

Micro Fiction (250-300 words)

With One Wheel Gone Wrong

By A.M. Homes

With one wheel gone wrong, she careens into the checkout line. A perfect shopper, she prides herself on sailing the circulars, clipping coupons, buying in bulk. Her basket is overflowing with catnip and kitty litter, Pull-Ups and pomegranates—plenty of all. She takes a magazine out of the rack; there's a spot to scratch, an offer she can't resist—"Got an itch you can't identify, don't know what you want, let this be your moment." The background photo is of a beautiful house with everything just as you would want it to be—untouched by reality. She scratches; her finger is quickly coated with gold powder and under that is something a little sticky—tugging at her. It is as though she is being pulled into the magazine. A sudden burst of light, an explosion of inspiration, a fleeting illumination, and she is inside the picture and it is clear—this is her house, this is who she is, the life she is supposed to live.

It is incredible—she's seeing not only the future but the pathway there—and it's a new kind of floor tile—you just put one foot in front of the other, don't stop, and watch where you're going. And then, as though in a faraway dream, she hears the scanner beeping, she hears the checker say, "Are you taking that magazine?" Drawing a deep breath, she pulls herself back into the checkout line. She takes every copy of the magazine out of the rack. "I'll take all you've got," she says.

"Paper or plastic?"

Near Taurus

By Dawn

After the rains had come and gone, we went down by the reservoir. No one was watching, or so it looked to us.

The night was like to drown us.

Our voices were high—his, mine; soft, bright—and this was not the all of it (when is it ever?).

Damp palms, unauthorized, young: We would never be caught, let alone apprehended, one by the other.

He was misunderstood; that's what the boy told me.

"Orion, over there. Only the belt. The body won't show until later," he said. "Arms and such."

Me, I could not find the belt, not to save my life, I said.

Flattened with want: "There is always another time," he said.

He died, that boy. Light-years! Ages and ages. And here I am: a mother, witness, a raiser of a boy.

I could tell you his name.

I could and would not.

"Here's where the world begins," he'd said. I see him now—unbroken still; our naked eyes searching for legends—the dirt beneath us parched.

Vista di Mare

By Stuart Dybek

In Genoa, as she packs to leave, he tells her that he doesn't want it to end, and she replies that if he really knew what he wanted, she wouldn't be leaving.

Alone, he continues on along the coast toward Rome, but at a station where a field of sunflowers overlooks the sea, he impulsively gets off the train. Not far from shore, he can see two fishermen employing their nets.

He sets off on a trail climbing through olive and lemon groves and steeply terraced vineyards. In Genoa he'd reduced his belongings to what fit in a backpack. He sweats under its straps and imagines this is how it would have felt to tour Europe when he was young. In college he had a girlfriend who wanted to travel together. He'd have liked to go but was afraid it would seem like more of a commitment than he was ready for, and he took a job instead. Along a rocky cliff, he stops to watch the gulls ride the updrafts and wonders if he's ever known what he's most wanted. Then it comes to him with a force like tears that for once, at least, he does know: He wants this, to be here now, this moment looking out to sea.

The town, carved from the mountainside, is terraced like the vineyards—streets of cobbled steps. He wants to stay here where he's had his revelation, where nothing seems out of sight of the sea, but the only pension is closed due to a death. At a restaurant, he orders a bottle of mineral water and figs with prosciutto. The waiter speaks a little English and tells him about an apartment for rent, but it might not be a place the man would want to stay.

"Why not?" he asks.

"No *vista di mare*." All Americans, the waiter says knowingly, want a *vista di mare*. "That's why it is so inexpensive."

"What does it look out on?" he asks the waiter.

"Mountains."

Witness

By John Edgar Wideman

Sitting here six floors up on my little balcony when I heard shots and saw them boys running. My eyes went straight to the lot beside Mason's bar, and I saw something black not moving in the weeds and knew a body was lying there and knew it was dead. A 15-year-old boy, the papers said. Whole bunch of sirens and cops and spinning lights the night I'm talking about. I watched till after they rolled him away and then everything got quiet again as it ever gets round here, so I'm sure the boy's people not out there that night. Didn't see them till next morning. I'm looking down at those weeds. A couple's coming slow on Frankstown with a girl by the hand, had to be the boy's baby sister. They pass terrible Mason's and stop exactly next to the spot the boy died. How did they know. Then they commence to swaying, bowing, hugging, waving their arms about. Forgive me, Jesus, but look like they grief dancing, like the sidewalk too cold or too hot they had to jump around not to burn up. How'd his people find the spot. Could they hear my old mind working to guide them, lead them like I would if I could get up out this damn wheelchair and take them by the hand.