

## Flashes From

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**ANNETTE**  
**Henry W. Leung**

During an hour of poetry at the Chelsea Chow House, my students lock me out of the classroom. I guess it's pretty funny. We were talking about William Carlos Williams ('Why are there so many Williams on the board?!'), and this is probably the kind of thing he'd have done if he were eight years old.

Annette is locked out with me; she had gone to get a drink of water. When she sees the door closed, a wall of blue before her, she gasps with a pop of her lips, the water in her cup swooshing like a roller coaster. She looks at me, tries the door handle, and yells, 'Hey! It's me, Annette! Let me in! I'm one of you guys! I'm not a grownup! Open, please!'

Laughter from inside. I still have photocopies to make: I can wait this out, but nobody's getting any work done. The truth is, I don't know what I'll do. Can I get angry with these kids?

Then my boss enters the hallway.

'Come on!' Annette pounds the door. Water splashes from her other hand. 'Even Chelsea Chow is here now!'

My boss is the principal, or in other words the god of punishment. It is her house. She gets angry so that I don't have to, and after they've let her inside she lectures my students about fire hazards, yells that they've sacrificed not just safety but trust.

When she leaves they look at me and wait for more chastising. They think I've betrayed them. Annette sits down, alienated. But punishment isn't what's at stake here; poetry is. I ask them to write sorry-but-not-really-sorry poems in the style of Williams.

And they are sorry. And they aren't sorry. And the door stays open a little longer.

## MOUSE TONGUE

Zoe F. Gilbert

They did mice in the first taxidermy class. Four hours from snake food to whiskered gentleman, the teacher promised, holding up a bag of frozen mice in one hand and tiny plastic top hats in the other. They giggled, but were soon absorbed in cutting, peeling, stuffing.

Such new knowledge was exciting to Frances. Now I know how to skin a mouse, she thought, I could do something bigger. A rabbit: no problem. A cat? The tail would be different, but the principle the same. Her mind scaled up – piglet, swan, deer – finding ways around snouts, wings, hooves as she went. She looked at her own hands. Fingers would be fine; toes simple. The difficulty with a person would likely come at the head. She hadn't liked pulling out the mouse's tongue.

Around the classroom, students manipulated their misshapen mice into poses, adjusted heads and limbs gingerly. Frances imagined herself with seams along inner arms, the backs of her legs like stockings. Nobody would know if she made discreet improvements, tugged in her waist a little tighter, was generous with stuffing at the bosom. The teacher had shown them how to fill out the mouse's cheeks by inserting cotton wool through the mouth or eye sockets, so cheek bones would be easy. She would put her stitched self in a balletic pose, elegant, and give herself a wistful look with glass eyes in forest green. She would feel funny without a tongue, but it was necessary, the teacher said. Otherwise it rots and starts to smell.

The mouse's tongue had been long, resistant, like an earthworm extracted reluctantly from the soil. Her own would be like an eel, a thick pink curl, which she pictured pickled in a glass jar. Her mouse listed left on the newspaper sheet in front of her, loose limbs akimbo, wires protruding from paw pads. Nobody spoke to her at parties now, but her stuffed self would be enigmatic in its silence, aloof. Ever since childhood she had wanted green eyes.

## LOVING IT

Paul McDonald

The McDonald's in my town smells like shit. It doesn't help that the toilets are too close to the service counter. I won't eat there, but I sometimes pick up a coffee on the way to work. It's always packed, even at seven a.m., and it staggers me that people are eating with relish; loving it.

A while back I'm queuing for my coffee and I notice a couple side-by-side at a table opposite the toilets. Surely a stupid place to sit? They aren't much above eighteen – half my age – and seem to have dropped in on their way home from a club. He's wearing too many gold chains, and her make-up looks too serious for breakfast. Chain Boy is getting on her nerves, waving a half-eaten hash brown under her nose. She slaps it away, but he keeps waving it, making her nauseous. In the end she swears at him and heads for the toilet. I smell her perfume as she passes, and notice how beautiful she is: elfin face, milky skin, whiter than the napkin she holds to her face. I think I hear her puke but I can't be sure. Chain Boy leans back in his seat with his legs splayed, sucking his fingers. I dislike him, partly because of Elf Face. She's too good for him. She's lovely, and McDonald's makes her puke: a woman with looks *and* taste. I've had some attractive girlfriends myself, of course, but can't seem to hang on to them; I tend to get the ones who're obsessed with soap operas, Big Brother, or having a kid and naming it Kyd. We end up arguing, and I remain single.

About three months later I spot Chain Boy and Elf Face again. I've just finished work and am walking through the town centre to my bus stop. I hardly recognise her – for one thing she's smiling; for another, she's fatter, with flushed, doughy cheeks. It looks like he's been feeding her Egg McMuffins, intravenous milkshakes, and chicken-nugget suppositories. She's been taking it with relish by the look of her; taking it, and learning to love it.

## THE MONTHLY CHECKER

Laura Besley

### I

Because I had grown up here, amidst these fields and people, it fell to me to check the barns and outhouses of the farms for things, or people, that shouldn't be there.

On the first of the month, I would go to the Braun's; on the second, the Müller's; on the third, the Huber's, until I had completed the monthly cycle again. All throughout the war.

I suppose doing it that way it's possible they knew I was coming, could move or hide things, or people, but I don't suppose they would've dared.

I certainly never found anything, or anyone.

### II

On the same day of every month, the boy would come, roaring up the driveway in his army truck.

'Guten Tag, Frau Braun,' he would say.

'Guten Tag,' I would reply, looking at his face, remembering how it looked last month, last year, and when he was just a baby.

He would look around the barns, the outhouses, and then come in for coffee, both of us stirring in powdered milk and fear, tiptoeing around forbidden subjects.

I suppose he knew that we all moved stuff, and people, around, depending on the day of the month. But he never said.

## SKINNER & DEWHURST

David Swann

‘We should bow down before the cows!’ he said. ‘They’ve been giving us their milk for yonks, they’ve let us drink it – we ought to bow down!’

Well, it didn’t matter whether you agreed or not, it was embarrassing to hear him say that on the train to college, especially since he meant it, especially as he wasn’t taking the piss.

But worse was after we’d got off, when we were taking a shortcut across the field – and I swear that the same train, the exact same train we’d just got off, was stuck there at the signal, with Skinner on his hands and knees in the grass, as good as his word, trying to make us all join him before the cows.

Which Dewhurst did, of course, the idiot.

As for me – well, there were girls watching from that stupid train, all their faces skenning out. So I went off-ski, priming the rest of the class to snigger when they finally wandered in with wet knees. Dewhurst copped the worst of it, because Dewhurst always did.

Dewhurst was still bowing down to the cows weeks later, when Skinner had long since moved on, when he was saluting the peas in Tesco’s and chanting *Sieg Heil* to the rusks.

That was Skinner for you: the kid who married his guitar to an amp down by the river, called all dogs Bob, and claimed to have no feeling at all in his knees – and threw himself off a back-alley wall to prove it, then said, ‘Felt nowt. Felt almost nowt.’ Dewhurst, high above, stared white-faced into the alley while Skinner yelled, ‘On your knees, Dewhurst! On your knees!’

## FOREIGN POLICY

Martin Sorrell

There's the Coke machine outside the bunk block.

Alongside the machine that dispenses Marlboro.

Alongside the water-fountain, kept a welcome few degrees above zero.

He can grab himself a can and draw in smoke, trying not to think about Lew and Spud and Ann-Marie breaking from rehearsals to go out on the lake in Escanaba, Michigan. Try not to think of them taking a couple of hours off before the gig, skating out to the ship full of timber, frozen in, past the fishermen playing their lines through boreholes in the ice.

He can splash his face and neck and feel it dry. Then do it again, and the whole of his head.

How long has he got to go?

When the temperature drops he can play some basketball with whichever of the guys are up for it who don't have their own plans for rest and recreation, who don't go to see the Bruce Willis movie in the cinema.

Basketball and a game of pool. Get in some cue action. Escanaba. Big Lew and Buddy Spud and Ann-Marie out on Lake Michigan. Ann-Marie and Spud. Ann-Marie and Lew. Lew and Spud.

Pool, basketball. Then maybe his bunk to work out new ideas on his keyboards, write them down, send them home.

How much longer has he got?

Tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow, he'll be in a Humvee on airport duty. Next week, if there is a next week, they'll be sent against the big warlord in the province to the south, the Seat of Kings, so-called.

So now?

He can go back out for a last Marlboro, breathe the night with lights and guys and smoke. He can close his eyes to really hear the sound. He can close his eyes to really smell the smell. He can start to walk outwards. To the sound and the smell.

And then there's wire.

And then there's wire.

And then there's wire.

And then there's wire.

## **CHORES**

**Jeff Nazzaro**

Susan returned home from work with groceries one evening to find her husband on the sofa, half a bottle of Scotch he'd always said was out of his price range on the coffee table next to a book she thought he'd finished months before, and no glass. On his lap was a handgun she'd never seen; on the curtains were his brains.

She walked slowly towards the mess, face contorting, but when she saw the cat perched on an arm of the sofa, intently lapping at a knot of tissue, she screamed and swung the grocery bag, one of the reusable nylon bags her husband had implored her to use. In her adrenaline-charged shock of horror and disbelief, she swung too hard and the wine bottle inside the bag struck square in the head and killed the cat.

On the counter in the kitchen, under an empty cat-food can, beside the sink full of dirty dishes, was a note scribbled in pencil on a sheet of college ruled paper that read: 'Sorry about the mess. Took out the garbage and fed the cat.'

Naturally, everyone assured her that the suicide wasn't her fault. And after she assured them that she was okay, they all said the same thing, something like: 'He didn't have to kill the cat.'

## ORIGAMI GORILLA

Jonathan Cardew

Theo held the note in his hand. It read:

Jerry

Pizza

Jam

‘Who’s Jerry?’ Theo asked.

Janine looked up from her origami. ‘What did you say?’

‘This list. It says Jerry, Pizza, Jam. So who’s Jerry?’

After little tucks and folds, Janine lay whatever she was making on the coffee table. She brushed a stray hair from her eyes with a knuckle. ‘I don’t know who you’re talking about.’

Theo showed her the list, cross-referencing her handwriting with another note she had written just today. It was unmistakably hers.

She resumed her origami.

‘So?’

‘So, I don’t know what you want me to say.’

‘The truth?’

‘I probably wrote Ben and Jerry’s in shorthand.’

Theo was expecting this. He left the living room and returned seconds later with a jar of jam and two Connie’s pizzas. ‘No ice cream,’ he said, placing the items ceremoniously on the table. ‘Jam and pizza, but no Ben and Jerry’s. Nothing named Jerry in the groceries this week.’ He felt a sudden beat of blood in his temple. ‘So who’s Jerry?’

‘Jesus, Theo,’ Janine said, staring at her fingers, ‘maybe someone at work.’

‘Maybe someone at work?’

‘Yes! Maybe someone at work.’

Theo sank back into the couch and exhaled. He watched as Janine picked up the piece of origami again. After a couple of nips, she held out what she’d made.

‘It’s for you. Here, take it.’

He took it, slowly. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s a gorilla.’

‘A what?’

‘A gorilla.’ She rested back and laced her fingers behind her neck.

‘A gorilla!’ He turned it around in his hands. ‘Where are its arms and legs? Where is its *face*?’

She closed her eyes. The wrinkles in her forehead seemed to move up and down independently – a kind of accordion contracting and releasing. Without sound.

Theo threw it on the table. ‘It doesn’t look a bit like a gorilla.’

Janine kept her eyes closed. ‘You think?’