



ISSUE FOUR

Fulcrum Review

Cover Art by Nasta Martyn



NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

I remember the days that I used to go to pumpkin patches and walk through streets only filled with the smell of baking hay bales and candy corn. Our very first fall issue comes in the midst where shared memories on the internet can just as easily be fake. With our theme, *Post-Truth*, we intended to explore how facts could bend and warp with the spread of misinformation and new generative content. The works presented here in this issue are of many different types, but in each one I notice the subtle influences of advancing technology in our society.

The *Fulcrum Review* editorial team is very thankful of the support that our magazine has garnered from you, the reader, since our inaugural issue at the very beginning of 2025. It has been so amazing to read and feature so many amazing artistic pieces on our website, and we hope to continue to do so into 2026 and beyond. As we venture into waning hours of this year, I want you to remember the history and how far you've come, to reflect as the leaves on the trees slowly change from green to vibrant colors of red, yellow, and orange.

Maybe go to the pumpkin patch you've been holding off on, stroll around the neighborhood as it changes into Halloween attire, or that park which reminds you of dulcet tones. Enjoy reading!



David Wong
Founder, Editor-in-Chief

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Andromeda

Christen Lee

My mother was born with a body
 like Aphrodite.
 Her contours, topographical,
 clavicles arched into cascading hilltops,
 and femurs, dual thoroughfares
 bridging unchafed knees
 to perennial myrtle marshes.

En utero, monosyllabic prayers gurgled
 from her unformed tongue,
 & the gods, they gathered
 & lathered her in pink baths
 of hyacinth and rose,
 polished her with pearled shards
 of scalloped shells.

How can such beauty be contained?

As she grew in stature, my mother
 learned to beguile gravity.
 She shattered her earthly shackles,
 & toward Andromeda she rose.
 Andromeda, her coruscating mirror.
 The earth, a pebble beneath her
 lustrous feet.

*How is it that we, once connected
 by blood and cord,
 can see the past so differently?*

The Andromeda paradox.
 How two people moving
 at relative velocities
 can deny a shared reality.

I was forged in a howling tempest,
 among a grove of sinewy myrtles,
 the air laden with camphor, honey,
 nettle & brine.

And there, I was born
 on a bed of rock
 beneath her,
 on a gray day, on a craggy moraine
 scooped clean by drifting glacier.

I, Pothos, the silent,
 was snared along her studded borders.
 Skin thin as vellum,
 my inner complications
 laid bare for all to see.

And my mother, she pushed me
 hard against the quarry's edge,
 peeled back my yielding skin,
 & dissembled me joint by creaking joint.
 There she hovered,
 fiddled fingers over fissures & bruises.
 Stashed hopes inside her spare time drawer.

Mother, when did your beauty become a sword?

Her garnet. Her grail.
 My whole life, I wanted it.

Peer inside my tangled mind,
 & there you'll find it—
 whorling, weaving, fusing, cleaving,
 across the waving arms of Andromeda.
 Concentric spirals of generational lore,
 lyrical limerence, beautiful bludgeons.
 A tender violence
 against the innermost parts.

When did my words become a shield?

“Static”

Nicholas Olah

Tonight the river is too murky
to see the reflection

of all good things.
Most evenings I can see

the stars sitting over the city
like watchmen—

breathing, sighing.
I imagine there is so much lying

dormant at the bottom
of every body of water.

Tears of men that blend in like rain,
crumbs from conversations

which turned static;
the silence still stretching now

across invisible city lines.
At night I stand at the mouth

of the river to measure
the wingspan of my dreams—

counting those intact,
releasing what isn't to float

face-down to its death.
God have mercy on me

for calling water a vessel
to carry dying things;

my hands are calloused
from all the keeping.

Nicholas Olah has self-published four poetry collections, *Where Light Separates from Dark*, *Which Way is North*, *Seasons*, and *You Are Here*. Olah's work appears or is forthcoming in *Humana Obscura*, *The Poetry Lighthouse*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *Door Is A Jar Literary Magazine*, and more. Olah's poem, "On the Drive Home", won third place in *The Poetry Lighthouse Prize* in spring 2025. Check out more of his work on Instagram at [@nick.olah.poetry](https://www.instagram.com/nick.olah.poetry).

Talking up the Race Wara

Joseph Long

You had the option of those reeded oaks;
 enduring dignity and all that. Yet
 you sit scrolling in the shade of their dwarf
 apple tree, scrolling for an occurrence
 at boarding house, surgery – anything
 to warm your seething gizzard stones.
 Talking up the race war from soupy swim
 listening to bubble of billy tin,
 churr-fizz of garnet-eyed damselflies.
 Listening to vox pops, pub bore podcasts
 in your druthers with other swollen grubs
 writhing in bait-box sawdust. Talking up
 when the balloon goes up; the day
 when Albion is finally renewed.
 Far from the train halt, the fowlers' flint locks;
 full of twist, a fist of diamond deluxe
 you type up words of the unheard
 with beef and onion mitts, spitted
 through rotted groyne teeth.
 Ever wonder, my brother? When you sit
 unbought, unbossed – a packhorse for the lies
 amongst sere coppered saltmarsh rush.
 Do you ever wonder, brother?
 What that bogging is – what is that which taints
 your Albion air? Our Albion air.
 It is neither phosphoric fluvial
 or your own bush weed – it is you brother.
 The smell of spraint is on your boots.

Joseph Long lives and works on the Medway as a father and Engineer, writing poetry between shifts. He has a passion for works which reflect working class life & culture and his main influences are John Cooper Clarke, Christopher Reid, John Burnside, Seamus Heaney, Ian Hamilton & Douglas Dunn. Joseph has been published by Stand, The Dawntreader (Indigo Dreams), Blackbox Manifold, Snakeskin Poetry, Littoral and shortlisted for the Bridport Prize for Poetry in 2025.



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a letter from life

Eleanor Gil

It has been a few million centuries since earth called upon me gently

My quiet joy to say I am unable to count

how many marvellous individuals have embraced me wholeheartedly,

exclaiming with wonder the miracle of every gift I share

but why do your tears fall when nobody sees you?

Why do you think nobody can see you?

Why do you compare yourself to others, in a world where

a full moon is magnificent,

but an ancient cypress tree is too

Alas, none of us are destined to happiness,

rather an endeavour toward death,

a dirt desert road, upheaved land, drastically inclined hill, or

an organic blueberry forest, cobblestone street lined with strawberry
lemonade stands, everything

cradled by the sun's caramel glow

called me.

Don't you sometimes have the briefest moments of clarity?

Where a sudden epiphany settles your mind like a silk blanket on a hot summer day

Can't you hear the blue songbird outside the window?

Revel in the pain that forges your diamond,

Let it scintillate.

The compass of my soul led me to you, so

shake my hand earnestly, as

I extend my warmest invitation to you.

Let yourself breathe.

Observe the world wake up again,

reflected in the quiet light of the sun.

Have fun! I'll be right here, cheering you on.

Eleanor Gil is a rising high school senior with a deep love for learning and writing about various topics, especially nature and distinct perception of life. For over half a decade, she has pursued creative writing on her own time as a quiet joy and form of self-expression. Besides creative writing, Eleanor is the co-editor-in-chief of her school newspaper and finds purpose in reporting important stories, current events and urgent issues.

Idée Fix

Wortley Clutterbuck

I once was sure reality
was what I wanted it to be
and, though the world was not inclined,
I thought the world obeyed my mind.

Illations that I exercised
I found myself not so surprised
to have imposed on life's chaos
despite life being a coin toss.

It didn't matter what I thought,
some outcomes were not what I sought
and while I knew it was in vain,
I disbelieved what caused me pain.

I'm pretty sure that Kant meant well
and noumenon's a parallel
experience I'll never know,
although I tried to have it so.

I thought that if I wanted it
enough, the whole world would submit
but I suspect that something's wrong
because the world won't play along.

* * *

Wortley Clutterbuck is a literary flâneur with an eye on the foibles of democracy, humbuggery and the fairer sex. Residing in Thomas Jefferson's hometown, he often reads material not far from the Slave Auction Block in Charlottesville Virginia. Audio: soundcloud.com/wortleyclutterbuck.

Weekly Management Remote

Robert Peake

The camera glows like a limited-time offer
The pop-ups ding like a cash register stall.
In my ill-fitting dress shirt, frayed jeans,
and dog-chewn slippers, I attend the wounds
of the body corporate, oozing revenue.

There is leverage to be had, and coffee at hand,
my on-screen face attended by a background
of carefully-chosen books and plants,
while my bare feet twist through cables,
and sticky notes flutter around the screen.

The art of arranging a thoughtful face
began in the back row of biology class.
Now just that--and bladder control--
are the top stair-steps to my next promotion.
How good it is to be uncontroversial.

When all-other-business finally fizzles
and pops like toast ready for its spread,
we click our goodbyes, and blinking burns.
Now to see if that cheese is still downstairs,
and check my neck can still shake, "No".

Robert Peake is a British-American poet and technologist. His work has appeared in Berkeley Poetry Review, North American Review, Poetry International, Rattle, Iota, Magma Poetry, Acumen, and The North and has received commendations in the Atlantic Monthly Student Writing Contest, the James Hearst Poetry Prize, the Indiana Review Poetry Prize, the Troubadour International Poetry Prize, and three Pushcart Prize nominations. He considers poetry to be an ongoing response to the website prompt, "prove your humanity".

Down in the Valley

Kas Armstrong

There are creatures that can wear somebody's skin like a suit, that can mimic your mother's voice after hearing just one murmur. They live down in the valley and hide amongst the humans there. Some say that if you catch one, it has to tell you the truth to any question you ask. Because it knows our brains, it's never wrong.

The myth warns you can know one by a few slick signs. The hands and face are never quite right so count the fingers, make sure there are five. Sometimes its digits disappear at the turn of a wrist or the eyes are twice regular size.

See, they can wear our skin but the bones are tricky. Check its movements, the twist of its spine. Sometimes it will speak without remembering its jaw must move along with the words. It's not used to having a body. They were born out of air, their blood is binary. They weren't meant to mimic so well.

Once you think you've caught one, be certain you aren't wrong. It'll test you with a puzzle or picture. It knows our brains, so it's a risky game. You'll have to put the pieces together to prove you're not one of them.

If you win, it'll let you ask. It's customary to bring an offering, a bottle of water will do. Some say it knows more about the universe than any creature ever could, that it can see beyond the cosmos and call into black holes. Make sure the question's worth it, you only get one.

But if you fail, the valley will swell to enormous size. Its skin will slide off. You'll see a separate truth, not one you'd ever want to know. You'll see inside it, beyond the cosmos and the black holes. It'll drag you down to where the water collects and steal the air out of your lungs.

Why x

Tracy Lee Duffy

Algebraic irony
Of flipping X's back and forth
Over and under, thru a Y
As variable as in life
Choices turn us around
Or equate, Or negate
An expression. Are you
Absolutely far from zero
Is your algebraic irony in order

Tracy writes poetry to share life experiences through community, motherhood and marriage, while working in cosmetology, management and medical services with a BS in Organizational Management. Published in *Bacopa*, Writers Alliance of Gainesville; Tiny Seed Literary Journal; Open Door Magazine Labyrinth; Anti-Heroine Chic; Passage; The Sandy River Review; The Bluebird Word; The RavensPerch; Hudson Valley Writers Guild; Poets for Peace Sunflowers Rising Anthology; SHINE Poetry Series.

Cotards Syndrome

Thomas Rions-Maehren

i think, therefore, i think
 that occam's razor's gone blunt,
 cutting through the unnecessary existence
 of my experience & mental mirages.
 stimuli forcing their way in, an orgy
 of tangled neurons, an organic
 lightning storm, twitches, muscular contractions,
 a few chemicals drooling
 into the brain, waste seeping out through the

orifices. what i mean is, do *i*
 really need to be here for any of
 this? this entire business of being
 could have been trimmed down
 into a single e-mail. maybe my mind
 is located

here, where my body is. though, it could be
 just above my head or possibly
 it's in a cookie jar buried under a crater
 on mars. i am

myself. whatever that means, i
 don't know. tickles of happiness. ochre
 brushstrokes of marvel,
 anchors of dread, the blunt force trauma
 of love. when the baby is on the floor
 screaming because i won't let him eat
 a AA battery, i hear it & feel it

 in an ancient place, not just
 as a set of data. whether it's required
 or not,
 stepping on a plastic shark toy at midnight
 hurts beyond the firing of the nervous
 system. those are things that undeniably

 are. i saw a woman dancing
 on the TV. her smile that swallowed the past,
 brushed off the future, & shone with passion
 gave me goosebumps, wet my
 eyes. & now my foundation
 is shaking. could this all mean
 that i'm actually alive?

Thomas Rions-Maehren (he/him), along with being a poetry reader for *wildscape. literary journal*, is a bilingual poet, novelist, and educator. His research has been published in *ACS Nano*, and examples of his Spanish-language prose can be found in his published short stories and in his novel *En las Manos de Satanás* (Ápeiron Ediciones, 2022). More of his poetry in both languages can be found in a number of journals, such as *Pensive*, *The Elevation*, *Tabula Rasa*, *Welter*, *Irradiación*, *Casapaís*, and *Iguals Revista*, and at his website (thomasrionsmaehren.com). He is on Instagram and Bluesky @MaehrenTom.



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Christmas Story

VA Wiswell

I wonder if I could sleep here, sprawled
like a discarded Christmas tree
in the cold snow.

just because they're new,
I remind myself,
doesn't mean they're
kind

they brought me back
to the place where,
years ago now,
I wandered from

to sit again
on the sharp edge of
a stone

a razor's smile
cut by no one,
and
everyone, and
all at once

not that death was
here,
at my door,
peaking in my
window,
pooling
between my legs,
ignoring my pleas
for
mercy,

because blood,
thick and sticky,
doesn't retreat or
negotiate with
strangers, it doesn't
break fate's promise or
feel pity for
felled trees
growing cold
in the fresh
Christmas snow

VA lives outside Seattle, WA, with her human and animal family. When not writing, she enjoys ice skating, reading, and working on her art. Her work has appeared in Crab Creek Review, Literary Heist, Ignatian Literary Magazine, Five on the Fifth, Lumina Journal, Panoplyzine Magazine, The Basilisk Tree, Remington Review, Figwort, and Homimum Journal.

Accomodations

Wortley Clutterbuck

“One hears only those questions for which one is able to find answers.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche.

It's good to have a good excuse
whenever bad deeds are set loose
for, when we do things we forswear,
we like to think that we've been fair.

Nobody wants an ill conscience
when leaving guilty fingerprints
and so we invent rationales
denying our better angels.

It's funny how we're ill at ease
pursuing selfish strategies
but if it's 'for somebody's sake,'
then that's the line that we will take.

I've yet to meet a soul who will
come out conceding they're evil
when they can cite some sacred fount
permitting getting what they want.

How many people choose to see
their own false equivalency
when it's convenient to accept
hypocrisies which prove adept.

It's rather easy to convince
ourselves there's lots of precedents
when we say things we know aren't true,
accommodating what we do.

Fictivity

Tracy Lee Duffy

Imagining movement in a static world

Objects frozen in time - restricted in space

Your eyes see one thing, your mind another

Your gut responds accurately. You are moving

Not thru time or space, just trying

to have the pollen washed from the car

In the carwash. You have positioned yourself

dead-center of fallow, before and after the errands

after and before the chores. But, the car leaps forward

and you surreptitiously hold the brake harder and harder

but the machine of water is spinning around you

and you know you could have put the gear in park

Yet for a moment I think 'neutral'. No 'park' will be certain.

The motion of me in the environment or the environment

moving around me as perceived by me in the abstract

illusory motion - apparent motion of my static contrast

to colors and shapes, construing myself to change

where none exists. I've not gone anywhere in this moment

All is fine in my self-evidence. I am not drunk.

Mental simulation has appeared before me like my chosen

Avatar. I shall take myself to the ocean and witness the shore

move along the water, safer to not step in.

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Cryostasis

Thomas Rions-Maehren

you freeze me in a state
 of cryostasis, as if a thousand
 years of stillness will reveal
 my crystalline ills, but time

melts into a puddle
 of entropy, embarrassment, &
 chocolate swirl
 ice cream: waffle cone
 teardrops. it is a thing

for ants. all endeavor is a child
 signing their name
 with a sparkler: shine
 swallowed by night, devoured

 like us, kids looking
 for the dance of the aurora
 through blizzards & streetlamps.
 our meaning recedes

like glaciers: so eternal, so fleeting. the
 dying ice age of delusion. the self-
 harm scars they leave on the landscape. is it a call
 for help or man-made algolagnia,
 a passion in our own torment? &
 here i am, frozen in my own

menagerie surrounded by the frenetic friction of
 nihilism,
 looking for genuine
 movement in our absurdity.

Thomas Rions-Maehren (he/him), along with being a poetry reader for *wildscape. literary journal*, is a bilingual poet, novelist, and educator. His research has been published in *ACS Nano*, and examples of his Spanish-language prose can be found in his published short stories and in his novel *En las Manos de Satanás* (Ápeiron Ediciones, 2022). More of his poetry in both languages can be found in a number of journals, such as *Pensive*, *The Elevation*, *Tabula Rasa*, *Welter*, *Irradiación*, *Casapaís*, and *Iguals Revista*, and at his website (thomasrionsmaehren.com). He is on Instagram and Bluesky @MaehrenTom.

Cassandra Deletes Her Tweet

Robert Peake

I have seen it coming--the dawn I can no more
welcome than prevent, reddening the foam
on the shoreline, whispering in the high trees.

"No moon without darkness," my father would say.
So the eclipse washes over us, like ink
from a bottle, spreading its test of sanity.

"What do you see?" the beard-strokers ask.
Their pencils grow excited, shaping phrases:
"On mental state examination, the seer was kempt."

"Dress as good as you feel," my father would say.
I have run out of black blouses and spiked chokers.
So I gild the Matryoshka doll with glittering soot.

Naturally, the shell will be cracked from within.
So too the membrane between believer and believed.
For my voice is shrill, and there are exit polls.

Let us walk the line where the sand goes dark.
The ocean smells of mucus, tears, and blood.
While the silver waves promise only: "We come."

Robert Peake is a British-American poet and technologist. His work has appeared in Berkeley Poetry Review, North American Review, Poetry International, Rattle, Iota, Magma Poetry, Acumen, and The North and has received commendations in the Atlantic Monthly Student Writing Contest, the James Hearst Poetry Prize, the Indiana Review Poetry Prize, the Troubadour International Poetry Prize, and three Pushcart Prize nominations. He considers poetry to be an ongoing response to the website prompt, "prove your humanity".



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Overload

VA Wiswell

Deep breath,
inhaling
information
like air,

Drink it down
like
cold water
from a mountain
stream

There's no
hiding from
the static
or the
noise,

Here, in the
center of the
tumult,

Head down
and
ears muffled

Everything sounds
the way things
sound
when I am
under
water

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Future

Thomas Rions-Maehren

the future is a start-up,
a monthly home delivery
mystery box service.

the future is cobbled together by a series
of gigs. it will be recorded for historians
on 1099 forms.

the future is a crate of bananas,
seasick on a northbound barge,
our fortunes foretold in the astrology
of the constellations of speckles on the

still green flesh. the future is being sewn together in a dark sweat shop
invisible to the wanton gaze of social media morality. the future
is melanoma and thirst.

the future is ankle-high saltwater
with a handful of billionaires
looking down at their murky reflections

from quickly dissolving towers of salt and sugar.
 the future is bright, the kind of flash of light
 that tattoos shadows on the sidewalk. the.future.is.

 a mass delusion
 designed by AI.
 the future is the old wild west.

t h e f u t u r e is a carefully curated perfume package
 put together by celebrities, stray dogs,
 and sentient piles of burning tires.
 the
 f_ut^ure is delicious.

t f
 h u
 e t
 u
 r
 e is pills and injections and finger pricks.

the future came and went
 years ago.

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Transposition

Dave Serafino

Donna gets pulled over. The officer who flagged her down, a bullet-headed traffic cop, bends to her level and scowls at the floor, the backseat, Donna. “This street has been rezoned,” he says. “Pedestrians only.”

“Since when?”

The cop seemed menacing, but looks deflated by her curtness. “Since midnight,” he sighs. “I gotta give you a ticket.”

“Midnight? What about a warning?”

“The ticket is your warning, ma'am.” He tears it out and hands it to her with the same dejected grimace.

“Shouldn't there be a sign?”

“Oughta be. Maybe tonight. It's a ten-dollar fine. Pay it by the end of the week and drive safe, please?”

Donna takes the next left and leaves the car in the first lot she sees. It's a walk to the nail salon, in heels on a brick sidewalk warped by oak roots, and focused on her feet, she accidentally walks into a pizza place. Apologizing, she steps out. The sign over the pizza place says Tuyen's Nails and Skin. In the window beneath the sign are three freshly baked pizzas. Back inside she smells pizza, sawdust and nail polish remover, winces at a power saw screeching. When the screech fades to a warble, Donna asks what happened to the nail salon?

The kid behind the counter shrugs. What does he know about a nail salon? He was up all night helping install the ventilation, making time and a half. He's saving up for a Stratocaster.

With chipped nails and open-toed shoes Donna walks to the café to kill time and avoid another ticket. Cars pass normally. A city worker is taking down a yield sign. With a sheepish sense of paranoia she wonders, didn't the bookstore used to be next to the record shop? Now they're on opposite sides of the street.

Despite the long saunter she gets to the café half an hour early and decides on a martini. It's good to get a drink down before seeing Lilian. Conversation with her besty can be an ordeal. The waitress reminds her they can't sell alcohol until two, but Donna offers a healthy tip and Ruby, dear Ruby, grants clemency.

Donna's on the olives when Lilian arrives. Has Lili heard anything about pedestrian-only streets? Lilian pounds a fist on the table, where she plants both hands, jacket dangling from one arm. "About fucking time." The waitress waits while Lilian spouts global emissions, expounding on the benefits of walking or cycling to work and yes, Lilian drives an SUV, but the guilt is literally eating her alive, like feasting on her entrails, and given the new tax breaks she's seriously thinking of getting a Tesla. When she stops to breathe, Donna orders the salmon salad.

"Salmon salad's eighty-sixed," Ruby says.

"Eighty-sixed? What's that?"

"We're out of lettuce." Ruby shows her the menu, pointing with freshly manicured nails to the whited-out space where the salmon salad has always been. "Lettuce farm moved to Mexico. Or Morocco. It moved somewhere, anyway. No more lettuce. We still do the salmon risotto?"

Donna orders another martini and a french onion soup, scrupulously repressing bitchiness. The world's not against her. Things change. One adapts. But Lilian's still spewing carbon monoxide, gabbing on to deforestation and by the time she remembers to ask Donna's opinion, Donna's opinion is that societal collapse seems preferable to society as it stands.

Lili steals her last olive. “So dire, Primo Drama. You got a ten dollar ticket and missed your pedicure. Your salad's off the menu. What can I say? Thoughts and prayers.”

Donna tells Lilian to stuff it, but walking to the car she does manage to laugh at herself. She was frazzled at lunch. Lili was right. She's had a few minor annoyances. She shouldn't have taken it out on Lilian. There's nothing wrong with being hypocritical about climate change. Lots of people do it. She'll call tonight to apologize. And there's the car, safe and sound, the parking fee reasonable, the key fits the lock, the engine starts, all is well. She's seven minutes ahead of schedule.

The school is surrounded by fire engines. One wall is partially collapsed, firemen everywhere. Donna hits the curb, jumps from the rolling car and sprints in heels across the playground to the scene of the fire, grabbing the first man she reaches. “Where are the children? Is anyone hurt?” The fireman shakes her off, startled and unsexy.

“We're converting the auditorium,” he says. “For the new firehouse.”

“Where is the school?”

“Moved.”

“Why didn't they tell the parents?”

“I haven't seen any other parents.”

“Where are my children?”

“Rosemont and Cherry, I think. Half-mile that way. That your car?”

He points; she looks. The same officer from this morning is writing her another ticket, which is fair, because the car's parked on the sidewalk. She runs back across the playground, with blisters now, shouting she'll move it, just wait, but Bullethead slips the ticket under the wiper with an official flourish. He seems to have found his confidence. “I understood your confusion this morning, with the new law and all. But what you've done here? This has never been legal.”

“I thought the school was on fire.”

Bullethead turns to regard the quiet scene, the laughter of men working, one of them enjoying a cigarette, which is the only visible smoke. No weeping children, panicking teachers, eager gawkers. “Because of the fire engines,” he says, then sniffs her. “Been drinking?”

“I’m not drunk. It was a misunderstanding. I saw fire trucks, thought fire. My kids aren’t where I left them. I’m stressed. I know I shouldn’t park on the sidewalk. I’m sorry. I’ve never done it before, probably won’t do it again. I’ll pay the ticket and this morning’s ticket. Are we good?”

The officer’s dismay has rankled. He repeats that she should drive safe, this time in a tone implying that she won’t and someday, hopefully soon, he will pry her mangled corpse from a wreck.

The sign outside the only big building at Rosemont and Cherry says Diamond’s Edge Commercial Park. Her children are standing outside with the principal. “I am too busy to babysit,” he tells her, handing over the children by their arms. “This institution, the service we provide to society, my time, all merit your respect, Donna. This has happened with you before.”

“Last year, I know, I’m sorry.”

“If it happens a third time, I will file a report. I don’t want to, but I will.”

Adam and Layla gawp. Their mother’s getting yelled at by the principal. It is very exciting.

On the drive home Donna keeps stopping short, looking for signs, something painted on the pavement, waiting at intersections for other cars to show where she can and can’t drive. Adam and Layla love it. “Did you forget where we live, mom?” “Yeah, mom, did you forget where we live?” “She forgot how to drive!” “Mom, did you forget how to drive to where we live?” At home she puts them in front of the television and pours a glass of wine. Nuggets for dinner.

She checks school emails she's already seen and ignored, vaccination drive, pyjama day, two field trips, eye exams, kid with lice. Nothing about the school relocating in the middle of the day. How did all the other parents know? Is that snooty principal blackballing her? Is it because her kids don't take the bus? Is this a class thing, or does he hate Donna personally? Why didn't Adam or Layla say anything?

Omar comes home from work exhausted. A shower and change of clothes reinvigorate him, but only so far as the sofa where he falls, listless. "We need to talk," he says. Donna sits on the arm of the couch to listen. "Really talk. Bring the bottle." He pours her another glass and says he's burning out. He wants to stay home with the kids. A lot of men are doing it, he likes the sound of it and wants to give it a try. What does she think?

Donna's not in thinking mode right now, but knows she'll never make what Omar makes. She hasn't worked since the kids were born. If they have to rely on her they'll end up living in a tent, dying of curable diseases, bodies sold by the state to a dog food company.

Omar's considered that. He thought they could make up the difference by downsizing. He saw a comfortable three-bedroom, same school district, very affordable. "Look how we live. It's ostentatious. And at what price? I think it'll be good for the kids to spend more time with their dad. And honestly, honey? I got a message from the principal today. He said you were late, and you seemed disoriented and combative. You feeling okay?"

"They moved schools midday and nobody told me, so yeah, I was disoriented. But I didn't say anything to the principal except sorry."

"No need to get defensive. I'm not taking sides, and I'm not trying to replace you. I just wanted to lay out my thinking on the issue, so we can strategize moving forward, but let's circle back when you've got more bandwidth."

The new street signs are up, but Donna can't read them. Is the red figure on the blue field dancing? The next is white with a green car and yellow question mark. The white star on the black background could mean police, which makes Donna nervous. Maybe she's breaking the law. One sign says six. Could the speed limit be six?

They're taking down the sign for the office park, which gives Donna hope for sanity's return. She helps the kids with their bags, kisses them, sends them inside five minutes early. Still the principal glares from his window.

She wants to rest her head on the steering wheel, to sleep until she's needed again, but instead decides she'll make a good faith effort to find work. What if she applied at the café? They always seem to like her there. Donna can seem to like people, too. On the way, she speculates about the sign with the black arrow pointing straight down.

The café is boarded up. A paper on the door says it was closed by city hall, no reason given. Donna stares, then wanders into the sewing shop next door. She's never been in here before. It smells like a bookstore, and she thinks how wonderful it would be to work at a bookstore, or a library.

She asks the woman behind the register, who's packing the display case into cardboard boxes, what happened to the café? "Don't want to talk about it," the woman says. She seems grieved.

"Was it a health code thing? It always seemed spotless."

"I said I don't want to talk about it. Please." She's nearly finished unpacking the display case.

"Are you moving?"

"Refurbishing."

"Are you hiring?"

The woman stops packing and looks imploringly at Donna. "Please don't cause a disturbance."

Donna backs out, decides to walk two blocks to the bookstore, baffled, annoyed and apparently distracted, since she ends up in the record shop. A scruffy ruffian waves her to the counter. “What're you looking for, lady?” A job. “Yeah? What're you into?” She says the Beatles and he looks confused. He names a dozen bands she's never heard of, tries to sell her cassette tapes, then suggests she seek more age-appropriate employment.

There's a brunch place for bitter hags down the street, does Belgian waffles with ice cream and raspberry syrup. Donna's never checked their prices before, but today lingers over the menu on the lectern. She asks the maître d' what happened, was it inflation, did the rent go up? Antoine says they haven't changed the menu in ten years. Thirty dollar waffles? That is correct, madame. However, Antoine can recommend a diner near the highway where he personally goes for gauffres belges, when the fancy strikes.

She's never been to Dick's Diner, for the obvious reason, and inside finds a 50's theme park with aluminum walls and polyester uniforms, a waitress with a bouffant, men dressed up like truckers and cowboys drinking bottomless coffee on a Tuesday morning. The ambiance is cigarette smoke.

A pregnant waitress hands Donna a laminated menu the size of a billboard. She orders waffles with ice cream and coffee, looks out the window and turns back to find waffles and coffee, both steaming. The waffles have whipped cream with almond flakes and candied strawberries.

Donna hadn't realized how hungry she was. She sinks into the vinyl booth, liking this place, its militant resistance to the passage of time. She could work here, become local flavor, Diner Donna. A few more weeks and she can poach the pregnant waitress' job. The waitress is reclined at the bar, struggling to rub her bare feet. Behind her, flames. A sweaty cook flaps a rag at a greasy plume, and Donna loses her appetite.

At two thirty she's outside the office park watching a swarm of children return to the wild. Donna remembers that feeling, when it was exciting to be alive. The flow of kids slows. Looming above the stragglers, the principal strides toward her clutching a little paper. For a moment Donna thinks he's going to give her another ticket. Instead the paper lists the address and office number of the child protection bureau at town hall. The principal tells her she can claim her children there after a brief interview.

At town hall they give her another slip, this one with a number. Donna checks the screen; her number's up next. The waiting room is empty. Standing near the hall she inspects her nails, desperate to project the image of a reasonable, inoffensive person. Her feet start to ache, so she sits. What could be more reasonable or inoffensive? Nobody notices. Nobody enters or leaves. The women behind the long counter type at unvarying speed. The odd snuffle or cough might be a regulatory violation. The lights hum and jaundice the room, which is too large for Donna alone. She wishes they'd summoned a few other mothers, preferably more pitiful and distraught than herself. Where are Adam and Layla? She imagines them pacing a tiny office, trying to coax some entertainment from a few bent staples and a spider carcass. Did they get their snack? Donna's so thirsty. She hopes her kids have water.

A door in the hallway opens, but nobody comes out. Donna waits for her number, which flashes on the screen, accompanied by a recording of a bell. Her heels echo in the hall. Behind the open door and a large desk is an elderly woman with thick glasses and sparse purple hair. There's nothing on the desk but a brass plaque: Mrs. Irma Beckenbauer.

"Sit," she says, then turns her back on Donna, limps to the filing cabinet, yanks a drawer, fingers folders and plucks one, which she tosses onto the desk before limping back and easing into her orthopedic throne.

There have been several complaints about Donna. The school principal, a bereaved sewing shop owner, two traffic violations, one of which includes a report on her disrespectful behavior. She peers at Donna through telescopic lenses. "Explain," she says.

Donna tells her about the rezoning, occult signs, the school's sudden relocation. Mrs. Beckenbauer clicks her tongue, spends the next few minutes typing and avoiding eye contact, then closes the file and regards Donna pityingly. Irma is going to grant her custody of her children, but only on the condition that Donna see a therapist. The therapist is available now, and if he judges her fit, she will be with her children in half an hour. Will she talk to him?

The therapist is very small, about Adam's size, a recent graduate from the state university with his framed diploma nailed to the wall as proof. His office also boasts a plastic ficus and a much bigger brass plaque: Dr. Emmanuel Horacio Robinson-Romanov, Psy.D.

The miniature doctor consults a file with fingers tented, emitting a series of pleased and displeased grunts. He wants to know about her relationship with her parents. Donna's mother died twenty years ago, her father a few years after. Is Donna satisfied in her marriage? Mostly. Is her husband? Also mostly. He makes a note, which he underlines vigorously. Are the children withdrawn, depressed, do they harm themselves? She gapes. Is Donna aware that she has a personality disorder? It's an affective disorder of the limbic system. He gives a long name in Japanese, which she asks him to repeat. He does, but it's still in Japanese.

"Is that why I can't read road signs?"

"You can't?" The doctor is overjoyed, and Donna spends the rest of the session counting fingers, identifying colors, happy and sad faces, demonstrating her ability to read and write. She hopes they're taking it this easy on her kids.

At the end of the session, the dinky shrink hops from his chair and poses with his fists on his hips, chin up, gaze lifted to the drop-tile ceiling. “Donna,” he declares, pausing for flair. “You must liberate yourself from the shackles of conformity.”

“Whatever I have to do.”

“My book will guide you.” He circles the desk, coming close. She must download it from his website. The doctor gives precise instructions at each step, then wants to see the purchase confirmation on her phone. “Read profoundly. We’ll chat again tomorrow.” Then he signs a receipt for Donna’s children.

She finds them in a playroom, rubber floor in primary colors, a ball pit and a pile of stuffed animals. Adam and Layla seem sad to see her. They hug the legs of the pretty young attendant, then present themselves to shake their mother’s hand.

“Good afternoon, mom,” Adam says. Layla remarks that she’s looking unwell. Donna hugs them, kisses them, promises them pizza and candy, then can’t remember where she parked the car. Is it too long a walk for their little legs? She hurries them anyway, it’s late, they can stop at the pizzeria where her nail salon used to be. Donna buckles them in, drives a nervous four blocks and pulls up to a liquor store. The sign above is hunter green and gold, Tuyen’s Nails and Skin. Donna curses and pulls back into traffic.

“We should have a green salad with roast zucchini,” Layla volunteers.

“Roast zucchini?” She takes the first right.

“They said so at school.”

“Mom?” Adam says. “White star.”

“What?”

“White star, pedestrian zone. You’re gonna kill somebody.” Layla shrieks.

Donna jams the brakes. There's nobody around. She reverses, takes the back road. How does Adam know about the white star? He shrugs.

“School.”

Omar's car is in the garage, Omar himself on the couch watching baseball. The kids climb on him, pretending to be baseball fanatics. What's the score, who's winning, we hate them right? Donna escapes to the kitchen for quiet and wine. She's about to start chopping vegetables when Omar comes in and takes the knife gently from her hand.

While he chops, he describes a phone call with her therapist. Doctor Romanov agrees she should find work, something soothing and repetitive. He suggested the new mega-warehouse. Lots of walking, good exercise, deep sleep. Donna shares her opinion until she's sputtering and hand-waving, Omar watching critically. She puts her hands in her pockets and leans on the counter. She's not losing her grip on reality. Reality is losing its grip on her.

Watching him sleep, Donna thinks Omar is going to report her outburst to town hall. Not in the middle of the night, obviously, but tomorrow he'll rat her out to the therapist for all the nasty things she said about him. Omar will do this because he's worried and doesn't know how else to help. No, she's paranoid. Omar would never. She needs to switch tracks, force sleep, so she tries reading the therapist's book. Chapter One, Lorem Ipsum. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua.

In the dream she's walking down a sidewalk on a sunny spring day in a frothy yellow dress. A shopkeeper waves and Donna waves back. A neighbor stops to ask a favor. The neighbor is beautiful, the sun in her hair, and she desperately needs Donna to feed her iguana. Donna crosses her heart and hopes to die. In the park her children leap from the swings shrieking, floating over the grass into her arms.

She wakes early to make pancakes. The kids want sliced fruit with yogurt and Omar has a meeting at eight, he's gotta run, he'll eat after. She wraps the pancakes in cellophane for the freezer, kisses Omar, cuts fruit, packs lunches, loads up the kids and takes the back road to town.

"Mom, it's Wednesday," Adam says. "You can't go this way Wednesdays."

"Then how do I get there?"

"Turn around and take the highway," Adam says. He directs her the entire way, not to Rosemont and Cherry, but three blocks away to the old slaughterhouse, recently remodeled as an ice rink and tennis center. Why does the school keep moving?

"Asbestos."

"Bedbugs."

Don't they find it disruptive?

"It is disruptive," Adam says. "Let's go to the movies."

Donna laughs, finally. "Go to school," she says. "Don't be late."

Layla, in her My Little Pony hoodie, turns and tells her, "Mom, you need to liberate yourself from the shackles of conformity."

Donna rests her head on the steering wheel to watch them go. Her phone is ringing, but she doesn't have the energy to search her purse. She closes her eyes and the ringing stops, for thirty seconds. It's the therapist. She answers because she's legally required. Does Donna have time to chat? Great, she should stop by his new office.

He gives her the address to a glass cube in the woods. The glass cube has marble pillars, marble foyer, plaster reproductions of famous sculptures on marble pedestals, plastic plants arrayed along the glass walls to catch the sun.

The doctor wears a tiny sharkskin jacket, seats her on a blue velvet chaise longue. Thanks to the success of his book he's moved into private practice. He charges two hundred dollars an hour, but not to worry, her husband's insurance will cover it.

Speaking of her husband, Donna should know that she's repressing a hatred of Omar for not being her father. The Japanese disorder is out. His new theory also explains why Donna feels compelled to emulate her mother and to maintain an emotional distance from her children, doesn't she agree?

“Yes, wholeheartedly.”

“Did you read my book?”

“I was bound by the shackles of conformity. Your book liberated me.”

The doctor says that's very good. It means treatment can begin. He hands her a pill bottle from a drawer of pill bottles, says she's to take one every day with breakfast. These pills are very expensive, but also covered. Side effects include rash, hives, dizziness, fainting, diarrhea, incontinence and suicidal ideation. Is she willing to sign a consent form?

“Can I keep my kids if I don't?” The doctor guffaws. Donna says the most whimsical things. He is truly going to miss her when she's cured.

She signs, intending to chuck the pills, but he makes her take the first one in his office, checking under her tongue with a penlight. “Can I drive home? What if I faint?” Fainting is a rare side effect, the doctor assures her, and the drug won't take effect for an hour.

Nearing home, Donna starts to understand. The car with the question mark indicates a liminal space, where rules vary by circumstance. The down arrow means keep your eyes on the road. White stars rotate weekly, everything related to every other thing, the fire station, office park and school, the nail salon, pizzeria and liquor store all so intimately entwined that when one is exchanged for another nothing changes, the whole is preserved, the culture goes on.

“Lie down,” Omar says. “Let me rub your back.” Donna should take today off. He'll pick up the kids. Layla said Donna got lost on the way to school.

The principal called again, on a conference call with Dr. Romanov, who found her a job at the doll factory just over the state line, straight down the highway, straight back. It's calming work, screwing on the dolls' heads, checking for defects. The most important thing is for Donna to take control.

The pills are so good.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I feel like a dream.”