

The Seraphic Review

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Caleb Edmondson

Savoring this Moment

It's Sunday evening, so we fish cigarette butts from a Solo cup
to decide who will die first, the shorter going second.

It's better to plan these things, so that when the day comes, the music is
good, the bar is open, and our caskets make everyone happy, inside and
out.

You say we need to switch things up, so we paint the kitchen red and
hang buckets of tickseed around the patio. You put on some records.

Sinatra and Holiday tell us about love, how not to love,
how to be in love. We don't say that

we're thinking about inevitability, but we are.

Later, we take edibles and watch Miyazaki movies. Ponyo turns into a
human and we wonder if we could ever turn into vampires. You say
you're too fond of garlic.

I have to agree.

Have we ever planted bulbs out in the garden?
Buried their little heads? Once I heard that when we're dead

and buried

>>>

we live for another 80 years—second lifetime under soil,
guided into whatever's next
by worms and rot and prayers and moss.

Am I allowed to say I already miss us?

The lamplight catches your eye like honey,
so go ahead and linger a little while in the doorway.
We'd be fools not to savor this.

Overheard Somewhere in a Late 2000s Little Town

A lion's roar of vacuum suction
tugging up years of dust and carpeted string.

Radio programs telling everyone Michael Jackson died.

Zipper. Zipper sliding from corner to corner
of a CD case full of Metallica mixes and AC/DC live performances.

Calls of ghosts in graveyards.

Ghosts calling from graveyards, trying to convince the kids
to stop filling water bottles with Wild Turkey
and raspberry Svedka stolen from parents' liquor shelves.

Yelling, always so much yelling after 2008.
Talks of loans, and loans going unpaid, talks
of divorce, cheap lawyers, cheap life insurance.

Words with Friends notifications
ringing from the family computer.

Facebook messages telling us that grandpa died.

Prayers echoing over wooden stairs, carrying lifetimes
of wishes and wonders.

>>>

Something about forgiveness,
something about muffled pillow screams,
something about longing for returns to reruns
of Saturday cartoons,
something about toasters popping
with their promise of Eggos, chocolate chips,
whipped cream and butter.

Caleb Edmondson is a writer from Akron, OH. He is currently working toward his MFA at BGSU, and works as an editor for the Mid-American Review.

Vei

Metamorphosis

Humming fan whispers
Hypnotizing ward I'm in
Pale infirmity.
Moribund state, I recall the end
Leads to metamorphosis.

Vei, a hobbyist poet and a part-time actor, discovered the transformative power that poetry has as a means to soothe the soul. What began out of curiosity, quickly turned into a personal journey for therapeutic expression. He has become enamoured with the art form.

Matthew Donovan

Bathwater

The glass shattering scream
of advanced weaponry wielded
at possible terrorists is heard

mostly through tiny fingers
covering innocent ears.
They lie on what passes

for a bed in an enclave for
the dispossessed. Young ones
cringe in fear of calculated

lightning; enforced eradication.
They're thirsty and disoriented,
with no time to process

the shock of walls coming
undone. They're nothing but
a dwindling mass of shivering

numbness, enduring the very
terror their assailers claim
to be defeating.

Matthew Donovan is a retired, professional firefighter currently working for a Local Government. He was born and raised in the Bronx, and lives in Connecticut with his wife Stephanie and their daughters. His poetry has been published in Permafrost, BarBar, Southern Quill, Fine Lines, Eunoia, and others.

Aigerim Bibol

Pink Lines

TW: implied sexual assault

I stare at the pregnancy test in my hand.

The two pink lines are stark against the white background. For a moment, time seems to freeze as I stand there, holding the tiny plastic stick that carries the weight of an entire future. A future I never anticipated, never planned for.

My hands tremble as the weight of those two lines sinks in like an anchor dragging me into uncharted waters. I briefly contemplate the possibility of leaving Alabama, of seeking refuge in a neighboring state where the laws might offer a sliver of hope. The thought is fleeting. My parents would never approve of an abortion, and I have neither the means nor the courage to escape my hometown, the only place I've ever known.

All of a sudden, the bathroom starts to spin and the walls are closing in around me and I can't *breathe*, I can't breathe. The pregnancy test clatters against the tile as images flood my mind, fragments of memories I try and fail to suppress. The roughness of his hands, pinning me down. The nauseating scent of his cologne, piercing through my nostrils. The metallic taste of blood as I bite my tongue, mingling with the salty tears spilling down my face. He doesn't stop. He doesn't stop. I stagger and retch into the toilet.

My parents are still when I tell them. The tension in the room is tangible—it feels as though time itself is holding its breath. >>>

My mother's voice cuts through the silence like a knife. "How could you let this happen?"

I wasn't strong enough to fight him off. "I'm sorry, Mom."

My father's expression hardens, his disappointment palpable. "Lily, you've put us in an impossible situation. We raised you better than this."

I didn't want to. I never wanted any of this. I stare at the floor, stifling the scream that threatens to escape my throat.

"You know," my mother says, biting her lip. "We could consider giving it up." "No," my father says sharply. "What would everyone think? She made a choice, and she must face the consequences. Besides, every soul is worth saving."

But what about me, father? Who will save me?

My body betrays me further with every passing day—countless mornings spent hunched over the toilet, nights spent tossing and turning in an attempt to find a comfortable position. The days blur together into a never-ending cycle of nausea and fatigue, a relentless reminder of the life growing within me. I crave pickles and peanut butter, mashed potatoes and mayonnaise, bizarre combinations of foods that would make my stomach churn under normal circumstances. Each shift in my body's rhythm feels like a tightening chain, binding me to my fate. I am a prisoner within my own skin.

I finally summon my courage and drag myself to an obstetrician's office. The receptionist glances at me, her eyes full of judgment or maybe pity—I can't quite tell. As I approach the desk, she smiles professionally. "Do you have an appointment?"

I nod, my voice barely above a whisper. "Lily. Um, Lily Thompson."

She makes a note. "You are seventeen years old?"

"Yes." I hold my breath as she frowns. >>>

“Is there anyone here with you?”

I shake my head. Thankfully, she doesn't push any further. After confirming my details, she hands me a clipboard with a stack of forms. “Please fill these out. The doctor will see you shortly.”

I find an empty seat, clutching a pen tightly in my fist. The waiting room is filled with a collective anticipation, expectant mothers engaged in animated conversations about due dates, nursery plans, baby names. They exchange smiles and knowing glances, their nervous excitement forming an unspoken connection. Something tightens in my stomach.

A nurse calls my name, and I follow her to the examination room. A middle-aged woman with a warm demeanor enters.

“Hello, Lily. I'm Dr. Stevens. How are you feeling today?”

“Uh, not great,” I admit.

She reassures me with a comforting smile. “That's entirely normal. Pregnancy can be overwhelming, but we're here to help you. First things first, let's go through your medical history.”

I answer her questions mechanically, not meeting her eyes. Dr. Stevens purses her lips when I tell her my age. I can feel her gaze, studying me more than the paperwork. She explains the required screenings and tests, schedules my next appointment, and asks if I have any questions.

I hesitate. “Is there... is there any way to, you know, end it? Like, use a pill or get an exception or anything?”

Dr. Stevens sighs, her expression sympathetic. “I'm so sorry, Lily. The laws here don't provide many options. I wish there was more I could do.” My body is no longer my own.

As my due date approaches, the whispers around me grow louder.

>>>

News spreads like wildfire in a small town like this, and everyone knows everyone's business. I catch snippets of conversations, the typical gossip that usually fades into the background. Except now, I'm the talk of the school.

"I heard Lily Thompson got knocked up by a senior."

"It's probably true. I mean, look at her."

They crane their necks to catch a glimpse of my stomach.

"I heard she doesn't even know who the father is," a girl whispers.

"Maybe it's the devil's child," someone else mutters.

I grit my teeth and keep walking.

It starts as a pain in my lower back. I shift in my chair uncomfortably, drumming my pencil on the desk as I try to focus on my calculus homework. A sudden, visceral jolt of pain clenches my abdomen, and any thought of derivatives and integrals are instantly forgotten.

The ride to the hospital is excruciating. Each bump and turn sends waves of pain through my body, and I grip the seat until my knuckles turn white. The world outside the car window is a blur, streetlights and passing buildings merging into a hazy backdrop. I can barely hear the radio over the pounding in my head.

The sharp scent of antiseptic pierces my nostrils as I stagger into the hospital, struggling to catch my breath. I gasp out my name and information at the front desk, and am promptly whisked away to the delivery room by a nurse with a stern expression.

I find myself staring at the ceiling of the dimly lit room, wincing at each contraction. The nurse moves with practiced efficiency, her eyes avoiding mine as though my presence is a stain on her sanitized world.

"I don't want to do this," I whisper.

The nurse gives me a tight-lipped smile. "Just relax, hon. You should be grateful—I know women who would do anything to be in your position. This child is a blessing." >>>

I open my mouth to retort, before being seized by a particularly excruciating contraction. They're beginning to grow closer together, each wave of pain crashing into the next. The nurse lifts the thin sheet covering my legs and nods.

"You're ready to start pushing."

Two agonizing hours later, it's all over. Exhaustion claims me, and I lie still as the doctors bustle around me. The child, my *son*, is placed in my trembling arms. As I hold him against my chest, dread washes over me like a suffocating tide.

The child begins to wail.

Aigerim Bibol is a high school senior and poet from the DC area. A Genre Managing Editor for Polyphony Lit, she has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, The Pulitzer Center, and Roanoke Review, among others. Her work is published in Diamond Gazette, The Stirling Review, Pen&Quill, and more. When she's not reading or writing, she can be found singing along to Taylor Swift, binge-watching Gilmore Girls, and drinking copious amounts of coffee.

Sameen Shakya

The Truth of the Matter is

If truth be told, my favorite
Poetry has always been
Half-thought words strangers mutter
That my ears happen to catch.

And truth be told, I forget
Those words as soon as they're heard,
But for an instant I'm part
Of some another's story

Which truth be told, I so love.
It reminds me that life is
A tapestry never solved.
Never to be solved, that is.

But truth be told, that instance
I feel closer to the thread
At the center of it all.
And is that not poetry?

A Mercy/Amor Sea

Closure requires swiftness
Yet we clung beyond the edge of love
Like shipwrecked sailors floating adrift
That sea called desire. And sometimes I
Would drown you to breathe. And then you me.
Sometimes we simply swayed.

Sameen Shakya's poems have been published in Alternate Route, Cosmic Daffodil, Hearth and Coffin, Roi Faineant and Thin Veil Press, to name a few. Born and raised in Kathmandu, Nepal, he moved to the USA in 2015 to pursue writing. He earned an Undergraduate Degree in Creative Writing from St Cloud State University and traveled the country for a couple of years to gain a more informal education. He returned to Kathmandu in 2022 and is currently based there.

Ranjiet

Death Rehearsal

The pedestal fan sucks in hot air
and throws dog days
on my face. I am
autumn's desiccated leaf

enveloped in heat
like unattended letter,
slow burning is my address.
Yellow in thinking
stiff but fragile,
touch me
and I will be
on your fingertips.

Dead ants are sticky notes
on my empty tea cup,
a reminder
this afternoon is too long.
Time tiptoes on
hot checkered floor,

>>>

Each hot spell makes
room sultrier.
The scorched walls seem

like desert's wallpaper.
The day is melting
on windowpanes.

I will be burnt alive in this heat,
I must prepare myself to pick up
my bones from ashes
and wash them in my sweat.
This emptiness, this fear
so unpretentious,
this excess unshackles you
from suffocation.

I cover myself with
a white bed-sheet,
a lizard falls on my feet
like a dead flower.

Another ride of
sinking.
I grip the frayed edges of the rug,
the wet threads smell
like burning of wet firewood.

In my city, every summer afternoon is
a death rehearsal.

Ranjiet writes poetry in English
and Hindi. His poems are
published in Hawaii Pacific
Review, Tint, Dialogue and
several other journals.

Changming Yuan

Khöömei

A deep double-
Throat, singing
From beyond
Heaven (or hell)
Echoing in nature
As it finds itself
 Heard in
A human space
Like a whale's call
 Perceivable
By its like
Even afar across
A whole continent

Yuan Changming edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Yuan. Credits include 15 chapbooks, 12 Pushcart nominations for poetry and 2 for fiction besides appearances in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17), BestNewPoemsOnline and 2079 other publications across 51 countries. Yuan began writing and publishing fiction in 2022.

Jim Meirose

Praying the Fishlist

Drake left his house on Alan Street. headed for the Post Office on Main, to get his monthly check. Passing the great oak at the end of his driveway, he ran his hand over the bark, knocking down many of the great black ants running around the trunk. If Drake had bothered to notice the ants, he'd find they seemed to be running in time with the sound of his neighbor, Harry the monk, yelling the fishlist in his backyard, into the distance behind.

Fivespot flounder!

Southern Pigfish!

Blacktail Grunt—

As Drake walked further from the house, Harry's voice faded away, but he could still imagine Harry out in his back yard like he did every day, the great book of fishes open in his arms, his brown robes flapping in the breeze about him and his lips writhing around the fishnames pouring from him.

Priestfish!

Slime Sole!

Gummy shark—

And Drake could still feel Nola's steel-black eyes boring into him, from where she sat on her front porch on the other side of Drake's house, staring at him as he came out his front door and went down his steps to begin his walk downtown. Nola was Drake's ex-wife, and, unfortunately, lived right next door to him. Nola; with her spiky black hair, and eyes like shiny coals set into her face, went perfectly with the screaming of the monk from the house on the other side wrapping all around her; what a vision she was. >>>

That Nola!
Small-spined oreo!
Polar flounder!
Bastard—
Yellow drum!
Gilt sardine—

Once downtown, well out of range of the fish names, Drake went in the Post Office past the great concrete columns, stepped up to the wall of brass P.O. boxes, and obtained the long envelope containing his monthly check. Once out of the post office, he retraced his steps to the sound of the traffic passing by on Main, returning to Alan Street. As home approached, once more, in the distance, he could hear Harry the monk still shouting out fishlist in a strong voice.

Smoothback flounder!
Western crayfish!
West african ilisha—

As Drake returned to the front porch of his own three story frame house, he made it a point to not look at Nola staring at him. Head down, he walked through her hard dark look and went into his house. Rising stiffly, Nola went into hers. And in the back yard on the other side, the Monk closed the great book and went into his back door, having taken the fishlist far enough for today; however far far enough might be.

It was all done in time with Drake.
All for Drake.

When Drake sat having his breakfast at his chrome legged kitchen table, he knew Nola was staring from her side window next door, her hard look pounding against the outside wall of his house, striving to see him through the wall. Nola. What a name, Nola.

>>>

And as he spooned his cereal up into his mouth, he could once more hear the fishlist being shouted by Harry, being shouted as always toward the brook past the railroad tracks and the high tension towers marching across behind their yards.

Corvina brasileira!

U' a manpachi!

West atlantic forkbeard—

When Drake was a young single man he'd walk proudly with his head held high as he went about his business at the high-ceilinged gilt trimmed bank in a well-tailored manner, as well tailored as the crisp new dark suit he wore for this, his first job. He advanced rapidly up the ladder. Soon he was an assistant manager.

Impressive, said his manager.

Impressive.

Whiptail reef shark!

Western jackknife—

Drake went out onto his back porch and down his peeling loosely nailed together grey steps and Nola came out onto her back porch and turned her eyes on him, piercing him once more. Her look was like a hard wind you walked through that cut you to the bone. What she was thinking he couldn't imagine. They had not talked for years since the divorce. He just remembered she had a soft dusky voice that didn't match her stony eyes. And in the back yard on the other side, Harry stood in his flowing robes yelling out the fishlist with the great book open in his arms.

Fox shark!

Squirrel codling!

Thumbstall squid—

>>>

Drake forced his way through the wind of names and the heat of Nola's look and went out past his property line into the scrub brush field with the names and her look pounding against his back, and he passed under a great oak tree, heading for where the railroad tracks and high tension wires intersected, where the wires came slanting up from the power substation down behind Nola's house, where the radiation would be the greatest. All of how they acted was due to radiation, thought Drake. What else could it be? He'd read that living near high tension towers was unhealthy—and they had towers and a substation!

Colorado Langostino!

European spider crab!

False pilchard—

And Drake went over the tracks and under the wires and walked all the way through the indian grass down to the brook and pushed the cattails to the side and knelt by the water in the lush weeds and cupped his hands and brought water up from the brook and the water lay transparent in his hands. The lines in his palms came up magnified by the water and he followed the lines with his eyes. They said you could tell your future by these lines. Drake strove to see his future.

Goosefish!

Ladyfish!

Kumamota oyster—

Nola and Drake had one child long ago, grown now and moved off far away, and the sight of Nola holding the child in her arms melted Drake when she stood in the halflight in the early morning in the soft glow from the lace curtained bedroom windows and she reached for the child's bottle set on the round topped table by the crib. She gripped the bottle, lifted it—brought it to his lips—

Largetooth sawfish!

>>>

Drake woke as he so often did in his bed in the middle of the night, and the glowing hands of the clock hung in the dark said it was three a.m. but he still could hear Harry out in the dark shouting out the fishlist into the blackness slathered over the brook and the tracks and the towers and everything and he still could feel Nola's stare straining to pierce the wall of his house from where she sat wide awake by her window. Day and night she sat wide awake, in the peeling wooden window frame, staring, like an awful picture hung on the side of her house. And Drake pulled the covers up to his neck in the dark as the words from outside forced their way through the windowpanes.

Latin grunt!

Oil sardine!

Shorthead redhorse sucker—

Harry was on medication too, Drake knew. That's what kept him up day and night, that's what kept his glazed eyes open, and that's what was behind the fishlist. Harry picked up the book at a flea market months ago. Fishnames. Just fishnames.

Simple.

The child in the green shirt played hardball with the others in the street and when his turn at bat came up he had no problem handling himself, he drove a line drive double out past the pitcher's head, that was his best hit of the night, in the trampled down field where they played until you couldn't see the ball come through the air any more; it was just a blur in the muddy dusk drifting up coldly all around the children, telling them all to go home.

Drake brought his red lawn mower from his rusted steel back shed and started it with a single snap of the pullcord. Nola sat on the top step of her back porch, in her green plastic chair, watching, as always.

>>>

And of course there was the Monk screaming the fishlist but the fishlist was lost in the roar of the mower and Nola's look came up against the roar of the mower and the chug of the engine pushed her look back. This was why Drake liked to cut his lawn. He would lose himself in the sound of the engine blotting everything else out.

Sh—tno—sturgeo—

Whi—-l!

Humu—— el—-e—

The sound of the mower churned the air and Drake pushed the mower within a globe of innocent gasoline engine sound that moved along with him and the fishlist and the staring bounced harmlessly off of, and he was happy for a while, even with the sweat dripping from his armpits under his shirt and from the tip of his nose.

The next day Drake came out his front door and once more started off to the Post Office for his check. Since he had been unable to work any more the check was a godsend. Thankfully, he owned his house outright. Thankfully, Nola had not gotten it from him. Somehow magically, his steely-eyed lawyer had seen to that, though he'd lost everything else to her. As usual the monk screaming the fishlist faded off in the distance and then came up again as Drake walked home from the post office, check in hand. His feet raised dust on the filthy sidewalk that thickly coated his shoes.

Blackbanded rockcod!

Genuine dover sole!

Common sunfish—

The child stood in the dark paneled grammar school principal's office where he had been sent after school for misbehaving in class. He sat in a wooden chair and waited for the principal to arrive from wherever she was tending to whatever business.

>>>

His eye ran down over the tiny cracks covering the back of her leather chair and across the wall of books behind. As all children of grammar school age, Drake was naughty from time to time. When the time came for his punishment he just accepted it. It must be right and just, since it came from the sternfaced teacher and spidery skinny blackdressed principal who stalked about the school like a wraith. Outside, his mother waited in the station wagon, nervously looking at her watch, waiting to ask him what had happened this time, waiting to give him the what for—what did you do this time—what? What? And he wouldn't even know half the time. He wouldn't even know because the punishment had erased his memory of what he had done.

Drake went in the house and laid the check squarely on the edge of the kitchen table and got out a poppy seed bagel and sliced it and buttered it and ate it sitting in his chair across from where the check lay cozy in its envelope. Drake chewed slowly, bathed in the sounds flowing in from both sides—the fishlist droning on next door, and her look pounding against the siding of his house.

Giant owl limpet!

King snake eel!

Knopp's shark—

Drake bit off a piece of bagel and caressed it in his mouth. Damn that Harry, why is he out there doing that all the time, where does he get his money he's always out there screaming—he has no job he must be too sick to work too and Drake could hear Nola's hard look clatter against the shingles outside and drop to the ground with an ugly sound. Pieces of her look piled up there, but they'd evaporate by the time Drake went outside again. He'd always hear them, but he never had to see them, thank God.

Will you marry me, he had told Nola; told her, not asked her. Once, this had been his way with everything.

>>>

And they had been married in the tall stone church with the loud tower of bells down the street from where she lived and the dark faced priest had had a long name and they had gone to the reception in a spotless limousine and Drake had got drunk as he always did at weddings, as he always would at weddings, but he always handled himself well. He always handled himself properly. He was very proud of this. He'd been very proud of himself for a lot of reasons.

Yes, Nola said when he proposed. Her head tilted and her hard eyes pierced his and she said it again, as though he had asked her a question.

Yes, yes. I will marry you.

Drake went out again from his back yard toward the tracks. A long slow freight was rolling by and the ground shook under Drake and he stood in the solid steel din of the train and counted the cars until the train had passed and he bent and put a finger to the rail and the rail felt hot. The sound of the freight moved off with the train, exposing once more the torrent of fishnames from the yard behind.

Oceanic whitetip!

Opakapaka!

Smooth hound—

Drake bent his head low under the raining hail of names. They pounded against his back and pushed him across the tracks and under the wires and down to the brook. He knelt and got up another handful of water, and this time he drank. Though he was crouched down in the cattails he felt Nola's look riding the fishnames down to the brook from her porch far up the slope and lightly rustling the tall stems around him and crawling around his back under his shirt mixing with the sweat there in the dark.

Smelt!

European John Dory!

Atlantic torpedo—

>>>

The child stood in the blazing sun of the schoolyard, lined up with the others, the hot blacktop pressing the bottom of his tightly laced shoes. Sides were being chosen, for some game. And, as usual, he was chosen last, but it didn't bother him because he'd learned to put up with it. And in the springtime when the flowers would all bloom his allergies would redden his eyes and the tears would flow and in the lunch line they'd all make fun and say look, he's crying. Look, look, look—he's crying—

Ha ha ha ha ha he's crying—

Drake lay awake staring into the dark above the bed where the fishnames boiled mixing with the laughter.

Brown bullhead!

Ha ha ha—

Kelp bass!

Ha ha ha ha he's crying—

Rubberlip seaperch—

As the names and the tears fell all around him and evaporated against the floor and the bedclothes and he wondered how long would this go on, what was that monk after? He rolled over on his side and found that Nola's look from her window had heated the wall of the bedroom from the outside and made a reddish glow come through the wall, hanging there like two red eyes. And he pulled the covers up closer to his chin and pressed his eyes closed and gritted his teeth and willed himself toward sleep, as the monk went on shouting into the moon and starlight.

Rudderfish!

Smalleye hammerhead!

White eel—

One of these days, he would call the cops, thought Drake. One of these days. To shut Harry up. To put an end to it. This is ridiculous. There were laws about making noise far into the night like this. >>>

What's the emergency sir?

There's a crazy man shouting into the darkness out back—

In the high school the boy in the baggy cuffed slacks and loose shirt walked through the hall to his next class, his books hung heavy in his hands, his head hung low as it usually was, and then suddenly someone yelled Fight! Fight! and the boy's head snapped up and he stood in the circle around the fighters watching them rip each other's clothes to shreds and slap and punch each other, their faces red, their shirttails out, and their hair books pens and pencils flying through the sound of their feet scuffling across the floor.

Fight!

He himself never fought though.

Brown trout!

Fight!

But he liked a good fight.

Brook trout—

In the afternoon Drake came out on his back porch and sat on the top step and picked at the same splintered spot he always picked at and down the slope the slow trains went by, one by one, long, noisy freights pulled by two or three dirt- black engines and the greens and the reds and the browns and the yellows of the string of cars and the scrawl of the graffiti covering the sides of some of the cars and the heavy steel wheels slowly turning, turning, bringing crushing weight to bear on the rails. Drake loved watching the trains—and the screeching of the steel wheels on the rails drowned out the fishlist and somehow absorbed Nola's look and Drake could feel normal again for a while, sitting on his porch with his chin on his hands with the sunlight come down bathing him.

The next morning Drake went through the fishlist and Nola's gaze toward the Post Office.

>>>

True cod!
Greenfish!
Lajang scad—

It was once more the end of the month. But there was no check in the post office box that day, or the next—and then it got to be that the check was almost a week late, so Drake went to the window and asked the bronze-faced clerk about it. Someone behind the bank of post office boxes looked and found that there had been a mistake and his check had been put in the box next to his by accident. This gave him a scare. Someone else could have got his check, cashed it, used it— But it all turned out all right. He turned from the box, check in hand, hand on chest. It always turned out all right; it always ended up erasing all the worries.

Coming out the post office door between the great concrete columns, in high school Drake asked the chubbycheeked blonde girl at the long brown cafeteria table, Will you go out with me, and she said no, and her cheeks slightly blushed, and he said how about next week, and she said no, and her cheeks blushed more deeply, and he said how about the week after that, and she said no again, and her face had turned the color of sunburnt flesh and so he gave up, for fear of hurting her any further, and walked away with his hands thrust down into his pockets and never asked another girl out again. And then high school was over.

Drake had cereal in the morning. A bowl of raisin bran with milk and sugar, but it tasted like nothing to him and he felt sad because he used to like raisin bran and now it was as nothing to him. Little things like this were being robbed from him one by one.

Acoupa weakfish!
False butterfish!
Dark electric ray—

>>>

The names went on all through the raisin bran and her stare pounding on the wall grew louder and louder but Drake pretended he didn't hear any of it. He had learned to pretend a long time ago; in school, on the job; he had learned to pretend. No children yet, they had decided. No children for a number of years at least. Maybe we won't even have children. What a world in which to bring children—the war, the unrest, the strife, the economy—we won't have any. We won't. Besides we don't have enough money.

Money.

Once Drake thought he had had enough of the fishlist so he went up to the fence next to his house and put his hands on the fence and called out to the screaming monk. He wanted to ask what the list was all about. He was getting tired of living with something that he didn't know anything of what it was all about.

Harry! he called out.

Harry threw back his head and yelled louder.

Bass hogfish!

Niger corb!

Harry!

Harry gripped the book of names, his hands whiteknuckled.

Common herring—

Angry and frustrated, Drake pushed away from the fence and turned and returned Nola's look from where she sat across their yards. His look went against hers and the looks spattered off to either side and fell into the grass. He looked away and coughed lightly into his hand and went down beck again across the tracks and under the high tension towers and went to the brook and broke a punk off of a cattail and pulled it apart a while and then he knelt by the water and brought some water up with his hands and rubbed the water over his face, though he had no towel with which to dry. It seemed the right thing to do. His face had felt greasy. >>>

St. Peter's fish!
Halfmouthed sardine!
Red roughy—

The tiny baby lay in the crib with its thumb pressed firmly into its mouth and its eyes tightly closed. The mobile turned above the baby, the soft smooth music played. The mother beamed. She left the room but left the door ajar so she could hear the baby if it started to cry and she went downstairs and began to iron her husband's clothes.

Four a.m. this time—Drake woke and got up out of bed and pulled aside the window shade and tried to see the monk, but though it was too dark, the words rode the waves of dark washing over Drake.

Monkey rockfish!
False brill!
Jackass morwong—

Fishnames! There were so many fishnames! Drake let the windowshade fall back closed and turned to see the picture hung against the far wall rattling from the vibrations of Nola's look. And Drake got back into bed and pulled the pillow up over his ears and closed his eyes tight so as not to see the blinding light of her gaze from where it came through the wall as it was doing every night now. The walls of the room around him disappeared, he lay naked bathed in the look and the words and the darkness.

Slippery sole!
Her look burned on him.
Gummy shark!
Her eyes cut into him.
Striped mummichog—

The child went off to college. The parents sat alone in the big house. It was all quiet and still and the warm light poured in the windows in the winter but could not by itself warm the house, without the child there.

>>>

Once in a while the child slipped a coin into the pay phone in the dorm hall and they would talk across the miles and time separating them.

Shallowwater hake!

White and striped bass hybrid!

Noodlefish—

Drake walked along the tracks behind Nola's house. Nola's look tried to push him off the tracks but the straightness and strength of the rails kept him going and he walked the tracks to the electrical substation with its great grey transformers and its spiky black insulators and its tangle of wires leading up to the towers, and he remembered being told once that these things can explode if they get too hot. He felt the power coming through him from the substation and he thought again that it must be all this power, and these high tension wires, that are causing the fishlist and are causing Nola to just stare at him, even when she wasn't there her stare still pounded him, and he wished he lived somewhere where these things weren't there but he couldn't afford to move. So he just stood there feeling the power course through him the same way he imagined the power coursing through the monk and Nola must feel, before the heat began turning his gut to ice and he turned and went home.

Pacific tomcod!

Yabby!

Golden angel—

He walked back up to the house toward the fishlist boiling in the air and gazed straight into Nola's eyes.

Wilson's rockfish!

Yellowspotted rockcod!

Clearwing flyingfish—

And then he had to look away because her eyes were burning blackhot and he went inside and washed out his eyes and they once more cooled. Pain, the world is full of pain, he thought, turning off the faucet and fumbling for a red and white towel. >>>

The world is full of pain and we are all hollow.

The world is full of pain and we are all hollow.

In college Drake did well. He at last was with people who saw his talent. He at last was with people who cared about him. Then one day while he was thinking this he suddenly realized he ought to have been thinking about his parents like this, but he couldn't. And then his grades started to drop, but he made it out clean before things dropped too far. Drake had toast and jelly and butter and the fishlist and her gaze for breakfast the next day.

Gila trout!

Japanese threadfin bream!

Panther flounder—

He ate fast to keep up with the throbbing of her look against his wall and the rhythm of the fishlist droning on next door, and he wondered again; what was the purpose of all this? He would have to try again to ask the monk. He would have to ask him right after he finished breakfast; he would have to get the monk's attention this time. There was no point in asking Nola why she was staring though.

He knew she'd say something horrible.

He knew she'd say something terrible that would come up against him and stick to him and burn him and be impossible to rip off.

Perforated-scale sardine!

Something cloying and dirty.

Smallmouth grunt!

Zander—

Let's have children—I'm ready, she told him across the breakfast table. The lace curtain softened the light through the small window behind her. I'm not getting any younger, she said. It's time I had a child. Let's start to try. I'll go off the pill. Come on. It's time.

She rose.

He nodded. >>>

Drake came out the back door to find out once and for all what this was all about.

Dollarfish!

Cub!

Doorkeeper—

Drake reached the monk's fence and gripped the rail.

Harry! he called out.

Black cod!

Her stare lashed his back.

Why are you doing this?

Alfione!

Her stare lashed his back and his flesh hung in great bloody loops.

Why are you doing this?

Butt!

Lash!

Breet!

Why?

Lash!

Britt!

His back was afire; he was afire. Drake turned away and went fast down across the tracks to the brook and he knelt by the water and drank—from his cupped hands he drank the cool water and it tasted like any other water except he knew there were little things in it—little things scuttling in the water too small to see called microorganisms that might make him sick but could make him no sicker then those eyes of hers and the constant torrent of fishnames.

Cailleu!

He drank from his cupped hands.

Gag!

>>>

The water cooled his steaming gut. It was like he'd been in a microwave being boiled from inside.

Kalog—

The two year old toddled across the room and almost made it to the coffee table but fell down on his well-padded butt, but did not have a chance to cry because Mother scooped him up in her arms and kissed him and told him it would be all right; and he lay there in bed where she put him. He always stayed right where she put him.

Knopp's shark!

Mississippi alligator gar!

C-o sole—

And then suddenly it was all enough; it was the middle of the summer; it was too hot; again, it was three a.m.; he threw the covers off himself and lay on the bare sheet and let it all pound its way into him and he clutched the sheet and yelled along in rhythm with the fishlist and looked right over at where her eyes were hitting the wall of his house and he decided. He began to rise from the bed.

Call the cops, he thought.

I want a divorce, said Nola.

What?

I said. I want a divorce.

He went toward the old black phone hung to the wall.

Call the cops now.

What—

Coho salmon!

Atlantic razor!

Her red hot look burnt through the wall.

Aurora rockfish!

He got to the phone and called 911 with a trembling hand. It would be over this night. This night, it would be over. >>>

Her look came through the hole in the wall and wrapped around him and tightened.

I want a divorce.

I want a divorce.

My lord and my God!

I want a—

I want—

My lord and my God I'm boiling from the inside!

From the inside—

—the inside—

The officers taking the call drove toward the address; the last house left standing on Alan. There's going to be an industrial park here, said one of them—all the houses but this one we're going to, have been torn down. The other cop said, I wonder what kind of guy we'll find here, he's the last one, I wonder what he wants. I wonder what he needs. He's complaining about the neighbors invading his life. What neighbors? There are no neighbors. What will we find when we knock and he opens? What kind of person at three a.m.? The police car pulled to a stop before the house set between two rubble-strewn vacant lots. The policemen got out and warily, with their hands on their holstered guns, they made their way to the front steps in the thick hot black night's silence.

Jim Meirose's short work is widely published, and his novels include "Sunday Dinner with Father Dwyer" (Optional Books), "Le Overgivers au Club de la Résurrection" (Mannequin Haus), "No and Maybe - Maybe and No" (Pski's Porch), "Audio Bookies" (LJMcD Communications), "Et Tu" (C22 press), and "Game 5" (Soros Books).

Holly Day

The Tree

I wake to the choking sound of electric chainsaws ripping
through wet bark and I know
it's the white birch down the street. I lie in bed
stomach clenched and sick
as the crash of limbs falling against each other
interrupt the morning calls of sparrows and cardinals
in my yard.

I worry about my own birch, how this
will effect the old soul standing guard
surrounded by painted ferns and flowering hostas
once part of a thriving community
of river and paper birch trees, roots reaching to touch
one another beneath tract houses and
old apartment buildings
now the only one of his kind, friends plowed to make room
for parking lots and the new grocery store.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Analog SF*, *Cardinal Sins*, and *New Plains Review*, and her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Music Composition for Dummies*. She currently teaches classes at The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, Hugo House in Washington, and The Muse Writers Center in Virginia.

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