

# The 504

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark, ornate costume with a fur collar and a headpiece, holds a sword. The background is a smoky, ethereal grey.

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David Pring-Mill  
Devin Vandriel  
Yash Seyedbagheri  
Todd Kidd  
John Grey  
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## **GUARD DUTY**

By Rosa Meronek

Rosa Meronek is a graduate from the University of Arizona with a BFA in Theatre Production and a minor in Creative Writing. She lives in Tucson, Arizona and co-authored a children's book, *The Girl in the Tree*, for the non-profit children's literacy organization, Make Way for Books.

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Locked. Uriel marked a check on her sheet then moved to the next door. It was locked. She made another check on her paper.

She kicked rocks along the path as she dragged her black boots through the dirt, scuffing the toes. Tall pine trees lined one side of the path. Small grassy hills lined the other.

Her face contorted with a long, wide yawn, and extending her arms over her head, lengthened her spine. Lowering them, she scratched at the feather that tickled her neck then rubbed her palms against her eyes. She rolled her head, stretching the tightness in her muscles.

She hated twenty four-hour guard duty. How many endless nights had she pulled guard? An eternity of them. She hated doing her checks. They were stupid and pointless. Nothing ever changed. Mission from God, her ass.

She considered just marking off the other checks without finishing her rounds. Others had done it. She knew they had. Everyone did.

No. She had to do the right thing and physically check all the doors and gates. Michael would never let her hear the end of it if something happened on her watch. Yet... somehow his name never ended up on the damn duty roster. Way to lead from the front.

She glanced up at the dark sky. The new moon and storm clouds filled the night with inky black, and the chill in the air bit at her face. She sighed as she kept walking.

One by one, the boxes on her sheet were checked off.

Uriel's breathing stopped. The weight of her battle gear crushed her chest. The final door on the final hill hung open, dangling from the bottom hinge. She ran towards it, the crunch of dirt and gravel under her feet, the thudding of her heart in her ears.

The putrid smell of death hit her as she got to the open doorway. She peered into the tunnel but could see only

black. Drawing her sword, she ran inside, brightening the tunnel with its flames.

She ran down into the dark passage, sword held ready to defend or attack, until the tunnel opened into a small cave. The sudden stench of rot punched her in the stomach.

She fought the urge to heave her dinner onto the ground and glanced around.

Five sets of broken manacles lay in the dirt.

Fire burned in her chest. Turning, she sprinted up the dark tunnel, darkness and the stench of unwashed sins swirling around her. She burst into the fresh night air and gulped it down.

Her fingers grasped at her side, pulling the golden horn and bringing it to her mouth, sounding the deafening alarm.

The smell of decay lingered on the wind, and she gave chase, her feathered wings spreading wide as she jumped into the air and soared into the sky.

## WELL-WISH

By Karlo Sevilla

Karlo Sevilla of Quezon City, Philippines is the author of the full-length poetry collection “Metro Manila Mammal” (Soma Publishing, 2018) and the chapbook “You” (Origami Poems Project, 2017). Recognized among the Best of Kitaab 2018 and twice nominated for the Best of the Net, his poems appear or are forthcoming in Philippines Graphic, Ariel Chart, DIAGRAM, Small Orange, Black Bough Poetry, The Wombwell Rainbow, Line Rider Press, Melbourne Culture Corner, Quince Magazine, Last Leaves, Raven, 3 Moon Magazine, and elsewhere. He is also one of the contributors to “Pandemic: A Community Poem,” Muse-Pie Press’s nominated poem for the 2020 Pushcart Prize.



May you  
be spared  
the fate  
of having  
to choose  
not between  
life and death  
but death  
and death  
when you feel  
the flame's heat  
grow hotter  
on your back  
while standing  
on the ledge  
as the invitation  
grows louder  
from the pavement  
forty stories  
Below.

## DEFIANCE AT A WINE TASTING

By David Pring-Mill

As a tech journalist and consultant, David Pring-Mill has been quoted in Forbes, CNBC, Business Insider, and USA Today. In his spare time, he writes poetry. His poems have appeared in Ariel Chart, Poetry Quarterly, Boston Literary Magazine, East Coast Literary Review, FIVE:2:ONE, and many other literary magazines.

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When I enjoy a fancy wine or cheese,  
I delight in the taste of the mistakes.  
The aficionados try to name the subtleties.  
The consumers pay for attainable quality.  
And I celebrate the rich heritage  
of poor performance —  
the people who left their grapes and milk  
untouched for too long.

From that initial mistake came not only the thing  
but the concept of the thing: wine, cheese.  
Then more mistakes were made, to find out  
how to perfect it.  
But what is perfection  
if it is built upon mistakes?

It makes all the mistakes perfectly necessary.  
And here are the people  
trying to know it, pair it  
so expertly, vying for something elite,  
not mistakes of their own.

If a pothole in the road  
detours you to a different place  
where you meet one of the great loves of your life,  
is that road not perfect for you?  
Should you thank the bad contractors  
or the unbalanced city council budget?

## A BETROTHAL NECKLACE

By Devin Vandriel

Devin Vandriel has recently graduated with degrees in English and Creative Writing from the University of Arizona. Although dyslexic, she was encouraged to write by her 8th-grade history teacher. Since this encouragement, she has written several short stories and novels that she hopes never see the light of day.

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Calmila frowned as she turned the corner. In the dim unlit hall, the baskets had been pulled from their shelves. Beads made from glass, stone and precious jewels lay scattered and mixed.

Calmila jumped as a basket in the back room was tipped over and beads spilled into the hallway.

Glaring, she stepped delicately over the beads, careful not to crush any of her inventory. Someone was in her shop, destroying her property, stealing the food from her table, and money from her account. She slowed as she approached the door, realizing that the someone might hurt her.

Another basket crashed to the ground.

Calmila stood frozen. She had to do something. But... she could be hurt. Putting one hand on the wall, she peeked into the room.

And almost laughed in relief.

One black fox and one orange one were rolling around, playing tag and catch-me-if-you-can.

Stepping into the doorway, she put her hands on her hips. "Get out of here!"

The foxes froze. They darted through the open window - streaks of black and red.

Calmila put her hand to her forehead and rubbed back and forth.

She didn't understand when the window had been left open. She was sure she'd locked it the night before. It would take her days to reorganize all these beads. Time she could spend making bracelets to sell at the festival, or betrothal necklaces for men to give to their desired.

Calmila turned and surveyed the damage. Nothing appeared to be broken, but the beads had been impossibly mixed. She would have to close the store. Or work late every night for the next two weeks to get it fixed. She didn't have the money to hire a local girl to help.

“Hello,” a man’s voice called from the front. She knew that voice. But she couldn’t quite place him.

“I’m coming! Just a moment, I’m coming!” Calmila stepped over the scattered beads and pulled the window closed. Watching her step, she snaked through the river of beads to the front of the store. Trying not to crush any of her precious inventory.

The man was sharply dressed in a grey three-piece suit, designed to make him look skinnier than he really was.

“Good morning, Mr. Smith,” Calmila said, a sense of dread rising.

“Good morning, Miss. Johnson.” Mr. Smith brought a white napkin to his mouth and nose, turned to his left, and sneezed. “Pardon my allergies.”

He folded the napkin and put it in the front pocket of his suit. “Miss. Johnson, as I am sure you are aware, you are several months late on your rent.” His tone was dry, and formal. Cold and detached. The kind of voice a



doctor used when they were about to tell the next of kin that there was nothing to be done.

Calmila clasped her hands in front of her. "I'll have your money after festival."

Mr. Smith nodded. "An offer has been put in on your outstanding debts." He reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a white envelope. "I'm sorry to inform you that your building and the collateral you put up have passed from your ownership to the Lockwoods." He held out the envelope for her to take.

Calmila stared at it like it was a viper.

Mr. Smith stared at her for a moment longer before setting it on the counter. Turning, he strode to the door. "I am sorry, Miss. Johnson."

Calmila picked up the envelope and shoved it into her apron pocket. She would read it later. Maybe over a cup of tea, by the fire, as she tried not to cry. Turning her back to the door, she braced her hands on the counter behind her.

This shop had been her mother's, and her mother's mother. It had passed in an unbroken line down from mother to daughter for more than ten generations. Now, she was the one that was going to lose it.

Dropping her hands to her sides, she stood up straight, determined to pass the shop to her daughter. She could talk to the Lockwoods and buy the shop back after the festival next week.

She swallowed, recalling the stories of how the Lockwoods would circle small establishments and put them out of business to maintain their corner on the market. But the Lockwoods traded in dyes, not beads. They'll sell it back to her if she could make an enticing enough offer.

Pushing the door to the back open, she grabbed a basket, righted it, and began picking up all the tiny emerald beads.

Three hours later, she pushed a fourth basket back into its place, knuckling her sore back.

“Is anyone here?” A man called from the front of the store.

Calmila rolled her neck from side to side as she stepped into the front of the shop.

The man was well dressed.

“Can I help you, Sir?”

The man flushed and smiled. “Just Ian. I call my father Sir.”

Calmila smiled. “Okay Ian. What can I assist you with today?”

“I need a Betrothal Necklace.” Ian swallowed and looked away.

Calmila stepped up to the counter, pulled a binder from under the table, and set it down. “What kind of beads would you like to use?”

He shook his head. "Not beads. Jewels."

Calmila nodded. "Of course." She pulled the book from the counter and grabbed another. "What kind of jewels would you like to use?"

Ian bit his lip. "She's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, so the most beautiful gems you have."

Calmila grinned. "Sapphires." She flipped through the book to the right page. "They are the most beautiful gems. They come in almost every color. But the blue ones look like pieces of the sky hardened and fell to earth." She flushed. "At least I think so. What does your lady think?"

Ian's cheeks went red. "I only gathered enough courage to speak with her today. I've admired her from a distance since we were children." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know what she likes."

Calmila nodded her understanding. It was customary for the man not to speak with the woman he was interested in until the necklace was ready. But times were

changing. Men sometimes sneaked a conversation in with their love before the agreement was set. She flipped the book around for him to see.

Ian stepped closer to the counter and looked down at the book.

Calmila watched him flip through the pages. He paused on a page detailing Padparadscha sapphires.

“What do you think of these?”

Calmila gave him a warm smile. “They are the rarest sapphires in the world. Pink, the color of young love. A perfect gift for your betrothal.”

Ian shook his head. “But what do you think? If a man gave you a necklace made from these, would you accept his marriage proposal?” His face was open, his eyes searching.

Calmila looked down at the page and fingered it. “Yes.” She nodded firmly. “Yes, I would.”

Ian stared at her for a few moments longer. “How much?”

Calmila did the calculations in her head. “About... 50,000 for the stones.”

Ian reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a blank bank note. “How much for the entire necklace? And don’t forget to include a tip for your labor.” He set the note on the counter and pulled a pen from his pocket.

Calmila blinked. “Oh... um.. say 55,000.”

Ian filled in the note and handed it to her. “Can I get this the morning of the festival?”

Calmila nodded. “Of course. I’ll have it ready for you to pick up.”

Ian smiled and left the shop.

Calmila looked down and felt herself get light headed as she stared at the bank note. He had given her 62,000. With this, she would be able to buy her shop back. No

more payments. No more visits from bankers demanding money. No more having to decide between food or electricity.

Calmila closed her shop and put a sign in her window to let potential customers know that the store wouldn't be opening until after the festival. Then, she got to work.

The design he wanted would take her a full week's worth of work to complete. Luckily, she kept those jewels in the floor safe in the back room. She wouldn't have to spend time looking for them.

For the next week, Calmila spent the days setting the stones and wrapping the white gold wire around the precious stones. At night, she spent two hours sorting the back room.

The day of the festival came, and she opened her shop.

Ian came in. He looked nervous.

Calmila smiled. "Ian, I have the item you ordered ready."

She pulled the necklace from behind the counter. It lay nestled on black velvet.

Ian's mouth dropped open slowly, as if he were unaware of its movements.

"No woman could say no to a declaration of love like this," Camila said as she slid the item over for his inspection.

Ian's hand hovered above it, as if he were afraid he would ruin it with his touch. He pushed it back over to her.

Ian thanked her profusely as she boxed it up.

Calmila left thirty minutes after he did, locking the shop behind her. She had to get her shop back. Which meant she had to visit the people who owned it.

The Lockwoods' estate was massive, with long paved pathways, elegantly shaped bushes, and trimmed trees. Considerable time and money had been invested to maintain and improve upon this estate since her childhood. Even before they had begun renovations, it had been a palace.



She was shown right in and seated in a small room off the main hall.

She didn't have to wait long before a middle-aged man sat down across from her. "Miss Calmila Johnson, I'm Mr. Neigel, the Lockwoods' lawyer." He paused, taking a sip from his tea. "We expected a visit from you sooner."

Calmila blushed. "I had to finish a commission before I could come and negotiate for my business." Calmila pulled out a blank banknote. "How much do you want for my shop?"

The man smiled. "I'm afraid the Lockwoods have given me special instructions. Normally, they are happy to sell businesses back to the owners. However, with your shop, they would like to trade."

Calmila felt her hopes die. The Lockwoods were known for their trades. It always seemed fair, but it ended up being more than could be believed. A small price. But more than she would be able to bear.

As he reached into his bag, her hopes withered and died.

He pulled out a black velvet box. Setting it gently on the table, he slid it over to her.

Calmila stared at the box. It was a betrothal box. A small price. Seemingly simple.

Her hand shook as she flipped it open.

Pink sapphire stones set in white gold glittered from the box.

Ian kneeled on one knee next to her.

She jumped. She hadn't heard him come in.

He took her hands in his. "Calmila, I have watched you since we were children. Your beauty and grace pale in comparison with your kindness, wisdom, and compassion. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

## **YOU HAVE DIED OF DYSENTERY**

By Yash Seyedbagheri

Yash Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA program in fiction. Yash's work is forthcoming or has been published in *WestWard Quarterly*, *Café Lit*, and *Ariel Chart*, among others.

The world imprisons. I stay home, play Oregon Trail II.  
I love the openness of the trail, vast territory uncharted.

So many decisions, more than I remember from  
childhood.

Decisions call, while corpses pile up on TV and people  
protest.

Room constrains.

Which wagon train do I join? How many oxen?

What if X gets a cold?

I ford rivers, rest for the sick. People still die, dysentery  
and cholera.

Why? How do you know when you went wrong?

I walk into the night. I need fragrance, the stars, the  
moon.

Am I killing someone now?

At least it's not dysentery.

## **OLDEN**

By Tony Kidd

Tony began writing as a child and continues to do so in adulthood. He is a husband, cybersecurity worker, and a bit of a recluse. When not writing, he is usually painting or sculpting.

Olden ship of times before  
Left marooned and tattered  
Laid aground, washed ashore  
Once a part of wars so bold  
Now at peace and rest, she lays  
Along with many stories never to be told  
The men who once journeyed with her  
Now strewn across the lands  
Some in the ground  
Some still in taverns  
A young explorer wonders  
Before the ship, he gazes upon  
What would those old men say  
What fascinating stories would they tell  
About the journey they were on

## **OFF TO SEE MY PSYCHOANALYST**

By John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Orbis, Dalhousie Review and the Round Table. Latest books, “Leaves On Pages” and “Memory Outside The Head” are available through Amazon.

That picture on your desk.

It must be your family.

Attractive blonde wife.

Two children –  
one boy, one girl.

And a dog,  
a Scottish terrier.

Is his name Jock, I wonder.

As for the prints on the wall,  
I believe that's a Georgia O'Keefe  
painting of a New York hotel  
and, next to it,  
an Edward Hopper work  
of silent people sharing a common space.

Of course,  
your degrees, your certifications,  
awards and thank-you letters  
from various officialdom are plastered everywhere.

I know everything  
about your personal life,  
your tastes,



your schooling,  
and how well the community  
holds you in regard.

That's my analysis.  
No monetary charge.  
But could I lie on your comfy couch awhile?

## **A MOMENT TOO LATE**

By Amanda Coote

Amanda Coote is an emerging writer with a BA in creative writing. Their writing focuses on the humanity and realism behind high concept stories, blending genre writing and literary fiction, and often including LGBT characters and themes.

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Everything is still here. Just outside, on the other side of the thick glass smudged by countless hands, there the world lives, but you have left that. Here it is quiet, and the world is frozen, waiting on bated breath. On your wrist a golden watch, still so shiny and new, with that little inscription "A&H: don't leave this one with the fishes!". A little joke, a reference to a summer day at the lake with the little boys and their stick fishing rods and the girls chasing dogs or else playing in the water, and you frowned and cursed to yourself when, after you dove in, you looked at your arm and saw the old watch, now useless, restrained to you, soaked with lake water. Eyes, hazel and warm, met yours, and you saw concern and comfort in them, and you were promised a new one. You laughed when the same eyes, now looking wry, pretended to scold you for being so clumsy. But that moment sits out there, with everything else. Your watch, yes. The second hand has slowed down and come to a grinding halt. You are mid-breath, and in this moment, your head is turning slowly from your small, isolated and quiet world to that outside world. Your world - a small, but luxurious train compartment with you as its sole inhabitant. Soft, leather seats with floral patterns, wood

finishing carved elegantly. Above you, suitcases filled with all your belongings.

You don't plan to return to that place? Where will you go?

Your compartment connects to so many others, those small worlds all filled with people leaving this place for another, the train their faithful escort. Their lives don't concern you, and there are far too many of them for you to toy with what the lives of each are like. What does it matter which are bankers, or old couples, or young adults just out of college? Besides, your mind is elsewhere. Fishing poles, a broken watch, those hazel eyes. . . .

Enough. You shut those thoughts out. Best not to dwell on it. Only time can tell. The second hand inched forward, and it played with the next thin black line, marking the hour. Outside, yes, look outside. Your window is closed, muting any sound and, for a moment looking out you are reminded of old silent movies. Everyone there is a blur, there are so many, all moving about so fast. In the distance, there stands the ticket

booth, your memory of passing through it, handing your passport and ticket to a young, disconcerted guard already moving to the back of your mind. Now, like the memory, the booth is too far away to see properly. Even the big, bright letters setting it apart are blurred, which the smudged glass doesn't help. You could open the window, but then it is already so close, by the time you even stood up the train would be moving away from that booth.

Apart from the sea of people, you notice stalls you passed on your way, all selling a variety of goods. There is one you passed far down toward the train's engine, with magazines, newspapers, a young scroungy-looking boy in a plain cap reciting recent events. Someone died, you think, but you don't really remember, although it was so important in the moment. Another stall, somewhat closer, selling souvenirs, petty keepsakes people buy in a desperate attempt to remember they were ever there. Quickly, time is running out! A man is handing over a wad of cash to the clerk, a little girl expectantly reaching up, hoping to free from her father's grip the little bear wearing the shirt that says "I ♥ Frankfurt". The father's

eyes are on the train, and one foot is already moving in anticipation towards the car door closest to him. If the two fail to get in, you assume, the father will scold the child to great lengths. For now, though, they are frozen like the rest of the world. There is one more stall, almost an arm's reach away. This one sells food. Small, decent, pre-wrapped sandwiches. Chips, bottled waters and juices. Then, closer towards you, fresh fruit. Bananas just starting to brown, shiny red apples, plums, bags of grapes. Roasted nuts. You wish you had bought some, but you were in such a hurry.

The second hand is moving, and the world starts to whirl into motion. The father grabs his daughter's hand, races through the closing doorway. The train blows its whistle, and a conductor is heard saying "All a—"

Wait, the sentence couldn't finish yet! Something was missing. There, in the crowd, a missing puzzle piece. Everything was coming apart. It had to be there, you screamed in your head. You scanned again, looking for it, for them.

"All aboard," called a second time.

The puzzle has come apart. The second hand strikes past the hour mark. Everything that was still is now suddenly in motion. All that one instant ago was right before your eyes is now out of sight or a senseless blur: the crowd, the boy with the plain cap and the young eyes, the souvenirs, the ticket booth, even that fruit that you could have dug into, peach juice dripping down your chin as you laugh the summer evenings away, strolling through the woods, hazel eyes laughing with you.

Summer at the lake. A broken watch. You turn away. You can't look at that world anymore. In another instant it will all have vanished. A tear streams down your cheek. You thought . . . but thoughts led you astray. You were wrong, weren't you? About those summer nights, those days in the water, those cherished memories. A misconception, and a broken heart.

But then, in the distance. You don't see him, already your head is turned away. There, right where you had been looking, but the food stand had blocked your vision. Hazel eyes looking frantically around. He didn't get to say goodbye, did he? He looks up, in the same

instant that you turned your head away. He calls your name. The window! If only you had opened it. He runs toward the carriage but it is too late: the train is in motion. Hazel eyes watch you become a blur to the outside world.

Just a moment too late.