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Editor's Note

Welcome to our 82th issue. That's right, eighty-tooth, 'cause this one's got more chompers than a sharknado at a gator farm, so watch your fingies.

— Laura Garrison

Itch Meat

GJ Hart

Mr Porter parked in St Mary's churchyard - the Elephant was no place to take a Jag - and set off up the Kennington Road to his first appointment. As he hurried along, his arms flapped loose as a dipper's prosthetics and his legs - fragile as corn snacks beneath the tailored stripes, appeared barely capable of supporting the little weight they carried.

Mr Porter was not your average debt collector.

It would be natural to assume Mr Porter's stature dictated his methods. It didn't: he simply had no need to play the thug or the rough-houser. Mr Porter only ever needed a *quick chat* after which the debtor, having no idea why - since Porter had issued not a single threat - would pine for the boot and the bat and do whatever was necessary to erase him from their life forever.

As he made his way toward the Elephant's dirty, beating heart, his spirits rose. He forgot the flames lapping at his sternum and the weeping contusions welding his shirt to his back. He sucked in the smell of stale alcohol and dog shit, skipped through the filth that greased every pavement and when he saw the statue - the turret atop the elephant's back - he swooned like any tourist. He noticed fresh paint, and delighted in how the new, garish colours eviscerated it of the ridiculous solemnity it had clung to for so long. You can keep your *Burghers of Calais*, he thought, just leave me this.

Mr Porter's first appointment was at Natton House, a brutal cliff of streaked stone and misery that harboured many of his tattered little birdies. His client, Mr Butler, was a man who'd shattered

when the Glassworks folded and now owed him over a two grand. Porter bounded merrily up the crumbling stairway and banged on his door.

He heard raised voices inside and knocked again. Eventually, Butler opened up.

“You’re looking well, Mr Butler,” said Porter.

Butler dropped his head.

“Well aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Without a word, Butler turned and Porter followed.

“I hope we don’t have to go through everything again, Mr Butler”

“No, no of course not, Mr Porter,” said Butler, handing over a dirty roll of notes and a carrier bag filled with loose change.

As Mr Porter weighed them in his open palm, he took in the full splendour of his surroundings: the empty vodka bottles stuffed between cushions and cigarette butts blooming from the sodden carpet. He watched a naked child climb toward an open window and rejoiced in the father’s reaction *or lack of it* as he swayed to the sound a wailing tabby, matted in its own pale vomit, curled in a potty decorated with emerald sausage dogs and dolphins in Dixie cups.

Hearing his wife slam the bedroom door, Butler fell to his knees. He curled in a ball and pawed at Porter’s loafers. Looking down, Porter slid the roll of notes into his pocket - enough to pay this family’s rent for a full month and shivered with well being.

“I’ll be back on Friday, make sure you’ve got the rest,” he said and pulling his feet free, turned and left.

* * *

Mr Porter drove west to Mortlake and cutting the engine, rolled up behind a row of abandoned garages. After pulling on a hoodie, he crept across the road and hid in bushes opposite his ex-wife's new bungalow.

Here he stayed, watching until the street lamps shone and the curtains closed. And then longer. Sucking on miniatures as rain fell and his clothes dropped in wet loops. When he could stand no more, he left.

As soon as he opened the door to his rambling, three-story town house, he heard the brisk paradiddle of tiny feet and knew it was ravenous. Fortunately, cold skin combined with the warmth radiating from heating vents guaranteed it plenty to eat. He dragged off his shirt and in one jump it was on him.

The relief was sumptuous and Mr Porter moaned as it moved across his back. Occasionally it bit down too hard, but the pain was all pleasure and falling, Porter kneaded the carpet as his body submitted to whatever attentions it craved.

Until he'd stumbled upon a cure, Mr Porter had suffered from excessive itching his entire adult life. No lotions or creams mitigated his suffering and the interminable biopsies and blood tests revealed nothing. His wife, driven insane by his whinging would straddle him and, raising ten sharpened nails, swipe and swipe til the white sheets were white no more.

On the first day she left him, Porter suffered his most withering attack to date. He cowered in the mirror searching for clues and just as he was about to slam himself into something hard enough to numb the pain, he saw a tiny flash of blue. He snatched at it and to his surprise, felt something between his fingers. Holding it at arm's length, he dropped it into a jam jar and screwed the lid down tight.

Excited by his discovery, he forgot work and spent the day online, trawling through university databases and entomology archives, attempting to identify the diminutive beastie flickering within the jar. He found nothing and was eventually forced to accept it for what it was: an itch, nothing more, nothing less.

On the second day, cowering again, he saw an arc of burnt orange - A tiny sun storm between his blades. He snatched and caught it by its wing. As it struggled, some part of it struck out and cleaved his thumb nail clean off. It was bigger, much bigger than the first and he slammed it into the jar. Immediately it grew, its chest rippling with muscles and colours, then circling the other, it pounced and forced it down between lips spinning like a drive belt. Catching one then another, Porter watched it dispatch them with same preternatural efficiency.

On the third day, Porter attempted to vary its diet, offering it baby mice and rocket salad, but it rejected them: It had become so addicted to its own kind, it would eat nothing else and whined like a nailed tyre until Porter delivered more.

Joyfully, on the fourth day, Mr Porter realised he had his cure: he lifted it from the jar and placed it on his naked back. After a moment of uncertainty, it began to gorge itself, not stopping until his skin was smooth and red as candy apple. Once sated, it returned to its jar and fell fast asleep. Mr Porter also fell asleep, right there on the kitchen floor and dreamt of tranquil savannahs and the many women he lent to.

Despite adhering rigidly to the guiding dictum that loaned money and morality should never become friends, Mr Porter found

dealing with pensioners troublesome. He preferred the middle aged and middle classed; he preferred those still strong enough to fear weakness.

Today, he would visit Mrs Cook and Mrs Cook was very old.

Ironically, the only reason Mr Porter hadn't written off her debt was because he liked her and, unless he was a complete fool, she appeared to like him too. A situation Mr Porter was ill accustomed to and, although he hated to admit it, one he found strangely nourishing.

Mrs cook lived in Nation house, a looming, shit brown monolith built to shield the well-heeled residents of Herne Valley from the noise generated by the new bypass, but subsequently converted - after a boozy deal struck between two profligate councillors - into hundreds of 'dwelling pellets'. The deal would provide the perfect opportunity to spin dry some public funds and also clear away - by secreting them between its cloying walls - every problem housing applicant in a twenty-mile radius.

Porter climbed the attenuated stairwell, up to her fourth floor flat and knocked. He heard the sound of slippers shuffling across carpet and waited.

"You're late, Mr Porter. I'll have to make another pot now. Naughty boy," said Mrs Cook, finally opening the door.

"Sorry Mrs Cook," replied Porter and followed her into the narrow hallway.

"I'll get the tea. Would you like a biscuit?"

"No thank you, Mrs Cook," said Porter, shooing away the cat and sitting down,

"I'm in a bit of a hurry," he shouted through to the kitchen.

Mrs Crook appeared with a tray and seeing it begin to slip from her hands, Porter grabbed it and set it down.

"You are a good boy, Mr Porter, I wish my son was a bit more like you and not the fucking, little prick that he is."

When Mrs Cook talked like this, Porter got paranoid, so paranoid he felt compelled to check for cameras, fearing he might be the butt of some elaborate prank.

"Mrs Cook, we both know why I'm here."

"Yes, Mr Porter. Of course!"

"So."

"So?"

"The Money?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr Porter, I don't have any," and saying this she began to cough so hard Mr Porter would have, if he hadn't seen it many times before, feared for her life

"I'm so very ill, Mr Porter."

"I know, I know," replied Porter and sighed.

"But you must understand, if I don't collect, my bosses won't be happy. Bad for you, bad for me Mrs Cook."

"I don't want you to get into trouble. You're like a son to me. Sometimes I wish you were my son . . ."

"You're very kind Mrs Cook, but we must get back to the money"

"Well, I do have something Mr Porter and *I think* it's worth something. It's in the loft. Please take it, I would have left it to you anyway. *When I die*, Mr Porter."

"What is it?"

"You'll see," and with that, she stood, and taking him by the arm, lead him out to the hallway.

"Up there," she said, pointing to a small hatch in the ceiling.

"Up there," sighed Porter.

Standing on a chair, he released the latch and the door swung down, missing his head by inches. He pulled down a ladder and climbed up.

"It's in the corner, in a shoe box," shouted Mrs Cook.

Porter's back rubbed against the roof joists, disturbing clouds of insulation foam, as he pulled himself deeper into the crawl space. More debris fell and his throat tightened as he moved past broken board games and stacks of newspapers. Finally, just as the bulb began to flicker and die, he saw the shoe box. Stuffing it quickly beneath his arm, he turned and pulled himself out.

"Why would I want this Mrs Cook?"

"I thought it would be right up your street, Mr Porter, given your line of work."

Porter dangled the revolver between two fingers.

"No, Mrs Cook, I don't use guns."

"But it was my father's. He killed people with it," she said, her face shining

Porter handed it back.

"I'll be back next Tuesday, Mrs Cook."

"I look forward to it, Mr Porter, I might have another little surprise for you."

"Just the money, please, Mrs Cook. I don't think I can cope with much more."

Once outside, he patted himself down. He was glad he didn't have his car, glad he had an excuse not to stalk her today. He walked the short distance home and opening the door, heard it dart

and hit something hard. He slipped quietly through to the bedroom and flopped down on the bed.

Immediately he roared out in pain as millions of tiny needles pierced his back. He remembered the attic - the insulation and realised his jacket must be covered in glass fibres.

Porter saw the door swing slowly open, heard it sniffing. In an instant it was on him, flipping him over, latching on and forcing the glass hairs deeper into his skin. New swarms enveloped him. He struggled up and watched in the mirror as it appeared above his shoulder; it's one huge eye the colour of bin scum. It had grown again: rows of new teeth, triangular and perfectly flat, but softness too, and more legs that coiled in slow exploration. It sunk down and Porter felt it searching. A lick, a nip, then one mouthful and it was inside, *or in-between*. Rolling and sucking and purring.

Porter felt his rib cage shift and blacked out.

When he woke, he saw himself: a desultory puppet - a sheet upon a stick - his desiccated pelt beating against the bay window like a trapped gallinipper. Panicking, he reached down to check his money.

It was all there.

Every penny.

But not much else.

GJ HART currently lives and works in Brixton, London and has had stories published in *The Harpoon Review*, *99 Pine Street*, *The Jellyfish Review*, *Foliolate Oak*, *Eunoia Review*, and others. He can be found arguing with himself over @gj_hart.

Heads

Hamdy Elgammal

The hospital cafeteria was closed; I figured I'd wait on the street. The surgery was supposed to take a few hours. My ten-year-old had a small brain and they needed to put most of it back inside.

It was 6-A.M.-cold and my fingers still tingled from the car crash. My head was hot; I had banged it against the bathroom's hand dryer. It kept me warm.

It was going to be fine. All of it, everything. I talked to myself like this.

The hospital stood beside a patch of woodland, tall trees filled with green and birds that shrieked. In front of me, a lumberjack, wearing a red shirt and jeans, was working his way through one of the trees with an axe.

He had a stern face. The sound his axe made was persistent and precise.

The tree's top fell down, leaves green and lush and a stub was all that was left. The lumberjack looked at the stub's smooth surface before it began to crack. It broke upwards and a man's head came out, popping above the broken wood. The head was bald and pale and crowned with splinters.

It exhaled.

"What happened to you?" the lumberjack asked.

"I could ask you the same question," the stub man said.

The stub man stared in confusion at the axe and the lumberjack laid it down.

The lumberjack sat with his back to the stub. He put his face in his hands, wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Isn’t it a little too early for beheading?” the stub man asked.

“I’m just trying to do my job.”

“Where is the rest of you?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. He gazed, confused, at his stub. “It’s all quiet inside,” he said.

I turned to the lumberjack. “Where,” I said, “where is the rest of him?”

“It’s the way this works,” he said.

“Can you grow back?” I asked the stub man. “After what was taken from inside you?”

“Grow where? I’m trapped.”

The lumberjack looked at a stream of birds above us. They flew under the cloud-blotched sky, contracted and expanded against it like a slow-beating heart. Their wings made this sound.

The lumberjack stood and looked at the stub man.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “for your loss.”

He patted the head but only drove splinters further into the skull. The stub man winced.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the ER nurse from earlier coming up to the glass front doors, holding a chart. She looked around, searching for someone, then came out and walked to me.

“Your son,” she said.

HAMDY ELGAMMAL is a software engineer based in Berkeley, CA and a hobbyist writer. In the evenings he studies writing at the UC Berkeley Extension and adjusts a nonexistent beret while discussing writing and art in local writing groups.

City, this Baltimore
Zackary Sholem Berger

City, this Baltimore.
Nearer the campus
bird houses ride
three to a tree.

Dogs raise eyebrows
at stroller's cargo:
baby, toes dangling.
Off to a coffee.

Shot on a block
not far from here:
Our black neighbors.
I doctor some later.

City is shuddering
Blood on its buses,
its work and play shirts.
Crying in sleep.

Poe did not mean
The tale of these hearts.
Infarcted bodies
Flame in the sun.

Belief is concrete.
Something yet
To build, pay for.
To make, love for.

A mild mannered physician by day, **ZACKARY SHOLEM BERGER** writes in Yiddish and English and has been known to translate himself for kicks.

The Edge of the Universe

Timothy Day

Upon receiving the letter from Elise, Olivia was surprised to learn that her sister was living at the edge of the universe. Olivia hadn't seen her for three years, at the last holiday party their parents were alive for. She still had the picture of the four of them standing by the tree with candy canes on her fridge, Olivia pretending the cane was a pirate hook, Elise tilting her head sideways with the cane's hook against her neck, as if being yanked offstage. Olivia had long since cut off the other end of the shot where her ex-husband had stood, a candy cane hooked on his ear.

It is beautiful here, and I'd like to talk to you before I proceed.

Olivia was not sure what to make of the letter's last word. *Proceed*. How? What was proceed-able? Flights to the edge of the universe had spotty availability. Olivia booked the next one offered, leaving in three days somewhere between five p.m. and midnight.

Olivia arranged for her daughter's babysitter, Zach, to stay at the house while she was away. He arrived with a bag full of her daughter's favorite snacks, and just as Olivia reached the door, asked her how she wanted him to handle Mackenzie's bat mitzvah.

"Mac's only seven," Olivia said. "And we're not Jewish."

Zach gave her a skeptical look.

"My Uncle used to live out there," he said. "I know how it is."

Olivia told him not to worry about it.

When she arrived at the airport, Olivia was directed to an exceptionally tall security officer, who slipped her ticket into his

coat pocket surreptitiously before taking her arm gently and guiding her across the terminal in silence. After passing a series of more traditional flight gates, the officer led her into a back hallway, stopping at a frayed curtain with a scrap of paper on it that read: Employees Only. The officer held it up for Olivia and she stepped underneath to end of the hallway, bereft of any doors. After following the officer knelt down as if to tie his shoe and fished around in his sock, removing a single white key. He then reached upwards and moved his hand across the ceiling, stopping underneath a slight dent in the paneling. Bringing up the key with his other hand, the officer jammed it into the groove, breaking through the surface like styrofoam, and twisted. A jagged piece of ceiling crumbled off and fell to their feet, creating a cloud of dust. The officer turned to her and held his palms out, nodding upward. Olivia stepped into his palm and extended herself up past the ceiling hole, pushing against the new floor to lift her lower half into the room above. She looked back down at the officer, who whispered something inaudible into a walkie-talkie before looking up at her and smiling.

“Have a nice flight,” he said, then moved aside the curtain and left her.

Olivia stood and took in her surroundings; the room she was in looked not unlike the waiting area of a doctor’s office, with couches and chairs and artificial plants, no windows. Three other passengers sat around the room, their heads dipped into magazines. Olivia counted three correlating floor-holes in random spots of carpet, including a gaping one right in front of the check-in window that she traced to the overweight man sitting in the corner. She took nervous steps towards the attendant behind the desk, who

raised a finger and and swiveled around as she approached. *Just give her some cookies mom, she heard him saying. Christ shouldn't you have this down by now? Milk makes them tired I think. Yeah, I think I heard that once. She'll watch some cartoons and PTFO. Hold on a sec.*

He brought the phone down and turned back to face Olivia.

"Just checking in?"

Olivia squinted at him over the cavernous floor opening.

"Zach?"

No, she thought, it couldn't be—but it was.

The attendant, who was clearly Zach, tilted his head to the side and squinted back.

"Huh?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry mam do I know you?"

"You definitely do."

Attendant-Zach clicked his tongue and cringed apologetically.

"I'm sorry mam. Maybe you're confusing me with some other stud." He winked.

"I don't think so."

"Code phrase please?"

At this the other passengers put their magazines down and looked at Olivia expectantly. She met their collective gaze with a furled brow.

"Edge of the universe?"

They exchanged looks of satisfaction before sinking back in their seats.

"Thanks," said attendant-Zach. "You're all set."

Olivia tried to say more, but he swiveled back around and returned the phone to his ear. *Mom? I'm back.* Olivia retreated and

sat down as far away from the other passengers as possible, then took her phone out and dialed Zach's cell.

Zach picked up on the first ring.

"Sup Ms. Riley?"

"Oh," Olivia stammered, looking back at the check-in window.

"Hi Zach."

"Hey hey hey. Enjoying that airport bar?"

"No, I mean—no. How's Mac?"

"She's great. Sleeping like a—well, like a seven year old I guess." He laughed.

"Oh good. Well...thanks Zach."

"Anytime Ms. Riley."

He hung up and Olivia flipped her phone closed, listening to attendant-Zach, still talking, the exact same voice she'd just heard in her ear. *And try to lay off the booze the rest of the week alright mom? I'm counting on you. The kid's not mine you know!* The exact same laugh.

Three minutes before takeoff, a new hole broke open beneath Olivia's feet and she let out a stifled shriek before pulling her legs up onto the couch. Seconds later, a man with a visor and a camera strapped around his neck emerged from the opening, apologizing to her between grunts as he struggled to lift himself up. Olivia gave him her hand and helped him the rest of the way and he lay on the floor panting for a minute before rising and dusting himself off, taking the seat next to her.

"What airport?" He asked.

Olivia looked at him in confusion.

"SeaTac?"

"Ah," he nodded, then pointed to himself. "JFK," he said.

The man went to check-in and Olivia peered down the hole he had come through, looking into a small control room where a handful of operators sat at computers with headsets on, reciting coordinates into their mouthpieces. Olivia rose carefully and stepped over to another hole, the one closest to a French woman reading *Time*. This one seemed to be positioned above some sort of upper awning, an elevated catwalk just below. From far beneath it, Olivia could hear the echo of the airport intercom as flight schedules were announced: *le prochain vol pour Grèce quittera en une heure.*

Olivia was about to ask attendant-Zach how long they had until takeoff when she caught another glimpse through the opening near her feet to see not a control room but the sky, white wisps of cloud accompanying the blue, hurtling by at hyper-speed. So this *was* the flight. Olivia fumbled in her daughter's backpack for the sleeping pills she'd brought along, taking two of them before sinking deep into the couch as the light of the room faded out.

Olivia woke to attendant-Zach shaking her.

"C'mon doofus! We're here! Wake up! Wake up Olivia!"

Olivia broke from him and started up to her feet. The other passengers had gone and the door beside the check-in window was propped open, nothing but a wall of whiteness beyond. Olivia stood before it and craned her neck out; there didn't seem to be a *ground*. She put one foot out to test it, but attendant-Zach yelped and came quickly to her side.

"What?" Olivia asked in alarm.

"We can't land in *the edge of the universe*," attendant-Zach said, as if it was terribly obvious. "You have to take the rope down."

"The rope?"

Attendant-Zach stuck his arm out into the white and felt around for something, bringing back a thick brown rope.

"This'll take you the rest of the way."

Olivia balked.

"Seriously?"

Attendant-Zach sighed and shook his head.

"Fuckin' first-timers. It's just a little rope-burn."

"Zach!"

Attendant-Zach paused and stared at her, his face grave.

"You don't get it," he said. "*It's all about to break.*" With this, he walked back to the check-in window and sat, eyes locked ahead. Olivia went around the desk and approached him, noticing for the first time the clock ticking on the wall adjacent, the two hands moving across a blank white surface. She peered nervously at attendant-Zach, sitting upright and stoic in the chair. Cringing, she stuck out her finger and poked attendant-Zach in the nose, staggering back as his head cracked apart and went crumbling to the floor, followed quickly by the rest of his body. Olivia looked out the open door at the rope dangling amongst the white and took out her cell phone.

Zach picked up on the first ring.

"Morning Ms. Riley."

The coffee table collapsed into pieces.

"Zach," she said. "Could you put Mac on?"

"Oh," he said, "I just walked her into class actually."

"Can you go back and get her?"

The couch Olivia had slept on deteriorated into foamy bits of fabric.

"Uh...sure. Just a sec."

A chunk of ceiling fell from the corner and crushed a chair.

“Mom?”

“Mac!”

“Hi mom! I’m in class.”

“I know jellybean!” Olivia shouted over the wreckage, “I just needed to tell you I love you!”

The floor began to break off into larger gaps.

“Oh. Okay. I love you too mom.”

Olivia stuffed her phone into her pocket and jumped onto the rope just as the entire room disintegrated.

It was a long journey down and Olivia’s hands stung terribly as she descended through the white. Finally her feet met something solid and she cautiously let go of the rope. She got on her knees and felt around with her hands; yes, there was ground here, though she could not see it, a sort of canvas material that resembled the surface of a trampoline in both texture and spring. Olivia rose, bouncing a bit on her feet, and spotted a figure approaching in the distance, a dark shimmer in the ocean of white. Olivia squinted; Elise. Soon she could feel the reverberations of her sister’s steps across the ground (cover? base? universe shell?), and then she could see her clearly, smiling and holding a sign that read: *My Jellybean*. Olivia ran forward and wrapped her arms around her, realizing as she felt Elise’s hand on the back of her head that she’d started to sob. Elise ran her fingers through Olivia’s hair gently, over and over, whispering into her ear that it was okay, that it would all be okay.

Elise took Olivia’s hand and led her through the white, turning slightly here and there until they arrived at a small brick apartment building, standing isolated amongst the nothing.

“You have neighbors?” Olivia asked as Elise got out her keys.

"You'll see them eventually," she said.

Elise's apartment was filled with items from around the world; a dish towel from Iceland, a toothbrush from Pakistan, a teapot from Kenya, a broom from Siberia.

"What's from here?" Olivia asked.

Elise shrugged.

"I guess I am," she said.

They sat in the kitchen drinking tea out of mugs from New Zealand.

"You'll have to break that to Sacramento," Olivia said.

At this Elise reached across the table and took Olivia's hand.

"That's what I needed to tell you," she said.

Olivia raised an eyebrow in question.

"We moved to Sacramento when you were a baby. Mom and dad thought it'd be easier if you didn't know."

"What would be easier?"

Elise paused.

"People like us go through life feeling out of place," she continued. "We keep searching, feeling like there's a place out there just past our reach where we'll feel truly at home, but we never quite get there. That's what it feels like to come from this place," Elise smiled. "You're home, Olivia."

Olivia shook her head absently. She thought about her ex-husband, and the almost-but-not home she had felt with him. She thought about friends, sitting there present-but-not during get-togethers, never without the vague sensation that she was faking something. She thought about lying in her bed at night, alone. She thought about how much she liked to be alone. She thought about Mac.

“No,” she said. “I feel at home with my daughter.”

“If she’s a part of your home,” Elise said, “Then she’ll be here soon.”

Mac showed up the next morning, standing at Olivia’s bedside. Olivia sprang up and embraced her, asking how she had gotten there.

“Mom,” Mac said, frustrated, “We came together.”

“We did?”

“Duh.”

Taking a walk with Elise and Mac that morning, Olivia began to see more; people and buildings and trees taking shape in the white. When she greeted the occasional passersby, there was the unmistakable sensation that she knew them, that they knew her, that they were seeing each other in a place where that meant something.

They picnicked in the park, laying out a tablecloth next to what Elise told Olivia she would soon be able to recognize as a cliff.

“What’s out there?” Olivia nodded beyond the cliff she couldn’t see yet, and Elise smiled.

“That’s what I plan to find out,” she said.

Mac stood and tossed the end of her PB&J into the abyss.

“My sandwich is a pioneer,” she said.

Back at Elise’s apartment, Elise showed Olivia the hang-glider in her closet.

“But isn’t this home?” Olivia asked. “Isn’t this place all you’ve ever wanted?”

“It wears out,” Elise said. “This is how I renew it.”

“How can it wear out?” Olivia felt a sinking in her chest. “Is it really home if it wears out?”

Elise came closer and placed her hands on either side of Olivia's neck.

"Olivia," she said. "This is the best we get."

"Then why are you still searching?"

Elise shook her head, then kissed Olivia's forehead and left the room.

The next day, Olivia and Mac returned to the park to see Elise off. Strapped into the hang-glider, Elise hugged them goodbye and assured them she'd be back before admitting that she didn't really know that at all. The cliff faded into Olivia's view just before Elise jumped off and sailed into the open.

Olivia saw more every day. The post-office and school, the wetlands and the fields, the sprawling flea markets. She felt connection all around her, realizing as the world came into focus that everywhere else she had lived in her life had been the opposite of this place; a broad expanse of nothing, hidden beneath a thin layer of something.

Two passed before Olivia tried Zach's cell again, unable to keep her only remaining source of anxiety pushed to the back of her mind any longer. Five rings went by unanswered, Olivia standing in Elise's old bedroom with held breath, and then there was Zach.

"Ms. Riley," he said, a little unsure, "Didn't think I'd hear from you."

Olivia sat down on the bed, taking short breaths.

"Hi Zach," she said faintly. "How are—things?"

"Everything is peaches," Zach said. "We miss you, of course."

Olivia sank sideways across the bed. She was silent for a moment, then forced out the word.

"We?"

"Yup," Zach said. "She asks me when you're coming back on the daily. I tell her I don't know, but she doesn't believe me."

Olivia put a hand over her welling eyes and groaned.

"Mom?"

Edge-of-the-universe-Mac looked in at her from the doorway.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Zach?"

"Mhm?"

"Could you put her on please?"

"Sure thing, just a sec."

Edge-of-the-universe-Mac took slow steps toward her, stopping beside the bed as Olivia took her hand.

"Hi mom!"

Edge-of-the-universe-Mac stood next to her, mouth moving soundlessly to the words of phone-Mac.

"Jellybean," Olivia said, "Say more."

"Where are you mom? Come home come home come home come home!"

Edge-of-the-universe-Mac's mouth continued to match every word, though the timing was slightly off. Olivia held her hand tight.

"I'm coming home, Mac," she said. "I'll see you soon."

Olivia could see the airport now, hovering clear beneath the clouds, and she reached it after an arduous trip back up the rope. The terminal and plane were both quite regular, the attendants unfamiliar. Olivia took her sleeping pills as the plane began to elevate, falling asleep to the image of edge-of-the-universe-Mac waving to her from below as she'd ascended the rope. It had felt like goodbye, but Olivia hoped with all her heart that it had been hello.

TIMOTHY DAY loves plants, bad puns, and blanket-forts, preferably at the same time. His fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Jersey Devil Press*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Cease Cows*, *Burrow Press Review*, *WhiskeyPaper*, and others. You can visit him online at frogsmirkles.wordpress.com.

On the cover:

“Lunar Condor”

FIONA McCALLUM, a rock climber and artist from Fredericksburg, Texas, is inspired to

paint her experiences during climbing adventures. She blends shamans, spiritualism, and fantasy into flowing statements of the natural world. Her work has been featured in galleries and openings throughout the Texas Hill Country. She can be contacted via email: fmccallum@austin.rr.com.

