Fiction in the Women's National Book Association Contest, was a Finalist in the Parks and Points Essay Contest and in the J.F. Powers Short Fiction Contest, had an essay selected as Notable for Best American Essays, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times, as well as to Best of the Net.

**Mary-Rose Abraham** is a multimedia journalist and recent creative writer (*HeartWood Literary Magazine*). Her work can be found at <https://maryroseabraham.com/>.

**Nova Warner** (she/her) is a recent graduate in the midst of a faltering job search. She has previously been published in *Indie Bites*, *Syncopation Literary Journal*, *From the Lighthouse* and *The Drabble*. Outside of writing she enjoys photography and

collecting books. She can be found on Twitter and Instagram @novawarner01. Astronauts live in her head.

**Dr. Favour Okechi** is a young Nigerian Optometrist, poet, short story writer and published author of a poetry and story collection called *Pitakwa Boy*. He enjoys reading, and reading, and even more reading.

**Megan Wildhood** is a writer, editor and writing coach who helps her readers feel seen in her monthly newsletter, poetry chapbook *Long Division* (Finishing Line Press, 2017), her full-length poetry collection *Bowed As If Laden With Snow* (Cornerstone Press, May 2023) as well as *Mad in America*, *The Sun* and elsewhere. You can learn more about her writing, working with her and her mental-health and research newsletter at [meganwildhood.com](http://meganwildhood.com).

**Indigo Chong** (they/she) is a scholar and playwright currently based out of Hawaii. Her work focuses on Postdramatic theatre, Critical Black Studies, and French feminist philosophy. Shoot her an email at [chongindigo@gmail.com](mailto:chongindigo@gmail.com), or read her Substack, [antiauthentic.substack.com](http://antiauthentic.substack.com).

## About the Artists

**Patricia Bingham** lives in Idaho. She is mainly self-taught; a questionable teacher, but a determined student. She works in many media to include photography, collage, assemblage, and painting for she loves to experiment. Her pictures spring from dreams and mingled thoughts, much like written stories, but told in the more ambiguous language of images.

**Ethan Liaw** is a Taiwanese-American student based in Texas. He is an avid writer and photographer and enjoys using the arts to explore and better himself. He is very passionate about literature and can often be found with his head in a book.