

LAUDANUM LITERARY
REVIEW

THE IDEAL BRAIN TONIC
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SUBMISSIONS
OPENING IN JUNE!

BUMPH

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DAVID AND BATHSHEBA BY FARIS ALLAHHAM

Dead — for a brief moment

(all moments are brief, he supposed)

Time stopped, he shuddered

Begetting.

Forgetting

not his Venus, he

crafted destruction

of the Bridegroom wholly dead

for a brief moment

(all moments are brief, He supposed)

Mikhail clamps his large hands around the man's neck and squeezes.

“NINE!”

“As you may have heard, the boss passed away recently.”

“EIGHT!”

“But she gave me a list.”

“SEVEN!”

“And you were on it.”

“SIX!”

Mikhail tightens his grip, crushing tendons.

“FIVE!”

Veins bulge and blood vessels pop inside the man's eyes.

“FOUR!”

Mikhail zones out, thinking about the nice, short man he met tonight, with his thinning hair and handsome bulldog face.

“THREE!”

The man slumps onto the toilet seat, sighing the last few particles of carbon dioxide out of his lungs.

“TWO!”

Mikhail leaves the stall, locking it from the outside with a fingernail in the mechanism.

“ONE!”

Mikhail turns on the tap to wash his hands.

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!”

Faris Allahham is a poet and student from Danville, Kentucky. He currently attends the University of Kentucky studying biology and Arabic. He will soon attend medical school in the fall of 2024. He enjoys reading both poetry and fiction, listening to music, working out, and playing with his cat.

Harper Walton is a PhD English student from Bath. Their poetry, fiction and theory is published by Oestrogenation, Carrion Press, 1883 Magazine and more. In 2023, they were highly commended for the Manchester Cathedral poetry competition, achieved third place in the Brick Lane Bookshop short story prize and won the Young Poets Network's Self Portrait Challenge.

render all technology useless soon... you'd be wasting your hard-earned cash."

Zorán laughs.

"What? You think I'm being gullible?"

"Please, your head's so far up in the clouds I bet you sneeze lightning."

"So you really think you can get rich from robots?"

"Do you know the etymology of the word? It comes from the Czech *robot*, meaning forced labour. I reckon there's a fair bit of money to be made hiding in the jobs no one wants to do. For me, the thought is satisfying, a closed circle. My ancestors worked themselves to the bone for pennies – as leather tanners, munitions makers, glass bottle factory hands, umbrella manufacturers, cow keepers."

"I admire your ambition. I can feel the strength of your aura. Assertive, driven, dominant."

"What's an aura?"

"I'll tell you some other time. I really must get going," Mikhail says hurriedly, glancing at the exit. "I have some important business to take care of."

"Wait, you never told me why you're here? What exactly do you do? Let me guess, acquisitions?"

Mikhail takes out a pen and writes something on a paper napkin. "I'm staying at the City View Hotel. This is the number, ask for me. And please, go and talk to those computer geeks before it's too late." He leaves with a smile and a swift firm palm on Zorán's shoulder. He pushes past red-faced wobbly tuxedo men and women with white powder-rimmed nostrils. Making a beeline to the bathroom, he dims all distractions.

There's only one man at the urinal. He has short, tightly curled hair and a goatee. Mikhail grabs the back of his neck and slams him face-first onto the sink. His suit trousers fall to his ankles and urine sprays from the tip of his circumcised penis. Broken nose dripping blood, he yells, before Mikhail silences him with a hand over his mouth. Cliff Richard's *The Millennium Prayer* seeps under the bathroom door, muffled by distance. Mikhail recognises the words of the Lord's Prayer to the melody of *Auld Lang Syne*. He hauls the man into the stall and locks the door. He turns the man's face until his shaking eyes meet his own.

"TEN!" he hears shouted by a chorus from the conference room.

WHILE SHE WAS AWAY BY ACE BOGGESS

The package arrived
with a flying-insect trap
she ordered. I took it out,
put it together, plugged it
into a bathroom outlet.
I snapped a photo
with my phone: the cone
of purple like a black light
six inches from her mala
hanging off a white knob
on the medicine cabinet.
I loved the juxtaposition
of Buddhist life-is-sacred
next to a doomsday device
for small winged beings,
the violet mushroom cloud
already showing detonation.
Those fruit flies had to go,
she texted. I told her, *No,*
you despise your ancestors.
I could feel the vibrations
of her shrugging
from across silent miles
of cellphone towers
between here & serenity.

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy*. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble. His seventh collection, *Tell Us How to Live*, is forthcoming in 2024 from Fernwood Press.

REMUS BY ANTHONY DAVID VERNON

Remember when we were wolves
 How we drank from tits
 And lived in caves
 And hunted in packs
 Remember when we had no words
 How our actions told our stories
 And our bonds were strong but speechless
 Those days were so joyful and violent
 Do you remember when that changed?

Anthony David Vernon is a guy who thinks sometimes and writes at other times. He has a master's degree in philosophy from the University of New Mexico along with two published books entitled *The Assumption of Death* and *Flings on Flings*.

suit and lit it whilst she was still inside, then extinguished it after getting the footage. Apparently, her screams of terror were genuine. Two years later, she was offered the role of another enflamed woman, a villager caught in a forest fire. My aunt, who to this day remains the most superstitious person I know, kept telling my mother *there is no two without three*. This unhelpful aphorism burrowed its way into my mother's head until she couldn't sleep for fear of being set alight. She spent many insomniac hours practising the stop, drop and roll technique, and fashioning her own fire-retardant clothing."

Mikhail's mind falters, unable to find something to say. He glances up at the chandelier as if for divine inspiration. "So... your father raised you?"

"Yes, with the help of aunts and neighbours. He worked a lot, so sometimes I had to come in with him. He was a medical photographer. I saw some interesting things. A two-metre-long rope of human hair in the shape of intestines because the patient was addicted to eating it. A 7-kilogram apron of abdominal flesh hanging on a hook whilst the woman it belonged to lay on her back. Fat removal surgery. They cut it clean off."

Martine McCutcheon's ballad *Perfect Moment* drifts gently over the dancefloor, where a few white-haired businessmen are champagne-drunk slow dancing with their granddaughter-aged escorts.

"But the thing I'll never forget was brain surgery. The doctor didn't want me in the operating room at first, but my father convinced him that I wanted to become a surgeon like him when I grew up, and he was flattered. With brain surgery, they fold the scalp forward over the face. And when they've finished, they use bone dust to glue the sections of the skull back together." After the silence lasts a little too long, Zorán's face jolts into shame. "Oh, God, I've just realised how vulgar those anecdotes were. You've probably never imagined such ghastly things."

Mikhail laughs off the awkward tension.

"Sorry, I'm not used to people sharing so much with me. It sounds like you had a fairly unconventional childhood."

"You could say that," Zorán sighs, laughing along, "but look at me now! My parents were born with nothing. I got into real estate and I'm standing in this fancy hotel's conference room so I can discuss the economic viability of artificial intelligence with tech moguls." He shifts his eyes over to the jeans-and-tees, who are downing bottles of beer and patting each other on the back. Zorán wonders why the most casual people in the room are the most intimidating to him.

"Haven't you heard of the millennium bug? A computer virus will

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it to me," leather jacket smiles.

"Your accent... where exactly is it from? I'm usually good at this, but I just can't tell."

The tall man loosens a sound from his mouth, something between a laugh and a sigh.

"I'm kind of from all over the place. If you can hear eastern Europe, it's because after my father passed away, I moved to his homeland, Russia, and lived there for a few years, learning the language to honour his memory."

"How thoughtful. And how rude of me; I've just realised I never asked your name."

"Mikhail Vasiliev," the tall man says, extending his hand to shake. The other man grips it with surprising firmness.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mikhail. You're probably the first person I've met with whom I share the first three letters of my surname. Mine's Vastag. Zorán Vastag."

"Oh really, what are the chances?"

"I'm not sure, but there can't be many of us."

"Your name is quite unique to me... where are you from?" Mikhail asks. Britney Spears' *...Baby One More Time* starts playing, causing both men's ears to prick in curiosity.

"Hungary."

"I've never met a Hungarian before."

"I haven't met many myself, since living in London."

"Do you ever get homesick?" Mikhail asks, the reflection of large golden 2000-shaped balloons illuminating his eyes.

"Sometimes. I've been calling my father more recently these days, because he's quite unwell. I'd like to return to Hungary soon to spend some quality time with him before he goes. I'll take him out on a boat on Lake Balaton. He enjoys the freshness of the air there."

"That sounds nice. What about your mother?"

"She fled Hungary in 1956 because of the revolution. She walked all the way to Austria whilst heavily pregnant with me. I was born shortly after she arrived. I never got to meet her." Zorán looks down at his brand-new Oxfords and exhales. "Later, relatives told me that she had been an actress in Budapest. Rarely casted due to her lack of conventional good looks, she was poor and had to take any role she could find. Her first speaking part was a prostitute who died in a housefire. She was 20 at the time. They made her wear a special

DAVID, BY THE ANKLE BY NORA SCHIMPF

thank the hanged man choosing compassion
in his eyes. he is with me, stiff-necked and abjected.
we toss our hair at daybreak, rushing the blood to our lips
and serenity to our skulls. among the dead we are kings,
living in hollow chariots and feasting on our homes.

among the dead we are children,
slumped in exhaustion.

with perfect faith we dig our pits deeper,
the homes in our chests ache and we thrive
at their decay. squarely on our heads
mischievous stirs its last wet grass blades
and memory fades into silt.

Nora Schimpf (they/any) is an engineer, trans woman, and queer disaster based in Louisville, Kentucky. Their poems have previously been published in Coffin Bell and Transom.

SITUATIONSHIP, OR A DISCOURSE ON PAST LIVES BY WILLIAM SUMMAY

For F—

pistachio gelato submerged into a stomach bruised with joy,
tattered fingers tossed further out to hook the melting cream, as you tell
me about the peculiar persistence of past lives...*like our friendship*...I have
been thinking lately about the Indo-European ablaut: vowel variations,
a map of wind shears words, gasping for air,
ever-emerging into childhoods: *song* into *sing*, *father* into *fatherless*, *son* into something
other than *son*. I have been thinking about how I am made of water &
minerals; how language is an eddy current, each brackish pebble falling in &
out of, never & always, these bodies, seldom the same with each
passage; how a rock finds its own smoothness in its surviving
the world crashing against it, & how its smoothness persists in finding
a mouth worthy of hiding *smooth* inside of...*or our relationship*...
I have been thinking lately about Babel & its fumbling tongues but
in fumbling becoming soft, earth-filled bellies, sailing always into
primordial accidents, the way a never-dead fossil breathes life into a
machine it could never dream of; perhaps you speak English because of the
Empires & I am only American because of whiskey, but we could have
been anything, even Amalfi fishermen, feral with homesickness,
casting ragged nets & impatient hands to fish out of these bodies
words without a sky to evaporate into...*or our situationship*...
Latin, *situs*; the Indo-European root, zero-grade form, an absence:
to be home. I've been thinking lately how I am not sure I believe
in past lives, even if your tenacious neck tastes of saltwater. I am sure
how sore the mooring into your home, crashing around on stained
Persian rugs & dark-oak floors, my words not quite finding their own smoothness,
so I bite off half of your name to see how brightly we can
wound it into something like joy between these gelato-stained lips
sticky with youth, & I will fasten the other half securely into your
spine for another life to be pulled into its current & make
an absence of its sweetness. *would you like to try some?* maybe later.

William Summay (he/him) is a writer and psychotherapist based in Louisville, KY. Through his writing, William explores queer-ness, the power of language, and the affective possibilities of violence and eroticism. William has been previously published in *SamFiftyFour Literary Magazine*.

SUCH GHASTLY THINGS BY HARPER WALTON

“Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you,” a deep, modulated voice says slowly through the wall-mounted speakers. “I only want you to have some fun.”

As Prince’s *1999* kicks in, a man stands alone at a high table, scanning the room. His small, sunken eyes flit between strangers’ faces, hesitant to linger too long on any in particular. Like most other men there, he’s wearing a black suit. The only exceptions are the men he’s come to meet, T-shirt and jean types with round glasses. A tall man intercepts his line of sight. He’s wearing a long leather jacket with notched lapels, like Neo from *The Matrix*. The rest of his outfit is equally dark, drawing attention to the stark, sculpted face under military-cut hair.

Finally a reason compelling enough to leave the comfort of the high table. The man fixes his posture to reach the full extent of his 5’8 frame. Ricky Martin’s *Livin’ La Vida Loca* erupts from the speakers in all its trumpeted glory. The man wades through crowds of businessmen drinking scotches on the rocks, arms gripping their dates so firmly it’s as if they’re expecting them to run away at any moment. The man’s eyes don’t linger on the young women’s silky dresses. They remain focused on the leather coat. The hotel conference room seems to melt away, oriental carpets and crown moulded ceiling fading to grey against the darkness of the leather. The man runs his fingertips over the long tables and picks up a bottle of Perrier. Whilst still striding purposefully forward, he cracks the cap, gulps half of it in one go, then places it down on another table.

He reaches his target. *He’s even more handsome in person. I’ve never seen a face so rigid before, so set in its expression.* The expression itself is not unkind, but vaguely serious, as if the man has come here with a specific goal he’s absolutely certain he will achieve.

“Happy new year,” the man says, perhaps overly friendly.

“Not for an hour yet,” leather jacket replies.

“I suppose. But it’s a convenient ice breaker.”

“You probably have to break the ice a lot at these events,” the tall man says sympathetically, maintaining eye contact.

“Someone has to. If I’m being honest, it’s usually me.”

“People don’t instigate conversations with you? You look just as capable a businessman as anyone in here.”

“Thanks, but I’ve been told I have an unapproachable face.”