



EL PORTAL

Volume 78. Number 2. Fall 2020

EL PORTAL

Volume 78. Number 2. Fall 2020.

Editor

Tiara Bollig

Assistant Editor

Alexandria Crowson

Assistant Editor

David Lerner

Graphic Designer

Van Mawi Thang

Faculty Advisors

Dr. Michael Rizza

Dr. Lindsay Tigue

Faculty Advisor for Graphic Designer

Scott Golem

Front and Back Cover Photos copyright

“Taiban, NM”

© 2020 by Linda Sumption

Eastern New Mexico University's Literary Journal
Portales, New Mexico

ABOUT EL PORTAL

Since its inception in 1939, Eastern New Mexico University's literary magazine *El Portal*, has offered a unique venue for the work of writers, artists, and photographers both on campus and off. It is published each fall and spring semester thanks to a grant courtesy of Dr. Jack Williamson, a world-renowned science-fiction writer and professor emeritus at ENMU who underwrote the publication during his time on campus. Each semester, *El Portal* encourages previously unpublished short stories, poetry, non-fiction, flash fiction, photography, and art submissions from ENMU students and faculty, as well as national and international writers and artists. Consequently, the views expressed in *El Portal* do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints and opinions of ENMU as a whole. *El Portal* does not charge a submission fee. Submissions from ENMU students receive the special opportunity to win a first-, second-, or third-place cash prize in their respective categories.

GUIDELINES

Please submit all written work in .doc or.docx format. With the exception of poetry and art/photograph, please limit entries to one story/essay per submission. Simultaneous submissions are welcome; we ask that you notify El Portal in the event that your work is accepted elsewhere so that we may remove it from consideration. When entering a submission, please include a third-person biography of no more than 50 words to be printed in the event that your submission is selected for publication.

- Fiction (up to 4,000 words)
- Creative Nonfiction (up to 4,000 words)
- Flash Fiction (up to 500 words)
- Poetry (up to 5 pieces)
- Art & Photography (up to 5 pieces)

Prizes will be awarded to ENMU students only. Prizes are awarded in the Prose, Poetry, and Art/Photography categories.

DEADLINES

Our staff reads year-round. Please note that we are a university-based publication. Response times may be slower in the summer. Please allow one-hundred and twenty business days for our staff to respond.

E-mail: El.Portal@enmu.edu

Website: ElPortalJournal.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Fishing Below Ouzel Fall, <i>Matthew J. Spireng</i>	1
Job Description, <i>Mark Belair</i>	2
The Scarf, <i>Mark Belair</i>	3
Silly Love Songs, <i>Mike Matthews</i>	4
Gather Ye, <i>Thomas Piekarski</i>	8
The House, <i>Daniel Moore</i>	9
Doorway Perspective 1, <i>Allison M. Palmer</i>	10
Creature from the Dream Time, <i>Naomi Lowinsky</i>	11
Buried, <i>Jaqueline Henry</i>	13
Depth, <i>Jaqueline Henry</i>	14
Drink and Be Merry, <i>DS Maolalai</i>	16
Cover Letter, <i>DS Maolalai</i>	18
Rideshare, <i>Jonathan Ferrini</i>	19
Mestiza, <i>Robert Rene Galvan</i>	29
Fast Fish Eat Quickly, or How to Learn Spanish like a Native, <i>John Dorroh</i>	30
Application for Having Children, <i>Nate House</i>	31
Brush Fires, <i>Jamie Logan</i>	44
What Happened to Ariadne?, <i>Jamie Logan</i>	45
Interview with Steve Bellin-Oka, <i>ENMU Students and Faculty</i>	46
My Husband and I Discuss How to Break Out of This Rut, <i>Steve Bellin-Oka</i>	55
Monologue as Hypothermia Sets In: A Cento, <i>Steve Bellin-Oka</i> ..	56

Ducks & Logs, <i>Gloria Keeley</i>	57
L.A. Freeway, <i>Gloria Keeley</i>	58
What We Felt and Forgot, <i>Cody Wilhelm</i>	59
Tongue Tied, <i>Cody Wilhelm</i>	60
Poison from Yesterday, <i>Cody Wilhelm</i>	61
Fling, <i>Grace Tschlis</i>	62
How a Comedian <i>Falls in Love</i> , <i>Alan Elyshevitz</i>	64
Heavenly Bodies, <i>Nels Hanson</i>	65
I'm Not Scared, Are You?, <i>Sara Kinard</i>	66
They May Be Poppies, <i>Dorty Nowak</i>	68
Struck, <i>Harlan Yarbrough</i>	69
I Squeeze Two Hands, <i>Tasha Vice</i>	77
Elevator Pitch, <i>Zach Murphy</i>	79
Cub Scout Blows It With Girl Scout, <i>Casey Killingsworth</i>	81
A Loaf of Bread, <i>Casey Killingsworth</i>	82
The Cubicle, <i>Tom McEachin</i>	83
Brainstorm, <i>Benjamin Harnett</i>	94
The Mountain House, <i>Benjamin Harnett</i>	95
Bad Omen: January 1961, <i>Emily Priddy</i>	96
Bay / San Francisco, <i>Marshall Farren</i>	98
Chile Store / Texas, <i>Marshall Farren</i>	99
I-10 / Southern California, <i>Marshall Farren</i>	100
The Joke of I, <i>Tenika Heidelberg</i>	101
Naked, <i>Tenika Heidelberg</i>	102
Fingers Crossed, <i>Tenika Heidelberg</i>	103

The Nurse, <i>Mike Sheedy</i>	104
Dog Beauty Contest, <i>Duane Anderson</i>	110
Still Lives on Canvas, <i>Patrick St. Amand</i>	111
Burning Flowers, <i>Lucy Martinez</i>	121
The Wedding Night (and accompanying art), <i>Paula Hernandez</i>	122
The Letters, <i>Abigail Warren</i>	132
Yoga & Cigarettes, <i>Abigail Warren</i>	133
The Wave Function, <i>Richard Wirick</i>	134
Excavating, <i>Gene Barry</i>	144
NineOneOne, <i>Jean E. Verthein</i>	145
Selkie, <i>Raven Lente</i>	155
Medusa’s Pain, <i>Raven Lente</i>	156
Liberty Atoms 46, <i>Christopher Barnes</i>	157
Liberty Atoms 48, <i>Christopher Barnes</i>	158
Our Dreams are Bonfires, <i>Richard Bentley</i>	159
Under the Weather—A Funeral, <i>Richard Bentley</i>	160
Traffic Report, <i>Eric D. Goodman</i>	161

FISHING BELOW OUZEL FALLS

Matthew J. Spireng

Figures that pool a few hundred yards
below Ouzel Falls would yield a large
cutthroat rainbow cross while I was still

on the path, too far for a photo of man
and fish to show anything but man in the distance
near rushing water with something in his hand

indistinguishable, as indistinguishable as
a distant ouzel feeding in the stream.
There, see that grey spot near shore

in the photo, that is an ouzel. The first trout
was the only fish the stream yielded that day.
A nice one, I could tell with naked eye. But

the camera would show nothing quite like it. Upstream
I climbed down near the water to shoot a close-up
of the next trout landed, but, as I say, the fly drew

no more bites. Each clear pool seemed barren.
So while there are photos of the man casting and
casting again, there are none that show his success.

JOB DESCRIPTION

Mark Belair

A disk of taut metal on a stand, a cymbal—when
downbeat-struck—launches the music into motion

while the snare drum, head stretched tight, pops
a backbeat that propels it, the snug bass drum

mooring its time, the drawn tom-toms
priming what's coming, the drummer—

on an instrument that can overpower—
a master of restraint with a job to translate

all these held tensions into utter relaxation,
into the open, easy groove that liberates.

THE SCARF

Mark Belair

A young couple sits at the edge
of a park fountain at night, their

talk and laughter undaunted by
cold wind-sprays of water, her

scarf, though stylish, too thin—
she finally mocks a big shiver—

while his knitted one has range for two, so
he loosens half a length and wraps her in it,

his arm then cradling her shoulder while she
warms a hand between the chest buttons of

his wool coat, their conversation still fluid,
each absentmindedly entwining with the other—

her ankle crossing his, his free hand further
securing the scarf, both heads tilting in turn

to hear the other over the fountain's rush—until
the interlaced couple make a single, living, enviable

hieroglyph
of love.

SILLY LOVE SONGS

Mike Matthews

Do you remember that time, Dad, when you sat at the bar, longing to feel your ex-girlfriend's warm breathe on your neck as she passionately whispered *Happy Valentine's Day* in your ear? The neighborhood regulars had not come in yet, so you closed your eyes, ignoring the triviality of the bartender venting about his roommate.

"The jerk ate my leftover Chinese," he complained, then tore open a frozen burrito.

But that didn't stop the memory of her face from filling your mind's eye. You smiled for a long moment, until you sadistically imagined her lips descending upon another man. The painful picture vanished like your next beer as you continued to drink alone in the stench of the bartender's microwaved indigestion. That sad hole in the wall was her favorite place, so you waited with hope in your heart.

"Can I get another?"

As the bartender stepped down to pull a five-dollar bill from your pity-party-campaign-fund, you watched a hopeless soul's reflection in the mirror while she played Elvis on the Wurlitzer jukebox.

The words too familiar to ignore.

The acoustics too perfect to pass up.

Your backbone now a six-pack thick.

Your Miller Longneck bottle transformed into a microphone as you spun away from the bar. Elvis beckoned you over to his twenty-five-cent mausoleum as the bright neon bubbles piped through the plastic tube like an umbilical cord. She looked up from the sea of 45s that flipped over with a click and a clank. Her green eyes watched you approach, tilting her head slightly as your singing ensued.

"For you have made my life complete, and I love you so," you serenaded her. She blushed, making her cheek dimples grow deeper. She moistened her pencil thin lips with the curl of her tongue, then playfully sang to you.

"Love me tender. Love me true. All my dreams fulfill," she nodded, inviting you to sing together like dueling broken hearts at a piano bar. You did, hoping with every ounce of your shattered soul to start over.

"For my darling, I love you. And, I, allllwaaays willlllllll." You both held the last note, letting it drift off until the bartender sarcastically applauded.

"What's Valentines without the King?" she whispered, glancing deeper into your bloodshot eyes.

"My name is Mitch. What's yours?" you asked, savoring the strawberry scent of her long, blonde hair.

"My friends call me Hope," she admitted with a twitch of her perfect button nose.

"Don't recall seeing you around here before," you flirted, awkwardly digging out the spare change from the caverns of your blue jeans.

"That's because you've been too busy with your girlfriend, and Elvis."

"Love makes for a small orbit," you half grinned, now holding a palm full of pennies and pocket lint.

"Where is she tonight?" she tackled the topic as her eyes scanned the barren bar.

"We hit a meteor New Year's Eve. She wants to abort the mission," you confessed, then took a long drink as you relived the argument in your head; her plans to terminate an unexpected pregnancy.

"Didn't seem to knock you off course if you still come here?" she probed your intentions.

"I was hoping she would wander in tonight," you admitted with an aura of optimism. "Pretty stupid, huh?"

"Pretty romantic, actually," she smiled, letting the silent solace build until the jukebox clicked and clanked.

"What about you?" you dug deeper, trying to craft the conversation. "Any new astronauts in your life?"

"What life?" she laughed. "I'm alone on Valentines, talking to a guy who sings off key into a bottle of beer.

"You didn't answer my question," you hopelessly chided, then took another long drink.

"No, no astronauts," she lamented, then turned toward the jukebox. "I used to think I was one of those women who put her career first, you know?"

You nodded as another record loaded, then began to play. She didn't sing. Neither did you.

Hush my darling.

Don't fear my darling.

The lion sleeps tonight.

"Did you pick this one, too?" you drunkenly asked as she faced the tomb of forgotten loves.

"Only Wurlitzer in the neighborhood," she said confidently. "Come on," she tugged at your arm and pulled out a couple of wrinkled dollar bills. "Next round of heartbreak is on me."

"Sure," you said, then finished off your beer. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Screwdriver," she replied, then grabbed your hand. "Hold the Vodka," she winked.

You smiled with a deep sense of relief, then headed to the bar, laughing out loud, "One shot of self-pity it is."

You caught Hope's reflection and watched her summon another spirit. You heard the plastic buttons click as she pressed them down, then smiled as she made her way over to the empty dance floor. She waited, remember?

You quickly returned with a shot of Wild Turkey and a beer in one hand, her OJ in the other. She sipped her juice and winked as you took your shot. The jukebox clicked and clanked. The melody began to play. Your hips commenced to sway with Hope. You gazed into her eyes, and she into yours, compassionately conveying the reconciliation and regret you both shared while you silently listened to the words.

*You'd think that people would have had enough of
silly love songs.*

I look around me and I see it isn't so.

And what's wrong with that?

I'd like to know.

'Cause here I go again!

As the song drew to its end, you sang the final lines together, remember? She pulled you closer so you could again feel her warm breath on your neck, then she whispered in your ear, "Happy Valentine's Day."

You drew back slightly to look in her eyes. Mom smiled and kissed you on your lips.

"Glad I came here."

"Glad I knew where to look."

Then the three of us headed home, together.

Do you remember, Dad?

I do.

GATHER YE

Thomas Piekarski

I
Their ostentation had gotten the better of them, gathered at heaven's gate, kicking, pounding, but it was locked tight. On this very sorrowful cusp of twilight's last glistening, nobody was listening to their wails and decrees. Aristocrat, snake-haired Indian maiden, hero, and more wanting in very desperately. Some ambiguous hermetic force outside the lie that life was or is had them dumbfounded, numbed, scatterbrained. Their hunger for love humongous. Erstwhile savoir-faire, swagger of once being something of substance only afterthought. So they raged.

II

And in the midst of their stratification, those men and women huddled together, crying, sighing, rent, cursing the seed they had once sprung from but now left bereft of. Not only had they become stymied, the universe no longer able to sustain them. How could they legitimately certify their being? Stench of rancid dreams. Blackest clouds shrouded them.

III

Individuation encrypted, their complete impotence having eliminated id and ego. No more matrimony of stars, no more moonlight. Memories become once-upon-a-time nursery rhymes in limbo. Run plum out of ideas, there was absolutely no way to dislodge, nor obviate entropy. And bells rung by elves in hell who reviled, would devour them.

THE HOUSE

Daniel Moore

was bordered in driftwood.
Waves of suffering's cold blue salt

stormed our faces in separate rooms
on beds like tiny Northwest Islands

eroding in morning fog.

Over time, grief lifted in the
beaks of gulls.

Over time, love stayed
like a dog seeking refuge,

in need of a bowl kindness carved
from someone's lost & floating dream

bleached by the sun & perfect.

DOORWAY PERSPECTIVES 1

Allison M. Palmer



CREATURE FROM THE DREAM TIME

Naomi Lowinsky

When life is fraught with paradox
When facts are lies
and truth is fake
When the moon howls
in the shadow of the earth
Consider this
creature from the Dream Time

The Last Australian Snowy Kangaroo Egret

stands with the grace of Maria
her long-stemmed neck
her meditative stance
her sweet and pungent marsupial pouch
She never was
She always is
in the Dream Time

She's come to save us
from the world's crazed din
to tuck us in to her sleeping pouch
while the opposites have it out
in the streets on the news
the mad king plots the end
of the world as we know it

But The Last Australian Snowy Kangaroo Egret

will stamp her paradoxical feet
For she has roots
She has wings
She can leap She can fly
She can kick the rascals out
She's a bad-ass mother
Don't cross her

who never was
who always is
in the Dream Time
When the moon turns red
in the shadow of earth and even she
of the big fierce feet is afraid
in that bloodiest night

just cuddle up in her sleeping pouch
suckle her ancient mother's milk
You never know when the tide will turn
when the wolf will find her mate
when the sun will rise on the other side
halo the moon with glory and she
the last of her kind will spread great wings

as waters rise as fires rage she'll carry us off
to some other realm down under where kangaroo play
She'll suckle us for as long as we need
to become what we need to become
She'll feed us ancient lore the lay of the land
the journey of the sun the wolf in the moon
while the new myth forms our bones

And The Last Australian Snowy Kangaroo Egret

will deliver us to a world we've not imagined
where paradox is temple
is sacred text is living space
for the spread of wings for big fierce feet
for a people who never were
but always are
in the Dream Time

BURIED

Jaqueline Henry

Henry scratches at my knees, looking
for attention as I try to write.

I don't know where to start.
Time keeps me leashed

unwilling to let me roam through pages
of pain to find the beginning,

and figure out exactly when it was when
I discovered what forgiveness meant.

I don't know why it's necessary for me
to go backwards to find forwards

when I'm told—and I've known this—
that the past and future don't really exist.

Be in the now, be in the now!

But right now I say, tell that to Henry—
who remembers the history of every

bone he's ever buried in his little puppy life,
his nose blackened with the reality of mulch

and his tail wagging at his discovery:
Look at what I've got for you!

as if this is something new, and not planted by him,
not the thing he chose to inter

and sniff out when he was bored or lonely or
hungry or just wanting to chew, or discover.

I dislodge the bone from his mouth all yucked
up with gook, and throw it on the lawn with its pee

stains and mucked-up clay and patches needing seed.
Henry snatches it up and heads into the garden.

DEPTH

Jaqueline Henry

Sometime before she dies,
Aurora lay by the back door
watching slick sleet drill down
like rain—but slanted
like this *////// //// ////*
forming acute angles with
the ground.
She tilts her Lhasa head,
mimicking the shape,
and wondering *///* could she be? *///*
if the world itself had suddenly
slanted.

Watching her reminds me of
my own watching—alone,
from the 52nd floor of a condo
above Hell's Kitchen—forehead
pasted against a wet window
and wet eyes staring down at the
rain. And then I noticed,
to my delight, how huge
raindrops are up here—how
expansive and filled—and I felt
something within me fill and
something lighten.

I tried to follow the path of drops
speeding toward the city street,
trying to zero in on one or
two and failing—the drops dropping
too fast for my brain to process.
Still. I saw how they morphed— like this *O > O > III > iii*
Gravity and velocity
squeezing and lengthening and
forcing fluid into a different
form entirely. Me
into a different
form.

Sometimes on these occasions
 —of sadness and noticing—
 I've wondered what my dogs
 would think of the world from such heights
 when for all of their lives they've watched
 it from the earth and never ever
 the sky. Always, they'd contemplate
 the deep blue from below, tilting
 their heads up at a jet taking off
 or at the taunting of the jays
 from the tops of the oaks, perhaps
 even wondering // could they be? //
 what it's like to fly or to look down
 at the drops falling instead of
 feeling them
 fall.

From the patio door, Aurora glances
 back at me: Stop thinking so hard.

II

She is dead now. Years later a different
 dog moves with me as I move from
 place to place, from ground to sky
 and I wonder, does he know about
 depth? And then I think, how silly
 of me, this dog whose only sense
 is to love and want love. In its entirety.
 We see the depths, but do we really?
 We think we know form, but do we really?
 I stand on astroturf at the dog park
 looking up at my balcony and not
 ten minutes later I'm on my balcony looking
 down at the ground trying to envision that overlap.
 Trying to imagine myself being in two places
 at once. Or two places of being.
 Time an illusion, depth an illusion, love not.
 Love is not.
 It fills my space if I let it. Like this: I > 0000000

Expansive drops of rain.

DRINK AND BE MERRY

DS Maolalai

for tomorrow we dry,
waking up,
stale faced and red
in beds that are
only our own
and nobody else
about us.
you might go out
all optimism,
but look at that
all the optimism in the world
won't make up for charm
and a flat belly—
who's the muscly boy in the corner?
he's the one who'll take someone home.

listen: I was out last night
with my friend Aodhain
and he had this English guy with him—
nice guy, funny,
a goatee
but no chin
and within 5 mins of meeting me
he goes
“hey d, can I give you some advice—
a man with your physique
shouldn't hide his belly with his arms”
and I guess
I do look ok sometimes
but it was strange to hear a stranger say it,
although I got to know him over the night
and I guess it became ok.

we went from cobblestones
where my friend podge works
to another bar
on the quays
and I was quite amusing I think

made some friends
talked to a girl a while
smoked a cigarette
and looked
quite cool.
then on my way home
alone
I talked to another girl
and she
gave me some chips.

today I've been out in the sun all day
and couldn't handle food.
it was worth it though.
I had a good night
and talked to my friends
and made some new ones.
god help me
when my hangovers
get worse.

COVER LETTER

DS Maolalai

company's lost the contract. now
I'm applying for jobs. I liked it here—it was fine;
plenty of time between calls
to read books if I wanted,
or fuck about on the internet. I'll miss it a little.
and there were poems too,
like fingers on a dockman's hand. the job
a deck of cards, solitary
and dealt easy. free black coffee
and a window
with broken cars. outside, the yard
always full of seagulls, crashing like boats
on rocks. drinking my coffee
I compose an email
and don't include any of this.

RIDESHARE

Jonathan Ferrini

It was a hot summer, and I was “sweating” my physics final exam. I was required to take physics for a second time during summer school after failing the course during the spring quarter of my sophomore year in college. I was also “sweating” the grueling, twelve-hour days, I was working as a rideshare driver.

My family lived in a large, luxurious home, in an affluent part of town. My parents were both successful professionals. Although I wanted to become a software engineer and design new apps, I spent most of my time playing video games, drinking with my friends, and slacking. I attended a rigorous STEM university, and the students were very competitive. The coursework was tough and required intense study. Nobody reached out to one another to share notes or help explain difficult subject matter. Our access to the professors was limited, and we waited in line to approach overworked graduate students, serving as teaching assistants, who had limited time and patience for our questions.

Distraught because I flunked physics and wasn’t devoting the necessary time to my studies, my parents meted out “tough love” to me; they kicked me out of the house for the summer with no money and told me “to make it on my own.” They explained the experience would be “good for me” and motivate me to take my “studies seriously.”

I found a friend’s couch to sleep on for the summer. I needed spending money, fast, and signed up for a rideshare job using my hybrid car which was ideal because it had great gas mileage. Being a rideshare driver had its advantages because I could “cash out” my earnings daily which were immediately deposited into my checking account without tax withholding. I drove twelve-hour days, earning about \$200, minus gas money. After twelve hours of driving in heavy traffic, I returned home, hungry and exhausted. After a few hours of physics study, I’d fall asleep after eating a frozen dinner.

The job took me all over town and into neighborhoods I didn't know —mostly lower income. I'd often race through these "bad" neighborhoods, running red lights to avoid potential car jackers, and fearing the menacing-appearing homeless who roamed the neighborhoods. It was tiring work, but I met interesting people, beautiful girls, feeling satisfaction from a hard day's work.

My rideshare app alerted me to a pick-up at a downtown, budget motel, which always resulted in a scary ride. The passengers were usually frantic after being evicted, intoxicated, or mentally ill. I accepted the rides because I needed the money, and all rides have the potential of becoming long and lucrative.

I arrived at the motel where an elderly, grey-haired, black man was tending to an elderly, frail, silver-haired, Caucasian woman in a wheelchair. As I approached, he was eager to see me, waved, and approached the vehicle. He told me they were only going a "few blocks," and apologized for the "short ride." It was a hot day, and I gave them my last bottle of water because they were perspiring, and I feared they were suffering from heat stroke. They were thirsty and grateful for the water. I noticed the elderly woman's hands were grotesquely twisted, and she had difficulty holding the water bottle with both hands. The black man gently held the bottle to her mouth, allowing her to sip the water.

I opened up the trunk. The man carefully lifted the elderly woman from the wheelchair and buckled her into the rear seat with tenderness and care, suggesting a relationship similar to a mother and son. He folded the wheelchair and placed it within my trunk. This man was large and imposing but exhibited chivalry, kindness, and love for the crippled old woman.

He thanked me for "picking him up" which suggested he may have been the victim of rideshare discrimination by frightened or insensitive drivers. He remarked, "I'm sweating worse than an Arkansas mule."

I had never heard that expression before, asking, "Where did that saying come from?"

"My pop was a sharecropper in Mississippi and used it and other sayings often." He was perspiring and distraught about his cell phone battery dying. I plugged his cell phone into my recharger cord, cranked up the air conditioning which calmed him down, and he thanked me. We immediately liked each other.

He introduced himself as "Rollo", short for "Rollin' On". He described himself as a "rolling stone," never spending too much time in one place. He introduced the old woman as "Beatrice." I introduced myself as Zack.

Rollo was an imposing figure but a "gentle giant." He was about 6'2", 220#, and his body looked beaten down from a long life of grueling work. His face also showed the many years of a difficult life. He was maybe seventy. The elderly woman looked to be pushing eighty.

"What's your story, Rollo?"

"I grew up in rural Mississippi and I was a troublemaker raised by a single mom. We got by on food stamps and a vegetable garden. Despite our frugalness, the food stamps would run out by the third week of the month. Mama was a great cook and could make a nutritious meal from very little foodstuffs. After the food stamps for the month ran out, I wanted to surprise her with a good cut of meat. I got caught stealing a chuck steak from the market, and the judge gave me a choice of spending a year in county jail or joining the Army. I chose the Army, which provided me discipline, a work ethic, self-respect, and 'straightened' me out. I was happy to send most of my Army pay home to Mama. I did one tour in Vietnam and was honorably discharged in 1972. I was spat on when arriving home at the airport up north by war protestors and caught the first bus home, back to my poverty-stricken town in Mississippi. Life was slow, no work, so I took to the bottle, and fell in with the wrong crowd. Mama was having difficulty walking and complaining of numbness in her feet. White doctors wouldn't treat black folk, so I took Mama to the only black doctor in town. He diagnosed mama with Type 2 diabetes. He couldn't treat her and urged me to take her for treatment

to the nearest town with a university medical school hospital. “Despite her Medicare benefits, the treatment was too costly for Mama to pay. I took to stealing to pay Mama’s medical bills. I stole anything I could pawn or fence for immediate cash. When she asked me where the money was coming from, I said I was sharecropping by day and working as a night watchman.

“I was eventually arrested, convicted, and I spent two years on a chain gang. Mama’s condition continued to worsen while I was on the chain gang, but she managed to survive until I was released. “After serving my sentence, with the help of a veteran’s organization, I found work as a truck driver trainee, offering full training; decent pay, which enabled me to pay all of Mama’s bills. And the job had good benefits, including medical insurance for Mama. I moved to Phoenix where the trucking company was headquartered. Man, I loved driving. I drove the entire country and Canada, digging the freedom and independence of working for myself. North America is one of the most beautiful places on earth, Zack. I’d call Mama every week from a different state or province and mail her a souvenir. She was proud of me, which gave me the self-respect I sorely needed. Over the years, I developed lower back pain from hours of driving, and was prescribed opiate-based medicines which hooked me. I drank booze along with the opiates. The booze and opiates created a wonderful high and removed the back pain, but I became addicted.

“When I returned the rig to Phoenix after a thirty-day run, I failed my drug test, got fired on the spot, lost my commercial driving license, and ended up on the streets as a homeless man in hot-as-hell Phoenix. I survived on unemployment benefits for six months and then turned to welfare. I took on odd jobs, when and if I could find them. I didn’t have the heart to tell Mama I was fired and was too ashamed to call Mama or return home to Mississippi. I became a drug addict. Within a year, the trucking company forwarded me a faded, official letter from the Mississippi Coroner’s office, informing me that Mama died and was cremated because no next of kin could be located. I suffered, Zack. The guilt of abandoning Mama was so intense; it could only be quelled with heroin, booze, and meth.”

Beatrice couldn't talk, except to mumble. Rollo reached over to wipe the spittle dripping from the side of her mouth. She was petite and held tightly on to the arms of her car seat as if she was holding on to life. Rollo explained,

"Beatrice was evicted from a hospice where she was expected to die from liver cancer. Her Social Security disability benefits weren't enough to cover the expenses, even in a poor-quality hospice. Beatrice has no family. She is going to die on the streets, alone, without me. Until her time comes, I'm determined to make her life as comfortable as I can. We're like family, Zack."

"Where did Beatrice come from?"

"I met her at the Salvation Army, sitting alone in the corner of the cafeteria, having difficulty feeding herself with her shaking, twisted hands. I sat next to her and fed her. We've been together ever since."

"How did she end up at the Salvation Army, Rollo?"

"Back in the eighties, politicians closed all the mental institutions and released helpless psychiatric patients, who had spent their entire lives under the care and supervision of mental health professionals, into the streets. Beatrice had been placed in a mental hospital for developmentally disabled children as a baby. She never learned to speak nor walk but could hear and understand most of what was said. She has Cerebral Palsy which crippled her hands. She never knew life outside of the state hospital. When they closed the hospital, she met briefly with an overworked social worker who couldn't understand her, handing her a list of privately-owned, overcrowded, board and care facilities, and a pharmacy where she could get her medications filled. It was like casting a newborn to the wolves. Most of her life has included short-term stays in emergency rooms, prison cells, or sleeping on the sidewalk.

"I've never let go of the guilt associated with not being by Mama's side when she died. Beatrice reminded me of my mother.

I was drawn to looking after her because it dampened the guilt raging within me. You like this rideshare driving gig, Zack?"

"No, I hate it."

"Why the hell do it then?"

"Because my parents kicked me out of the house for the summer for failing physics and I need money."

"They kicked you out of the house for flunking a course?"

"You have to understand, my parents are overachievers. Dad's a neurologist and a clinical professor of neurology at the medical school, and Mom manages a Wall Street investment fund. They think by kicking me out of the house and forcing me to 'make it on my own for the summer,' they'd 'toughen me up,' and I'd take my college coursework more seriously."

"Well, son, I can tell you stories about tough love."

Rollo pulled his shirt up over his head revealing scars on his back.

"The scars on my back are from whippings my drunken father gave me trying to straighten me out. I begged Mama not to intervene because he would turn the whip on her. He eventually split, leaving me and Mom to fend for ourselves, never returning. I'll take 'tough love,' rather than no love, anytime, son. Your parents are showing you how hard life can be. Me and Beatrice are perfect examples. It was fate that led you to pick us up. Maybe we'll teach you about life?"

Beatrice tapped Rollo on the shoulder with her disfigured hand as if in agreement.

"I don't even know what physics looks like, but I flunked life, Zack. I wish I could get those years back because I'd accept all the 'tough love' my parents could give me, if it would provide me with a future like the one you'll enjoy. You just treat this summer job as a brief stay in hell, drive the long hours, and remember the faces of the many homeless you'll see. Take each day at a time, put one foot in front of the other, and hope for the best. If the

wisdom you learn passes through one ear and out the other, or remains embedded in your memory, it is up to you. When you go back to school, attack your subjects like your life depends upon your passing each course. Any time you find yourself backsliding, remember me and Beatrice. We won't forget you."

I drove them a few blocks to skid row, where he asked me to drop them. Rollo unloaded the wheelchair from the trunk and carefully helped Beatrice into the chair. I felt guilty leaving them on a busy, hot street corner amidst despair. Rollo thanked me for the ride, shook my hand, offering me the following advice, "Zack, you make your own luck in life. You have all the tools necessary for success. Don't squander them. Seize every opportunity. Failure is your friend because it will eventually lead you to success. Nothing can stop you, brother."

Beatrice nodded her head in agreement. She pointed to a faded, green, plastic, shamrock amulet, attached to a tattered string around her neck she must have worn for decades. Beatrice motioned Rollo to remove it from her neck and give it to me. The shamrock had the date of her birth inscribed upon it and must have been a present from jubilant new parents to their baby girl. The faded green paint, and lack of a chain, was like a metaphor for parents who gave up when they discovered their newborn was disabled for life. I pondered the pain or relief they must have felt leaving their baby at a state hospital, never to see her again.

I was saddened watching Rollo carefully wheel Beatrice down the sidewalk to a rescue mission. I hung the faded shamrock from my rearview mirror as a reminder of my new friends.

As the remaining weeks of summer grinded along, I treated my rideshare job like a sociology class. I purposely sought out rides in the downtrodden parts of town and was pleased to pick up riders who I would have previously shunned for their appearance, mental condition, or economic standing. I was eager to learn who they were, what they thought, and how they came to be. I always learned something new about life and humanity from these sages of the streets.

It wasn't until I began receiving voicemails and text messages from my parents demanding to meet with them and "discuss the lessons I learned from my summer job" that I realized the summer had ended and the fall term was soon to commence. I dreaded the specter of having to explain to my parents "what I had learned" from my summer of driving. They wouldn't understand, and it wouldn't be what they wanted to hear.

I was the first student to complete the physics final, racing through it as if it was an elementary school math test. I received an "A."

The summer of rideshare driving changed me. I didn't want to return to the comfort of my home and plush bedroom, full of distractions, and light years from the reality of the streets I witnessed. I was independent now. I sought out minimalist accommodations within walking distance to campus hoping it would keep me grounded in reality and permit me to focus on my studies. I was fortunate to find a small apartment above a liquor store a few blocks from campus. The proprietor was the owner of the liquor store, giving me a bargain rent because I was a "responsible college student" and would watch over the liquor store during closing hours. Although the apartment was a single room, dingy flat, with an old refrigerator, Murphy bed, and small stove, it was mine. I was beholden to nobody's rules but my own.

I made contact with my parents by text message, with a lyric from a tune from my playlist. I chose Bob Dylan's album, "Highway 61 Revisited," hoping the lyrics would convey to them what I had learned over my summer of "tough love,"

"When ya ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose"

At night, I lay in the Murphy bed and thought of Rollo and Beatrice, alone in the world, roaming from soup kitchen to homeless shelters. Rollo and Beatrice profoundly changed my life from that of a slacker to a motivated student because I saw the pain or affluence life can mete out.

When the college term began, I attacked my studies with a

new resolve. I couldn't relate to my former classmates. I was a changed person. I fondly recalled the loving assistance Rollo extended to Beatrice, and whenever I encountered a student struggling with the coursework, I volunteered to help them.

I approached the university and volunteered to become a tutor in those courses I now was mastering. My offer was gladly accepted by the university, and, as students began attending my tutoring sessions, additional gifted students volunteered as tutors. I'm happy to say, I changed the reputation of my college major from a competitive, "lone wolf" major, to a collegial, "help thy neighbor" major. My efforts were not lost on the Dean of Students, who promised to write me a letter of recommendation upon my graduation and encouraged me to attend graduate school at our university.

My father and mother were very proud of my academic success. My father invited me to the Faculty Club to show off his overachieving son. After lunch, we headed back to his Laboratory, where some medical students were dissecting and studying the central nervous system of a cadaver. To my dismay, it was Beatrice lying on the stainless-steel autopsy table. The autopsy technician approached saying, "She was brought into the ER yesterday by a large black man. She was diagnosed as having terminal liver failure. She died in the ER. The man wasn't a relative but produced a legal document showing he was conservator for the woman, and he produced a notarized Last Will and Testament, including a "Statement of Donation" of the woman's body to our medical school."

A medical student spoke up while dissecting Beatrice, "We lucked out with this cadaver because it gives us the opportunity to study her liver disease, palsy, and developmental disability. We might find a link!" I was tempted to reply, "Her name is Beatrice and treat her with dignity!"

I approached the autopsy table and stroked Beatrice's fine silver hair. She was a small, frail woman, and terribly thin from years of starvation. I stared at her mouth closely and could make out a glimmer of a smile. I was surprised to find that both of

her hands were free from the contortions of Cerebral Palsy. Her fingers were straight, long, thin, elegant, and resembled those of a pianist. I asked the autopsy tech, "I've seen this homeless woman around town and know that her hands were severely contorted by Cerebral Palsy. Why are they straight?"

My father overheard my question and answered, "I've seen this before, Zack. For some unfortunate people, the gift of life carries with it a price in the form of unfair burdens they must carry throughout their lives. For this woman, it was cerebral palsy of her hands and developmental disabilities. Over the course of my career, I've seen death provide a 'repayment' of sorts for their burdens, and for this poor woman, it was the reward of beautiful hands."

I suspected Beatrice was happy to leave this world, and I'm certain she was delighted to donate her body for the furtherance of medical science. I excused myself, entered the men's room, closed the stall door, and wept. I was happy Beatrice found peace and beautiful hands in death, but wondered about Rollo's fate, recalling the lyrics to the Dylan song,

"How does it feel?
How does it feel?
To be on your own
With no direction home
A complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?"

I knew he missed Beatrice and his Mama. I also know he would take delight to see the gift of beautiful hands death provided Beatrice. I washed and dried my face while looking in the mirror, and recited Rollo's advice, "I'll take 'tough love,' rather than no love, anytime."

MESTIZA

Robert Rene Galvan

I gaze at my daughter's
graceful hands,
her olive skin
and amber eyes
which had been blue
until her third year,
her Nordic jaw
and indigenous
cheekbones,
the hybrid nose,
and chestnut hair:
amalgam of our
two seeds—
in some cultures,
an abomination,
but the arc
of humanity
in her smile;
in the future
the whole world
will look like her
and wonder
what all the fuss
was about,
and finally
be kind
to one
another.

FAST FISH EAT QUICKLY, OR HOW TO LEARN SPANISH LIKE A NATIVE

John Dorroh

I am learning Spanish
like a piranha with orange lips,
turning the water pink with diluted
blood. These texts are too heavy to carry
into still water. I need current and currency,
words swapping places like an illusionist's
secret ammunition, first the colored scarf
she waves in my face, a signal, a cue for transition,
a magic wand won't do, nor will sweet tricks
in a poolside cabana. It is serious work,
swimming with the big fish, clogging gills,
filling up my mouth with cement. Toro for bull,
cerveza for beer; these are the easy ones.

Immersion cools the hot skin
like liquid wax in ice water. Look, my
lips are blue, the piranha are Chihuahua
with razor-sharp teeth. Say it like this,
he demands. Buenas tardes, buenas tardes,
hold your lips just right, make the words spring
from your lips out into the daylight, make them
click like a fast train to Mexico City, to Puerto
Vallarta, to San Antonio.

I am learning quickly like agua
spilling from a public drinking fountain,
where fish gather to tell their stories,
where children smile as I formulate
sentences that even they
can understand.

APPLICATION FOR HAVING CHILDREN

Nate House

Until that cruel night, nothing special had ever happened to us. We worked ten hours a day, came home to our one-bedroom apartment in the suburbs, ate prepackaged meals from Comco, and watched nature shows on television of what the world used to be like. We had sex on Saturday nights, dreamt of snow, clear mountain streams, colorful reefs beneath crystal blue water and schools of silver fish. But when we woke, looked out our one small window at the brown sky and earth, the heaps of trash fires burning along the deserted highway and the sparkling, gated city of the rich in the distance, it was hard to imagine that the beautiful world on television had ever existed.

We were sitting on the couch, eating our microwaved meatloaf and spinach for dinner, watching a documentary on what they once called the Everglades. Pink birds with bright red eyes and long ladles for beaks waded in shallow water and used their absurd appendage to dig for crustaceans in the mud. It seemed only natural that such a poorly designed creature would go extinct. The walls of the apartment vibrated from a loud knock on the hollow door.

“Are we in trouble?” Margaret whispered.

She had black hair, as thin as thread, an egg-shaped head, narrow, brown eyes, a small nose that pointed to the sky and skin the color of cardboard. I put my hand on top of her forearm and caressed the thick hairs that grew from every large pore.

“I don’t think so,” I said and walked to the door.

Through the peephole I stared into a bright blue eye.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Dr. Osbourne. From the Department of Repopulation.”

He stepped back and pointed to the name tag pinned to his long, white coat.

Margaret's face turned pale and her left eye twitched. She placed her dinner package on the white plastic table, stood, and smoothed the front of her gray pants with her small hands.

"Let him in," she said.

I opened the door and Dr. Osborne walked inside. He was 6'4", as thin as a stork, with blond hair and perfect teeth. He smelled like bleach.

"Mr. and Mrs. Johnson?" he asked.

We nodded.

"Your application has been approved. You will have a child."

I took Margaret in my arms and held her the way I thought expectant fathers should. A tear fell from her right eye. I kissed her cheek, licked the tear to determine if it had dropped in joy or sadness but all I could taste was salt and sunscreen. I willed tears into my own eyes, happiness into my heart, but it had been a year and a half since we had sent out the application and I had long ago accepted the fact that we were destined to be one of the millions of couples whose genes were not fit enough to justify another body depleting the planet. I told myself that it was better this way—that no compassionate being would bring a child into this harrowing world.

"We will send a car for you on Thursday morning. Your supervisors at Comco will be notified," Dr. Osbourne said.

He opened the door to leave.

"You're very fortunate," he said. "Not everyone has the luxury of having a child these days."

He walked into the hall, shut the door and we listened to his footsteps echo down the hall.

"Are you happy?" I asked Margaret.

"Is that what I'm supposed to feel?" she asked.

Thursday morning we woke earlier than normal, drank our instant coffee, washed all the areas they might probe, put on our cleanest gray outfits and stood in front of our building's entrance. A long, black, electric car pulled up, driven by a short man in a silver suit. He got out of the car, walked around it and opened the back door.

"Get in," he said.

We slipped into the soft pleather seats. I took Margaret's hand in mine. She looked out the window, at the decaying buildings and broken sidewalks, the flocks of our brethren marching towards the Comco complex. Our driver carefully avoided potholes large enough to swallow the pregnant cats whole. He drove us onto the empty highway, where I imagined what it must have been like, before these dark ages, when the highway was filled with purring cars, driven by citizens who tapped their fingers against the wheel to the latest song, waved in solidarity to their fellow commuters, on their way to jobs that had meaning, with water coolers and coffee machines, lunch breaks and meetings at long tables with generous, kind employers. I wondered if any of them knew how lucky they were to have been born back then.

In the distance, I saw the silver towers of the city reflect the blinding sun. I lightly squeezed Margaret's hand. She would not look at me, lost as she was in her own thoughts and I knew better than to ask what they were. We came to the giant metal gates, covered by an ivy of electric wire. Soldiers marched across the top of the tall concrete walls, machine guns held against their bullet proof vests. Our driver pressed a button on the dashboard and the gates opened to reveal a freshly paved road lined with Elm trees. We drove onto the smooth pavement, the median covered with daisies and tulips, so real I could almost smell them. Men with blond hair walked along the wide sidewalks in crisp khakis and light blue Polos, next to tall, thin women in linen skirts and white sleeveless shirts, pushing strollers with happy, healthy babies. The beauty of it all made my heart sink.

We passed the long steps of the Museum of Natural History. The statue of an extinct mountain lion sat at the bottom of them;

its bronze eyes followed us down the main boulevard. Our driver turned right after the Museum of Progress and half a block later pulled into the curved driveway of the Department of Repopulation. The building was white and long, surrounded by deep green AstroTurf. He stopped the car, got out and held the back door open for us.

“Are you ready?” I asked Margaret.

“Do I have a choice?” she asked.

The glass doors of the building opened, and we walked into the cold, sanitized air. Pictures of pink newborn babies lined the bright walls. A man dressed in green scrubs came from the left hallway, a woman from the right and led us down separate corridors. We looked over our shoulders at each other, a final glance of the people we once were and would never be again. The pictures changed the further the man and I walked, the babies replaced with pictures of beautiful women, first in dresses, then in bikinis, then in nothing at all. We reached a door at the end of the hall. The man let go of my elbow, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a plastic cup with a lid.

“Ejaculate into this,” he said and handed me the cup.

I opened the door and stepped into the small room. A soft pink light illuminated the walls, then faded, then lit again. A white, plastic chair sat in the middle of the room, a tiny bottle of lubricant and a roll of paper towels beside it.

“Sit,” a woman’s sultry voice whispered.

I sat in the chair and held the plastic cup in my lap.

“Are you comfortable?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, even though the chair was too hard, the room too warm and I had the sense it was not only the woman with the beautiful voice watching me.

“What would you like to see?”

The walls turned from pink to blue.

“What do you mean?”

“To make you cum,” she said.

Women and men, of all sizes and colors, appeared in squares on the wall in front of me. A woman pinched the pink nipples of her pumpkin sized breasts, another skipped in a lace dress across a field of wildflowers. A man in a too tight policeman’s uniform gyrated his hips and licked the barrel of his gun.

“I don’t know.”

The walls turned black.

“Do you want me to pick for you?”

I nodded.

The back of a man, in white pants and a light blue shirt that stretched over his muscled shoulders appeared on the wall, standing in front of an apartment door. He turned his head and looked at me. He had my black eyes and the shape of my lips, except his were full and smiling. He still had all of his hair. He winked, opened the door and went inside. He took off his shoes and walked across the white marble floors to a large, clean kitchen. A version of my wife, in a white apron, stood at the granite counter, chopping onions. Her hair was blonde and wavy, bounced against her smooth white neck as she looked up, blew the man a kiss and put the knife down. She untied the apron, pulled it over her head, and let it drop to the floor. Beneath the apron she wore a red dress that revealed dark cleavage between her immaculate breasts. She walked towards the man and put her lips close to his ear.

“Follow me,” she whispered.

She took him by the hand and led him into large, sunlit bedroom with a king-sized bed, dark wood headboard and clean white sheets. Minimalist art hung from pale yellow walls.

“Sit on the bed,” she said and lightly pushed the man onto it.

She reached behind her, unzipped the dress and let it fall to the plush white carpet. She stepped out of it, completely naked, and slowly walked towards him.

“Take off your pants,” the women said.

We unbuttoned our pants, pushed them off and left them on the floor.

The man closed his eyes. His tongue licked his lips as the wife knelt in front of him.

“Go ahead,” the woman’s voice said. “There is nothing to be ashamed of.”

I squeezed some of the lube into my hand as the woman on the wall pushed the man down on the bed, climbed onto him and put her hands on his smooth chest. He entered her and put his strong hands on her hips.

I took myself in my hand watched the woman on the wall bite her bottom lip, move faster and harder against him. They groaned in pleasure. I groaned too.

“The cup,” the woman said softly. “Don’t forget the cup.”

I reached down, grabbed the cup, held it over myself as I watched them climax.

The wall went dark. The lights came on. I looked at the cup in my hand, the clothes on the floor.

“Hello,” I said.

The woman didn’t answer.

A fist knocked on the door.

“The cup,” the man outside said. “Now.”

I screwed on the lid, placed it beside the chair and put on my clothes. As soon as I opened the door the man came in, grabbed the cup with one hand, my elbow with the other and ushered me back down the hall. When we reached the main doors, he told me to sit on a black couch and disappeared down the corridor where my wife had gone. I closed my eyes, replayed those beautiful images and imagined, for a moment, that I was that other man, waiting for that beautiful wife.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Margaret standing in front of me, in her faded, gray clothes and black sneakers. She scrunched her face, narrowed her eyes against the bright lights, blinked three times, and turned towards the door.

"Let's go," she said.

I stood, took her clammy hand in mine, and we walked out the open glass doors, into the waiting car. The driver took us silently back through the city, past the museums, trees and flowers, out the electric gates, onto those decaying roads, past the crumbling facades, to the front door of our building.

"Get out," he said.

As soon as I shut the door, he sped away.

We walked up the five flights of stairs to our apartment and went inside.

"Are you okay?" I asked Margaret.

"No," she said.

"What's wrong?"

She looked at the dull, empty walls and the old couch with books for a leg. She stared at my hairline, hunched shoulders and soft belly.

"It's not fair," she said.

"What isn't?"

"All of it."

Two nights later we sat on the couch, ate a dinner of chicken cacciatore that tasted like salted rubber and watched re-runs of America's Funniest Home Videos. The phone rang. Margaret muted the television.

"Hello," I said.

"It's Dr. Osbourne. We are going to create your child. You should have intercourse. To make it feel natural."

He hung up.

“What did he say?” Margaret asked.

“He said we should have sex.”

“Would you like that?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she said and put her plastic container on the table.

She stood, took me by the hand and led me to the bedroom.

“Sit on the bed,” she said and lightly pushed me onto it.

She curled her chapped lips, raised her right, bushy eyebrow, pulled her gray shirt over her pale stomach and sagging breasts. She slipped the loose pants and faded white underwear off her thin hips and walked towards me.

“Take off your pants,” she said.

I took them off and closed my eyes as Margaret knelt in front of me. I imagined the plush carpet, the paintings on the walls and the woman’s voice, telling me there was nothing to be ashamed of. I lifted Margaret by her damp armpits, lay her on her back, licked her large pores as her hands ran through the hair on my back. She found the large skin tag on my right shoulder and gently flicked it back and forth with her index finger.

“Lay on your back,” she said.

As soon as I did, she climbed on top of me, put her hands on my chest and our genitals met through our thick pubic hair.

In that worn bed, surrounded by dull, empty walls, we became, for a moment, those beautiful people, with perfect hair and bodies, who knew just how to shift their hips and spread their fingers, bite their lips and softly whisper, yes, right there, yes. Each thrust was like a long, desperate breath, until a wave of blood rushed through us and crashed at the very point where our bodies joined.

She crawled off me and stared at the ceiling. I ran my finger across her left shoulder, over her breast and down her thigh. The phone rang.

“Don’t answer it. Please,” she said.

So I didn’t. But I knew it was Dr. Osbourne, calling to tell us that our child had been conceived.

Five days later, we returned to the Department of Repopulation where they transferred the tiny embryo to Margaret’s womb. The world shifted then, just enough to make the morning procession to Comco, with men and women as desperate and sad as I once was, bearable. Even my job, where I sat in front of a giant screen with twenty-two other men and women, helmets filled with sensors on our heads as we watched whatever shows, apps and movies they were testing that day, recording smiles, frowns, tears or screams into a tiny, hand-held, fob, became less deadening. As Margaret’s belly grew, I pictured the child’s dark eyes and brown hair, its ten tiny toes, each one a small miracle of science and faith. The more the fetus grew, the more accepting Margaret became and every so often I watched her on the couch, rubbing her hands over her swollen belly, softly singing Edelweiss, Edelweiss.

Just when it seemed that Margaret’s stomach could stretch no further, Dr. Osborne called.

“Monday,” he said. “We will send a car for you on Monday.”

We waited at the curb for the car. The same man, in the same suit, picked us up and drove us back to the Department of Repopulation. As soon as we walked through the doors, a woman came from the right hallway, took Margaret by the arm and led her down the hall.

I sat on the black couch, across from a man in white pants and a blue shirt, swiping his phone. He looked up and our eyes met. I stared at his lips, his clear skin, and the strong hands that had held the hips of that beautiful wife. He ran his eyes from my old shoes to the top of my thinning hair, held his phone in front of him and took three pictures of me. He looked at the pictures and laughed quietly to himself.

“What’s so funny?” I asked him.

He turned his phone around and held it in front of me.

“Look,” he said.

I stared at myself in his phone, at my large, porous nose, the deep creases in my forehead, the deep void in my eyes and the thin lips that looked like they were about to tremble. It was like looking at a picture of his prehistoric ancestor. He turned the phone back around and laughed again.

I wanted to take it from his hand, use it to break those perfect teeth so that he would never smile again, but I saw the cameras in the ceiling, knew that if I so much touched him, the police would descend upon me like a pack of hyenas I once watched on television and tear my body limb from limb as one of them videotaped it, to be shown on the nightly news—a horrifying reminder of what happens to anyone who threatened this fragile system.

His wife emerged from the hallway, in a white quilted robe, holding a red-faced baby in a blue blanket, two large nurses on either side of her. The man stood and went to her, put his arm around her, and led her to the glass doors. Just before they opened, he turned, smiled, and waved.

I closed my eyes, and even though it had been proven long ago that God did not exist, I prayed that their perfect family would get in the car with the man in the silver suit, be driven outside these walls, and by the time they reached our apartment it would be too late to explain that they had made a mistake and our driver would leave them there, trapped in our sad lives, while Margaret and I walked to their apartment with our new child and lived without fear, shame or want.

An hour later, I opened my eyes I saw Margaret standing in front of me, our child wrapped in a gray towel in her arms. I looked into the child’s bright, blue eyes, at the crest of brown hair on top of her perfectly shaped head. Margaret’s face flushed. She smiled in a way I had never seen, and it felt like a part of my prayer had been answered.

The man drove us back the way we had come, along the deserted highway and trash-strewn streets. He stopped the car in front of our building. I took Margaret's free hand and helped her, with the child in her arms, out of the car. I put my arm around her as we walked up the stairs to our apartment. The baby's tiny hand opened. I ran my finger across her palm. She opened her eyes and looked at her new world. Each change in light revealed something new, and I tried to see it through her eyes, the eyes of a being who had no idea of the horrors that existed outside these walls.

We named her Vera. She made sweet cooing sounds when she was happy, cried in desperation when she was hungry, and formed her own language that communicated every emotion so perfectly that I wished we would learn hers instead of her learning ours. We read her old, faded books, put on plays with stuffed animals, and when she fell asleep between us on the couch, I carried her to her cardboard crib. Then, I would slip into bed with Margaret, and we would hold each other tight, drift into a deep sleep, and dream about a world better than the one we lived in.

Vera developed faster than any of the apps indicated. At two months, she was holding her head up while on her stomach. At three months she was grabbing any object in front of her, trying to imitate our sounds. By the fourth month, she was already crawling, calling us Mama and Dada. As she grew, the harder it became to find any trait that could have come from our combined genes. We didn't care. She was ours, and we loved her in way we did not know possible.

On a Friday night, when Vera was seven months old, I came home from work and walked through the door. Margaret was on the couch, playing peek-a-boo with her. I walked over to them and lifted Vera high above me. She laughed as her tiny legs ran in the air. I kissed her cheeks, the top of her head, inhaled the sweet scent of her, even though Margaret told me it was just the smell of baby powder. As I remember it, it was as happy as I ever was and ever would be.

A loud knock came from the door. Then another. I handed Vera back to Margaret.

I looked through the peephole. Dr. Osbourne stood before the door, two large nurses behind him.

“Open the door,” he said.

It was not the voice of the benevolent doctor who had come to tell us we had been chosen to have a child.

“Everything is fine” I told him. “Go away.”

“She isn’t yours,” he said. “You had to know that.”

Margaret let out a small cry, took Vera into the bathroom and locked the door.

Dr. Osbourne held a baby in front of the peephole. The child was short and fat, with red blotches on his skin. He had thin black hair and my eyes. It wailed like a baby rabbit.

“There was mistake,” Dr. Osbourne said. “These things happen.”

“We have our child,” I said.

“Please,” he said. “Don’t make this more difficult than it needs to be.”

I leaned against the door with all the weight and strength I had, but the nurses kicked it open and burst into the apartment. I tried to punch one of them. She grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back as the other kneed me in the crotch. I fell to the floor. They rushed to the bathroom door and broke it open with their wide shoulders. They pried Vera from Margaret’s weak arms. The taller one carried her into the hall as Margaret collapsed, held her knees to her chest and rocked herself against the cold, hard tiles, each breath a long, desperate cry.

“On behalf of the Department of Repopulation, I would like to apologize for any discomfort this may have caused,” Dr. Osborne said and placed the other child on the couch.

They walked quickly out the door, into the hall and back to their waiting car. I heard the car door slam and the electric engine fade into the distance.

I got to my feet and sat next to the boy on the couch. A thick rope of drool hung from his bottom lip.

We named him James. We washed him, fed him, and kept his fingers out of the sockets. We told him we loved him, but I knew, when I looked deep into his vacant eyes, that it was just one of a thousand lies we told, every day, in an effort to try to make the unfairness of it all bearable.

BRUSH FIRES

Jamie Logan

I always loved
things that burned, loved
nights when my uncle passed me his cigar
and the tip glowed like a sparkler,
revered the light
when I held it too close
to my six-year-old skin.
With it, I lit fire
crackers, bottle rockets, played the game
of twisted wicks,
savored flame biting flesh like a lover
as I watched
the pieces hiss, scream, tatter, fall.

I still love things that burn,
love nights when we brown dumplings
in a cast iron skillet.
Grease stings
the wrists you kiss.
I prize the darkened room where you drip wax
onto my bare stomach
where your body pours itself into mine.
I hiss, scream, tatter, fall, incendiary.
In your arms, I dream of brush fires,
of complete and utter destruction
leading always to rebirth.

WHAT HAPPENED TO ARIADNE?

Jamie Logan

Thesus defeats the minotaur
with help from its sister
Ariadne. They part soon after.
He abandons her on an island
with seaweed and memories
of the moment she drew a knife
across the thick beastneck
of her mother's favorite child.

Ariadne bathes in the sea, soaks
in brine that dries a new skin
over the old. She sees a ship,
prays it will leave but knows—
knows that her tide has come.
She mourns this self, misses
the girl whose seafoam skin
once forgot the feel of a man.

INTERVIEW WITH STEVE BELLIN-OKA

Dr. Steve Bellin-Oka, author of the award-winning poetry collection *Instructions for Seeing a Ghost*, virtually visited Dr. Michael Rizza's Introduction to Creative Writing class at ENMU on October 1, 2020. In addition to the students, guests in attendance included Dean Mary Ayala, Jon Barr, Linda Sumption, and Kelly Cradock. After his reading, Dr. Bellin-Oka answered questions. The exchange is below.

Kelly Cradock (graduate student):

The endings of your poems leave me with a gut punch. They are always powerful. What sort of advice can you give to poets to help them achieve this sort of punch?

SBO:

One of my first poetry teachers in college, Stanley Plumly, quoted Robert Frost to us in class one day—"a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom." I was quite impressed by that statement because it was the first time I'd ever thought about a poem as needing close attention to its internal structure. Before that, I'd only ever thought about a poem as some kind of intuitive process and if you get lucky, people might like it. But that famous quote from Frost implies a progression in a poem that might begin with observation or description and conclude with a truth. So I've always worked toward that in my poems ever since. Thanks for describing the endings of my poems as gut punches; that's quite a compliment!

Ending a lot of poems with the same kind of "wisdom" has its pitfalls though. When I was putting *Instructions for Seeing a Ghost* together, it seemed to me that a lot of the poems ended in similar ways. When I was circulating it to potential publishers, one editor actually told me he thought the endings of the poems got predictable as the book went along. So I tried to vary the types of closure the poems have as the book progresses, but still leaving the reader at the end of each poem with a sense that something true was said. Maybe instead of a gut punch, you pull the punch to challenge the reader's expectations. I tried to do this in the third section of the book.

There's a classic book by Barbara Herrnstein Smith called *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* that I would recommend to anyone interested in thinking about how their own poems end and improving those endings.

Jon Barr (Chair of Theatre and Digital Film Making):

I want to ask about the experience of reading your own poems. If I were to read some of your poems aloud, I would get choked up. What is the effect of reading your own work aloud?

SBO:

Of course, even though we usually read a poem on the page silently in our heads, poetry's still an aural art with fundamental interests in rhythm, musicality, and the relationship between sound and silence. I think poets should read their own poems out loud before they consider them "finished." I do this, and I'm gratified when readers tell me they read my work out loud too.

As you know from reading the book, it's haunted by the loss of two of my siblings to early deaths—my sister, the youngest of us, from cancer and my older brother, from complications of opiate and alcohol abuse. They both died within a year of each other, and I think like everyone who has loved ones die before their time, I'm left with a lot of regrets. The one poem in the book I've never read out loud publicly is "Invocation," which is about finding something my sister gave me a few years after her death that I'd forgotten about.

Cutter Burnett (student):

Do you find that as a gay man you feel societal pressure to code switch when speaking publicly or professionally to appear less effeminate? Do you find that your sexuality has influenced the way that you view certain words or phrases?

SBO:

That's a fascinating question. I think you're absolutely right that gay men in American culture feel pressure to code switch in certain social situations because we are forced to come out constantly—whenever we meet someone new, start a new job, meet with a doctor for the first time, or deal with some institution like a life insurance company. There's always some element of risk and vulnerability straight people never have to think about. Because I'm in my early

fifties, I came of age at a time when being gay (or even seeming to be gay) could single you out for harassment and physical danger. It still can, of course, but the dangers seem more abstract to me now than they did then. In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic magnified all that; gay men were dying young in this country in droves, and nobody seemed to care. At the same time, because of those risks, gay men have always constructed a private language—both a lingo and a type of body language—that has helped us identify each other. And because sexual orientation is an innate quality you're born with, I think it colors everything about your experience of the world, including language.

However, poems have to be absolutely based on truth, if not the literal truth of exact events, at least emotional truth. Otherwise, what good are they? There's enough fake news and misinformation out there in our culture.

Audra Bagwell (student):

Seeing larger amounts of poetry emerging and poetry in general becoming more popular, do you think that poetry would be becoming more difficult to get published than say, a fiction piece?

SBO:

Since I don't write fiction, it's hard for me to comment on whether opportunities for publishing fiction are increasing or decreasing. I do think opportunities for publishing poetry, though, are increasing for a couple of reasons. First, the readership for poetry in the U.S. has been rising quite quickly in the last decade. I could speculate on reasons for that, but my personal feeling is again the fact that poetry deals in truths, and in our public discourse, misinformation and fake news are a serious problem. I think social media, for all its positives, is also a culprit in helping to divide Americans so profoundly, as well as facilitating the dissemination of untruths and discouraging deeper thinking about complex problems. Poetry refuses to take the easy way out and looks at things from multiple angles, and people are starved for that these days.

Aimee Roberts (student):

I am an emotional writer. I write what speaks to me at the moment. Do you write that way or do begin with a sense of structure?

SBO:

Certainly, when I'm drafting a poem, I'm an emotional writer who lets his subconscious dictate what comes out on the page. I don't usually start with a sense of structure at all. If I start working on a poem that's going to be in a traditional form like a sestina or a ghazal, I might map out my sestina's repeating words first or have the ghazal's couplet form in mind, but that's it. Again, because of my age, early on as a poetry student I was assigned an essay by William Stafford called "A Way of Writing" (written in 1970 before there was the universal understanding that we need to carefully avoid sexist language, so I apologize for his pronouns), in which he says "a writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them." I think that matches my process well—once the early drafting process has provided the emotional content for a poem, I let the poem sit for a couple of days before I come back to it and start thinking about structure. It's similar to William Wordsworth's idea that poems should contain emotion recollected in tranquility.

Kelly Cradock (graduate student):

How do you keep your emotions at bay when you write from your subconsciousness, without carrying the weight of those feelings for the rest of the day?

SBO:

With a lot of effort put into compartmentalizing! You're absolutely right that poets must tap into their subconsciouses, and that carries risk. Human beings are especially adept at hiding truths from themselves and if one follows Stafford's advice and lets the subconscious dictate the content of poem, you could hit on something that throws your emotional balance off. That's a risk for any artist, I think. Personally, I tend to write in the late afternoon and early evening. I'm married to a Japanese, and culturally, he's used to eating dinner somewhere around 9:00 at night. So after I'm done working on a poem that evening, we sit down and talk while we eat, or we watch TV. So I've turned off whatever part of my brain works on poems and turned on one less intense and emotional. I've learned how to turn that part back on the next afternoon and then turn it off again at night.

Betty Mealand (student):

In your talk, you said you put your favorite poems toward the beginning of the book. Which is your favorite?

SBO:

Learning how to structure a book is one of the hardest things for a poet to do, I think. No one really teaches that in MFA programs; you're just supposed to figure it out on your own. When I got serious again about writing poetry around 2014 (I had stopped writing anything for around 10 years before that), I read a lot of contemporary books of poems and thought a lot about how they were put together. What seemed to work well—and perhaps a bit cynically, what seemed to be winning prizes and getting published—were books in which the progression of poems over the course of 70-90 pages had mini-peaks and mini-climaxes as the reader made their way through the book. So I tried to do that in *Instructions for Seeing a Ghost*.

Obviously, I think the first few poems in any book are extremely important. One wants to introduce the themes of the book, the poet's distinctive voice, and the kind of forms the book is going to contain. For me, "Self-Portrait as the Chosen One" is my favorite poem, maybe not because it's the best poem I've ever written, but it's one in which the themes of family under pressure, the construction of the self, and the use of quasi-religious language begin in the book. There's also a sense of irony in that poem I really like. Finally, *Instructions* is interested in showcasing variety in form too—you want to show readers you're well-versed in the poetic tradition, even as you're adapting it to your own purposes. The book contains letter and postcard poems, a ghazal, found poems, and a kind of form I repeat in one way or other for all the poems titled after Hebrew letters. "Self-Portrait" is a semi-concealed double sonnet where I get rid of rhyme and strict iambic rhythm. So it also introduces the playing around with form I'm interested in doing in the book.

Michael Rizza (Assistant Professor of English):

Speaking of the beginning of your book, I noticed that these poems get a lot of mileage out of different types of enjambment, such as annotating and parsing lines. For example, in the fourth stanza of "Survivor's Guilt," you generate multiple meanings through enjambment. It's really marvelous. How do you approach line breaks? Does this come to you during revision?

SBO:

Thanks for noticing that! Line break is one of the most idiosyncratic things about contemporary poet, and people usually talk about the poet's "ear," whatever that means. I certainly know when a line break feels right to me, but it's very difficult to put one's finger on why. When I'm drafting a poem, I try not to think about line break too much and let the words come out. Revision is the place to think about line break, but maybe not every single one in a poem. When the poem is reaching for some kind of emotional intensity, I do try to think about those line breaks explicitly, and certainly "Survivor's Guilt" is that kind of poem. I love enjambment—it's something only poetry can do, really, and achieve effects through tension between the line break and the sentence. While working on this book, I was reading and teaching James Longenbach's book *The Art of the Line*, and I'm sure it had an influence on my revisions of the poems.

Rebeca Rojas (student):

For your poem "Ceremonial Cento," how do you get the borrowed lines? Do you look for them while you actually writing the poem, or when you are reading, do you come across lines that you like and save them for later?

SBO:

The cento is an important form for me. As you may know, centos originated in classical Roman poetry as a way to pay tribute to one's fellow poets, both contemporary and ones that came before. Something surprising always happens when you take lines written by other poets out of context, arrange them into a new order, and break them differently. The human mind insists on making meaning out of everything, so if you put two statements next to each other, we infer a relationship between the two and therefore meaning, even if those two statements are taken from disparate sources and on the surface seem to have no connection. That's what happens in centos, and I find it fascinating, perhaps because I'm on the autism spectrum and my mind is always playing back internally "phrases" that are seemingly unrelated to each other—lines from poems, bits of song lyrics, even non-linguistic musical phrases from songs I know. I'm always inferring meaning between things that other people may not think about at all.

That said, when I want to work on a cento, I have to be careful about where I get the source lines. I use a random process that I hope prevents me from cherry-picking lines from the source poems and thereby imposing a meaning on the cento from the outside. I want the relationships between lines to come from some internal logic that emerges when I rearrange the lines and break them with my own line and stanza breaks. In my studio in Tulsa, I have a couple hundred books of contemporary poetry that are arranged on my bookshelves in no particular order except by grouping those of roughly the same height together. I use a randomized process to come up with the source lines. I'll decide on a whim that I'm going to take down every fifth or seventh book from the shelves, open it to a predetermined page number, like page 12 or page 33, and then write down line 6 (or any other random number) of the poem on that page. Once I've done that I have about 20 or 30 source lines to use in a cento. I may not use all of them, but that's how I do it, and I do it that way to make my subconscious do the work of "writing" a cento.

Jon Barr (Chair of Theatre and Digital Film Making):

Did you have a moment when you were like "I'm a poet"? What advice do you have for young people who are considering pursuing poetry as a career choice?

SBO:

I can't really point to a moment where I said to myself "I'm a poet" before I received the phone call the week between Christmas and New Year's in December 2018 when the series editor for the University of North Texas Press told me a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet had chosen *Instructions for Seeing a Ghost* as the winner of the 2019 Vassar Miller Prize. But I do know I'd been working toward that book for a long time. The majority of the book was written from 2014-2019, but there are a few poems in there that were written 20 years ago. And one poem, "Running the Film Backwards" was written when I was in college and is the poem I think of as my first "mature" poem that has a unique voice to it. I've written poems since I was in high school, but it wasn't until the work was at a point that it could go out into the world and get recognition that I started telling people "I'm a writer; I write poetry" when they ask "what do you do for a living?"

Advice to young people who want to pursue poetry as a career—in the United States, poetry can't be a career. What I mean by that is unlike almost every other Western country, there is almost zero government funding to promote the writing of poetry, and poetry doesn't sell enough in this country to make a living solely from one's poetry. I know of only one poet—Mary Oliver—who could make a living from her poems alone and that didn't happen until late in her life. What usually happens is that a poet has another paying job already, the kind that allows them to support themselves and their families, and they write poems on the side. William Carlos Williams was a doctor; Wallace Stevens was an insurance executive; James Merrill and Elizabeth Bishop came from wealthy families, which certainly helps. More commonly, the poetry comes first and then the ability to support yourself through it comes later, by earning a university teaching job or a fellowship in recognition of your work. So it takes persistence and a lot of resilience and adaptability.

Linda Sumption (Associate Professor of English):

When we think about our lives in the time of a pandemic and a deadly virus, it is reminiscent for some of us of another such time, when HIV and AIDS hit us. Do you see any connections there and how poetry might respond?

SBO:

I'm so glad you brought this up, Linda. I think you're absolutely right that for people of a certain age, and especially for LGBTQ people and their allies, there's a lot of overlap between the current COVID epidemic and the AIDS epidemic (and that epidemic isn't even over yet). The specter of AIDS comes up obliquely a few times in *Instructions for Seeing a Ghost* because that epidemic had so many profound effects on gay culture. I've been thinking about the connections between the COVID-19 and AIDS eras quite a bit this year. In both epidemics we've seen government indifference to people's suffering, the sense that some people's lives are worth more than others, misinformation about how the virus is spread, and people dying horrible deaths among strangers in hospitals—and hidden away from public view—because they have to be isolated from their loved ones, all of which we saw in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Even Dr. Anthony Fauci, the NIH virologist who has struggled to convince Americans of

the severity of this epidemic, was largely responsible for getting the Reagan and Bush Senior administrations to do something about AIDS.

I think poetry definitely needs to respond to this and help us remember and learn from the past. The new book I've been working on this year is largely about the sense of living in two different times now. That's how strong I think the connections between the AIDS era and COVID are. The structure of this new book, which I hope to finish by summer 2021, only recently revealed itself to me, includes a section about COVID, looking to the past, and a section about AIDS, looking to the future and speculating on why we didn't learn the lessons we should have learned.

Jessica Segura (student):

You have poems about past lovers in your book. How does your husband feel about that?

SBO:

That's a great question! Honestly, I was more worried about what the surviving members of my family would think about the poems dealing with my brother and sister than I was about the poems about past lovers because I share memories of my siblings with other people. Kenichi (my husband) and I have been together a long time—it'll be 24 years in February 2021—and we've been through a lot in that time that proves how committed to each other we are. We're both mature people now who realize we both were with other partners before we met each other, so there were no surprises there for him.

MY HUSBAND AND I DISCUSS HOW TO BREAK OUT OF THIS RUT

Steve Bellin-Oka

He never said the tumbleweeds
gusting across the road
were large enough,
spiny enough to pierce
our Toyota's oil pan. Never said
it was only may and already
hot enough in New Mexico
to burn my bald and aging
Scalp. Carpenter ants are
streaming toward the wood
foundations of the house
like traffic glimpsed through
an airplane window high above.
One flies over and its jet trail
is like a finger of cloud
Accusing. He never said our cat
had disemboweled another squirrel
or left a yellow bird shredded
on the porch. What he said
was: listen. We're not too
old yet to adopt a child.

MONOLOGUE AS HYPOTHERMIA SETS IN: A CENTO

—Matthew Shepard, 4 a.m., October 7, 1998

Steve Bellin-Oka

Now that the nameless roads have carried us all from town, I remember, then lose eight hours. We are all earthworms—out of velvet, out of rayon, out of lace, out of ribbon. The figure or angel who disappears skips from our flesh, our flesh of the same diseases, identical pain. There's war and famine, a chord, cardinal sins. There's a ring, paper into pulp, our words last, then an awkward, unexpected jump. Black cloth flutters on a cattle fence: the vine's wrist pulse, the green tendrils of my day-old beard. No tack cloth or stable rag can wipe it away. For we are one and one and lost—what isn't—singing: the angels were wrong. Chapter that ends in a language of smoke.

Sources: Charles Wright, "Arrivederci Kingsport"; Erin Hoover, "If You Are Confused about Whether a Girl Can Consent"; Anne Sexton, "The Wall"; Catherine Barnett, "As if by Fastening"; Stanley Plumly, "Shadower"; Angie Estes, "Curio"; Kate Daniels, "Not Singing"; Margaret Ross, "Devil's Optics"; Marvin Bell, "What Lasts"; Seamus Heaney, "The Outlaw"; Amy Newlove Schroeder, "Interstate 5"; Derek Walcott, "Maria Tsaetseva"; Aimee Nezhukumatathil, "Perch Bones and Apple Aubade"; Louise Glück, "The Tree House"; Jack Gilbert, "It's Clear Why the Angels Come No More"; Katharine Rauk, "Duet"

DUCKS & LOGS
Gloria Keeley



L.A. FREEWAY

Gloria Keeley



WHAT WE FELT AND FORGOT

Cody Wilhelm

The morning comes
air heavy with
remembrance and remorse.

I remember cold toes in warm sheets,
slender fingers dancing across
my bare chest,
and tangled brown hair
falling to my face
as I wake up.

I remember foggy windows
and my numb finger tracing
on the cold glass,
outside the driver-side window,
the last heart she saw.

Hours pass, a crackling voice
on the phone tells me
that she spun out on icy roads.
That she didn't feel a thing,
that in an instant
she was extinguished.

A year passed,
her touch, so far off;
December's frigid air
embraces me.
I finally crawl out of bed,
and for a moment;

I forget her name.

TONGUE TIED

Cody Wilhelm

Drowning above water
In your empire of ecstasy.
I have so much to say
That I can't figure out
What to say first
But my silence is more than enough.

You still my tongue
That stumbles over the sentences
That I try to speak to you;
In a peculiar abundance
That I'm foreign to.

In searching for the right words
I lost myself and was enveloped in
Endlessness; a sea of good intent. You.
It's odd to find myself lost in the amazement
When being uncertain of
My direction.

But I was found by you.
And then I knew
I had found my place.

POISON FROM YESTERDAY

Cody Wilhelm

Poison from yesterday
stuck on my tongue;
eyes look your last.
Gaze lost in
her.
Close my eyes
to see

the silence;
fall back into vacant darkness.
You slipped through my brittle fingers
like bitter antidotes
we refuse.

Chasing dead ends
and running after the setting sun;
forsaken too Sisyphean tasks.
Stuck on old wounds
until your voice numb and meek
stirs up the dark.

I want nothing more
than for you
to swallow your words.
Suffocate on the pride
that you breathe
into purpled lungs.

Poison laced lips
from yesterday
stuck on my tongue;
enamored with the taste.
Receding into
bleeding bedrooms;
stranded and abstracted
into your thorny crown.

FLING

Grace Tsichlis

You were terribly hungover, but you insisted on seeing me. You invited me to your apartment but joked about making me walk across the city. After some back and forth, you picked me up, and when I got into the car, you apologized for your appearance, which I thought was oddly sweet. The windows in your apartment were flung wide open, and even though it was the middle of summer, the heat didn't seem to bother us. I could see the Sierra Nevada Mountains from the window, and I decided that if whatever this was turned into a disaster, at least the view was beautiful. You asked if I was hungry because you'd already made lunch. Of course, I was starving; Spaniards eat lunch so late. "I can always eat," I said. You smiled, and I felt my heart begin to melt, a sensation I previously thought was only metaphorical. I followed you into the kitchen and admired all of the magnets on your fridge from places you and your family had visited. I pointed to the Estonia one, "I like this magnet." "El imán," you corrected me. Your Spanish accent won me over the first day we met, and I wondered if my American accent did the same to you. Unlikely, since the American accent falls somewhere at the bottom of the list of most beautiful accents. You asserted that we watch TV in Spanish—so I could improve. I told you my Spanish didn't need any more practice, which we both knew was a blatant lie. After several minutes of debate, you were shocked to learn I had never seen an episode of *Black Mirror*, and you quickly discarded your Spanish TV argument in favor for this show.

We were outstretched on your couch, and our shoes were scattered across the floor. I remember you asked me multiple times if I was okay. I was more than okay, but I wasn't going to tell you that. We'd only met two weeks ago; you were practically a stranger. There was still time for you to kill me and bury my body. I was in Spain for the entirety of June to study Spanish, and my roommate was in Scotland visiting a friend for the weekend, so it would probably take some time for my professor and classmates to realize I was gone. Even though you were a stranger, you didn't

feel like one. In the middle of a particular gruesome episode, I sat up to take a drink of water. I knew you were looking at me, but I pretended not to notice. I set the glass back on the table, but before I could lean back into your arms, you sat up too. You took my hand in yours and pressed your thumb into my open palm, right before you kissed me. When we pulled away from each other, you smiled, and I smiled back. My heart doubled in size, and the rest of my body simply melted away. It was an unfamiliar feeling, but it didn't feel so unfamiliar with you.

You made fun of how I pronounced "el maíz," and I gave you a hard time when you mistakenly referred to your toe as a finger. "It's the same word in Spanish!" You argued. I laughed, "I know, but it's different in English." You gave me a look like you didn't believe me. For the rest of the time we spent together that June, I pretended it wouldn't hurt when I left to return to the States. You taught me Spanish slang that I've since forgotten, and I'm sure you've forgotten the English slang I taught you. The only word I hope you forgot is fling. I said it was the word to describe what we were. Although true, it was more fun pretending we were something more.

When I got out of your car for the final time, you told me you didn't want to forget me. I always thought the girls in movies who swooned over empty words were fools, but there I was, standing in the middle of the street at one am, eating up every word you said. The next day, I flew back to Texas, and you continued on with your life. Before I left, I told you to wait at least a day before you picked up another American girl at a bar. You laughed and told me I was the first. I rolled my eyes but quietly hoped you were telling the truth. We weren't going to end up together, that much was obvious, but I had this strange desire to mean something more to you. I will never tell you this, but sometimes, even months after we said goodbye, I push my thumb into my palm, as if the pressure might somehow reveal your fingerprints hiding among mine.

HOW A COMEDIAN FALLS IN LOVE

Alan Elyshevitz

Holocaust, he growls, to make a parent laugh,
and lopes around the dining room in a pirate's voice,

which turns into a story on stage—quality material,
narrative cashmere. Jolly and obscene, his humor, at first,

is neo-classical: one part child, one part spleen. Mastering
low expectations, his bits progress to apolitical marriage

and a character he calls the Human Air-Conditioner who mimics
suave men in the movies and comes to believe in his own hair.

We see him on television devoid of ethnicity, slapping
a slapdash grin on the face of a talk show host. When a profile

records his impishness with women, he decides to need facets,
so he edits a periodical combining wit with cautionary tales

of frozen orange groves. His agent arranges a sojourn to Africa
where he cleans some water with deductible money.

On social media he grows virtual spokes to a wheel
of the right people. His press releases feel affinity for slums

and national parks. Within weeks we begin to detect him
in our secondary thoughts. In under a year we find him

in mirrors behind us, just the right distance for public love.

HEAVENLY BODIES

Nels Hanson

The children conceived
 in cars at drive-in movies
 hover in invisible ships,
 at the portholes watching
 Ann-Margaret and Elvis
 in "Viva Las Vegas"
 where what happens
 in that city of lights
 doesn't stay there.

Frock coat, tall hat
 gaunt Lincoln stands
 at the window without
 glass in the Spring
 night, his head turned
 as he waits listening
 for the owl's cry.

Great flocks with
 eager eyes circled
 JFK's thousand brief
 rooms, flying off again,
 cupids without arrows
 above the Olympic pool
 on tightropes between
 warm water and air.

All entangled particles,
 voyeurs gaze into mirrors,

skies of stars on alert, any
 second the constellations
 changing as Love's gravity
 compels a heavenly body.

I'M NOT SCARED, ARE YOU?

Sara Kinard

"Agent Morgan, she is not like any other criminal you have ever dealt with. She has murdered over thirty people in the past three years." said Agent Golden as he read over the file of the woman in the interrogation room.

Agent Morgan waved off his partner as he was handed the file. "Which is why you and about ten other special force agents are going to be standing right outside this door and on the other side of the mirror in that room," he pointed to the locked door. "I'm not scared of this woman." He turned to the door and tapped in the code before opening the door.

He didn't miss Agent Golden mumble, "you should be" but he chose to ignore it.

Agent Morgan walked into the room and saw a woman around his age handcuffed to the table. He sat on the other side of the table in the cold metal chair and looked at her for a moment. She did not look up at him; instead, she was staring at herself in the mirror behind him.

Nick cleared his throat, "Ma'am? My name is Nick, Nick Morgan. Can you tell me your name?"

She shifted her eyes to look at him and she scuffed, "I can, but you already know it so why should I?" She smiled at him and shifted her eye glaze to the mirror again.

Agent Morgan cleared his throat, pulled out the file he had on her and set it on the table before opening it. He read, "Your name is Jane Grant?" She didn't say anything and he continued, "You have been charged with thirty counts of murder. So, because it is my job, I have to ask you why you did it."

She made a click noise with her mouth before looking him in the eyes, "How old is that one-way mirror?"

Agent Morgan blinked, "Excuse me?"

She nodded toward the mirror, "Whenever there is a dark surface on this side of the mirror, you can see right through it." Nick shifted awkwardly, seeing as he was wearing a black suit. "Before you walked in here, I could see through my black hair, but your jacket is so much easier to see through." She leaned forward and finally looked him the eye, "For the record, Nick Morgan, I am not afraid of you or anyone else you're thinking about bringing into this room or that is outside of this room right now."

Agent Morgan leaned forward as well, "Why is that, Jane?" She smirked, "Because you're afraid of me, and what I would do if these cuffs came off. Which, by the way," she placed her the cuffs on the table and Nick snapped back and rose from his chair, hand resting on top of his gun. She stood up as well and stretched, "you need new cuffs too. I've had fuzzy cuffs stronger than those." She sat back down, crossed her arms, and put her legs on top of the table. "So, Agent Morgan, how long before someone walks in here and tries to put me back in those?"

THEY MAY BE POPPIES

Dorty Nowak

The man I'm getting to know
brought me several seedlings
from his garden, spiked leaves
a deep healthy green. He told
me the barren pots by my front
door bothered him.

I said I killed plants, forgot
to water them, put sun lovers
in shade. But for these I made
a hole in new soil, planted each
a finger-width apart, moved
their pots to a sunny spot.

This morning I noticed buds,
secrets held tight-fisted,
poking through the leaves.
I don't know what colors
they promise to unfold,
white, red, purple or gold.

STRUCK

Harlan Yarbrough

“Do you believe climate change isn’t happening?” Ellie asked. “You’re a science teacher—you should know better.”

“Of course climate change is happening,” Roger James replied. “The science is clear. The data overwhelmingly shows that the climate is changing and people are causing it.”

“Then why don’t you support our climate strike?” the girl asked, sounding not angry but genuinely puzzled.

“Cause I think it’s more important for you to learn more—more science or more communication skills or more whatever you need—so you can be even more effective in fighting against climate change.”

“We don’t have time for that.”

“B—”

“Sorry, sir, I didn’t mean that like it sounded. Yes, you’re right—I and Maddie and all of us need more knowledge and skills—but we need to do this, too. We need to take action now.”

“Yes, Ellie, I get that, but you don’t have to do it in school time.”

“But we do. This is a strike. We have to show that we’re serious.” Before Mr. James could respond, Ellie MacDonald continued, “Please, sir. If you’ll just give us the assignments ahead of time, we’ll get ’em all done. We won’t slow the class down.”

Roger James could see he wasn’t going to convince his four best students to come to school on the day of the climate strike. They don’t really need to, he thought. They could probably attend one day a week and still get top marks. He sighed and said, “The rest of the staff’ll prob’ly be mad at me. I s’pose I’m the first one to cave.”

“Oh, no, sir,” Ellie said, “Mr. Pearce already gave us two weeks of assignments.”

With a rueful smile, Mr. James said, “That’s good. I sure hope you convince people, especially the politicians.”

“Thank you, Mr. James. That’s what we aim to do, if we can,” Ellie said with a smile.

And ya can’t, if ya don’t try, her teacher thought, as she walked out the door.

Most of Mr. James’s students liked him—hardly surprising, because he liked most of them. He showed no favoritism, but he felt a special fondness for Ellie and Madison and Wendy and Myuna and their friends Tom and Luther. Wanting the best for all his students, Roger pushed his classes harder than usual over the course of the next three weeks. By the Thursday, the day before the planned student strike, all but two of his students were a good three days ahead of the curriculum. He accepted his classes’ grumbling with good humor and congratulated them on their progress.

On the way out of her senior math class that Thursday, Myuna grinned and said, “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Roger James just grinned back and winked. He then picked up the assignments he had collected through the day and trudged to the staff room. There, he set his work down on one of the big central tables, as he said “Hello” to Mike, the art teacher. Roger drew a glass of water and carried it and the accumulated work to his favorite corner. Quaffing half the glass, he took his red pen from his breast pocket and began marking a stats assignment.

John, the deputy principal walked into the room, just as Mike asked, “Want to go out for a bite to eat and a beer?”

“Thanks, Mike, I’d like to,” Roger replied, “but I’ve got a ton of work to mark and I don’t feel that great,” which might have been true, although he felt no worse than the usual end-of-a-workday

weariness. He greeted John and returned to marking students' work. Working quickly, he got through two classes in under an hour, then walked to his office, booted his computer, and fine-tuned the lesson plans he had prepared the previous evening then printed them. He walked back to the staff room and put the next day's work in his pigeonhole, then went home to finish the marking job over and after dinner.

Feeling only a little bit guilty, Roger James picked up the phone and called the deputy principal at five minutes to seven Friday morning. "Hi, John, Roger here," he said. "I don't think I'm good for a day's teaching today."

"Fair enough. It's your first sick-day all year, isn't it?"

"Mmm . . . yeah, maybe. I had a couple last year."

"Do you have work ready?"

"Yeah, I'll make sure it's in my pigeonhole before school."

"OK. I'd better make some phone calls."

"Get Trixie if you can, please. She knows enough physics to actually help the students."

"Right-o, Roger. I'll do that. You get better, and we'll see you Monday."

The errant teacher could have gone back to bed, but he was used to getting up early and preferred that routine. He ate the eggs he'd left frying in the skillet while he phoned, the oatmeal he'd left in the microwave, and two pieces of toast smeared with hummus. A glass of orange juice later, he stepped out of his rumpled and tattered around-the-house clothes and into the shower. Dressed in clean blue jeans and a politically provocative T-shirt, he sat at the computer and checked his email.

Roger began by reading a message from his ex-wife, asking for money as usual. He still loved her and always read hers first—

and helped her whenever he could, even though he was no longer under any legal obligation to do so. Next, he read a delightful message from a good friend and former teaching colleague, who was living in the Himalayas. Roger answered those and three other messages before locking up the house and driving into town.

Arriving at the appointed government building, he found he was one of the first. He saw Tom hanging banners, so Roger parked his sub-compact and went to help his student.

“Oh, hi, Mr. James. Yes, thank you, just hold that right there,” Tom said. “It’s neat you’ve come here today.”

“I couldn’t let you do something this important without giving you my full support.”

“Good on ya, sir!” Luther said, coming up behind his teacher. “Thank you.”

Myuna and Ellie walked up behind Luther, each bearing an armload of placards and wearing a big grin. “Hey, cool!” they said, almost in unison.

“Where are Madison and Wendy?” their teacher asked.

“They went to get Wendy’s guitar and sound gear,” Ellie told him, just as the other two came into view around a corner and carrying black cases and boxes. Roger and Luther hurried to help them and divided the load for easier carrying.

“Oh, sir!” Wendy said. “I didn’t know you were going to be here. That’s so cool. Did you bring your guitar? It would be so nice to have your support, so I don’t have to play all by myself.”

“I could go home and get it. It’s less than twenty minutes away. Or I could bring my bass, if you’d rather.”

“Wow! I didn’t even know you played bass. But I like your guitar playing so much. Just play guitar. Do you think you have time? The action’s s’posed to start in half an hour.”

"I'll miss the first ten minutes, but that doesn't matter, does it? Are you playing right at the beginning?"

"No, prob'ly not for an hour, at least."

"OK. I'm gone. Back soon," Roger said, as he looked both ways and dashed across the street and up the block to where he'd parked. Driving home, he thought, If the press is there with TV cameras, I could be in trouble. Feeling committed, he pressed on, retrieved his old Maton flattop, and hurried back downtown. He placed his guitar case next to Wendy's then listened with half an ear to a succession of speakers while waving a placard at passing traffic for the next hour. A blast from a big truck's air horn and a friendly smile and thumbs-up from the driver raised everyone's spirits, when Wendy tugged on her teacher's sleeve.

Roger hurried to the guitar cases with his student, and the two checked that their instruments were in tune with each other. As Ellie introduced Wendy to the two hundred-odd protesters, Roger said, "Just tell me the key for each one, and we'll be fine."

Wendy smiled and nodded and whispered, "OK. First one's D-minor, I think," before she stepped up to the microphone. He was right: they were fine. She sang, her songs conveyed important messages about the earth and the climate, the two played well together, and everyone present enjoyed their music. As they put the guitars back in their cases, she said, "That was so pretty. If I ever record those, I want you to play on 'em. Would you?"

"Wendy, dear, I would feel honored. And I hope you will record them."

A few more speeches, another half an hour of waving placards, and the demonstration wound down to its end. Almost every student present thanked Mr. James for attending and complimented his music. Intentionally lacking a television, he didn't find out until Monday morning that no compromising footage appeared on the evening news. The six organizers—ringleaders, Roger thought with a chuckle—told him his face

appeared in a few photographs on Facebook. Fortunately, none of the school's administrators had friended any of the students or otherwise encountered the incriminating pictures.

In class Monday morning, one of the less motivated students asked, "Can we take it easy now, sir?"

"I s'pose we can," their teacher replied, "but what I was thinking was: what if we kept on working that hard and finished all the work a week before the end of term—"

"Party time!" his original questioner said.

"Yeah, maybe," Mr. James replied, "but imagine the actions we could plan, if we had a whole week together to do it."

Ellie MacDonald's face lit up like a beacon, and both Myuna and Madison said, "Wow! Yeah!" while Luther and Tom pumped their fists in the air.

Some of the actions in larger cities had garnered huge numbers, enough that political leaders of both major parties began delivering speeches in response. Mr. James spent a few minutes in each of his classes discussing the strike and its effects and congratulating those students who had attended and supported it, who constituted a majority in two classes.

In addition to his formal academic and pastoral duties, Roger began spending many hours after school and most lunchtimes conferring with his ringleaders. Ellie declared, "A positive response doesn't mean it's time to stop. It's time to push on harder than ever."

Myuna added, "Exactly! Speeches don't mean anything. We need to push until we see action."

Sort of like giving birth, Roger thought but said nothing.

Myuna, Maddison, and Ellie coordinated with the national School Strike for Climate group, and all six, plus four other students worked hard with Gavin Pearce's and Roger James's help to

produce a plan for a much bigger action in the second half of the school year. Gavin Pearce arranged for students to get class credit in English for visiting other schools and presenting their plans and proposals. As the plans took shape, the organizers invited local members of the state and national legislative bodies to address the expected crowd. Apparently, none of the politicians felt they dared decline the invitation, so all accepted.

Three weeks before the big event, which began receiving enormous amounts of publicity in both print and broadcast media, Roger James attained a troubling awareness in recognizing he had fallen in love with both Myuna and Ellie. His personal scruples, his professional ethics, and the law all forbade his pursuing an intimate personal relationship with a student, so he devoted a great deal of energy to suppressing any and all non-academic and non-organizational thoughts of either. He, of course, expressed his feelings to no one.

For the big strike, Wendy wrote two new songs and asked her teacher in advance to accompany her. They spent several lunchtimes and a few after school hours practicing in advance, and Roger brought in his bass and taught a friend of Luther's to play bass rhythm for all of Wendy's songs. Gavin Pearce attempted unsuccessfully to persuade the administration to cancel school on the day of the strike. Roger kept pushing his classes to ensure they completed the entire curriculum. The few students who didn't wouldn't have anyway, even if they'd had two extra months available.

On the day, almost forty percent of the student body showed up for the protest gathering. Barely ten percent attended school. About half the school's students evidently took advantage of the strike to take the day off elsewhere, although three did show up at the strike action in the capital city. Attendance at the local action was so large for a regional city it made the national news, gratifying the organizers and their teachers.

Roger suffered a mysterious but non-debilitating illness that necessitated his second and last sick day of the year. The musical

interlude succeeded even better than the practice sessions and pleased the participants and the audience. Ellie's and Myuna's hugs at the end of the demonstration almost brought Roger to tears. As the organizers and musicians packed up everything and prepared to leave, Wendy told her teacher she had arranged to record her songs over the summer. "Will you really record them with me?" she wanted to know.

"Of course, I will."

"Shall we ask David to play bass?"

"We could. He did OK, but I could just play the bass parts, too, since I'll be there to play guitar."

"But you can't play both at once."

"In the studio it doesn't matter. We'll lay down bass and rhythm guitar tracks first. Once we're happy with those, we'll record your vocals and my guitar."

"Oh, OK. Cool."

The new graduate and her teacher did exactly that over a few days in the summer. Roger even added vocal harmonies on some of the songs. None of the tracks ever became big hits, but the CD sold more than enough copies to pay for the production, and Wendy had a piece of work of which she could be, and was, proud.

At the beginning of the new school year, Roger felt an ache over the lacuna where Ellie and Myuna and their friends had been. The six students he thought of as "his" ringleaders matriculated at four different universities, and Roger turned his attention to developing a new crop of rebels.

I SQUEEZE TWO HANDS

Tasha Vice

In Great-Grandmother's sewing room where I learned to 'needle
and thread'

Beneath the bay window which boasts early Geraniums,
sits my mother's father and her two brothers.

They, a musical posse;

Guitars in arms, they strum with their backs to the sun.

Fingers pitch across the strings, dissecting and reconciling,
full-syncopated bits of melodic tunes burst into a savory
celebration

in anticipation of the day's spread.

In Great-Grandmother's sitting room, images adorn the
bookshelves and walls.

Nearby in the wooden rocker, that once belonged to his father,
sits my Great-Granddaddy who hums to the adjacent tunes.

He, a lone artist;

His mind constructs original buttons of tin and rich shiny metals,
revitalizing and transforming crisp red scraps of patterned cloth.

A creative festooned hat assembled over years past rests atop
his head,

waiting in clad for the feast.

In Great-Grandmother's kitchen, a fresh pail of eggs beckons.

Near the fridge where frozen cubes of homemade ice-cream lay
on hold,

my mother, aunt, grandma, and great-grandmother encircle.

They, an iron linkage;

Equipped with patience, they swirl around steaming pans, ladles,
and serving spoons.

Hearts twist didactically to arduous children at the waistline.

Plump green beans simmer and hearty meats braise, a
remittance of love's labors

for one celebratory meal.

Around Great-Grandmother's table
Great-Grandmother is alongside Great-Granddaddy,
In front of the window that looks out onto the worn wooden
barns.
Hardy descendants stand as family;
Bowing in reverence, they encircle the stacked plates and readied
meal.
Hands hold fast to one another and the moment.
Souls thankfully accept family and grace
at one of our grandest fares.

There, while bowing my head, I squeeze two hands and say
"Amen."

ELEVATOR PITCH

Zach Murphy

Troy stepped into a crowded elevator on the way up to his apartment. It was the type of “crowded” where you don’t even have enough room to reach into your pockets to grab your headphones. Troy would’ve usually waited for the next round because he wasn’t a huge fan of the awkward silence that tends to arise in elevators, but he was really anxious to get home and plop into bed.

It’d been a weird week. Troy had to put his beloved dog Bagel down, and he wasn’t going to get over it anytime soon, if ever. On the flip side, his manager finally gave him a raise. It wasn’t much for filling out spreadsheets all day, but it made Troy’s curiously escalating monthly cable bill look a little less jarring. TV was one of the only things that could possibly cheer him up.

Troy tried not to make eye contact with anyone in the elevator. It was moments like these when he wished he could speed up time. Or teleport.

“It’s a beautiful day out there,” said a voice from the corner.

Sometimes, the small talk was even more painful than the silence. Troy wondered why someone would choose to bring up the weather while in an elevator, of all places. You’re inside of a tiny room—inside of another room—inside of a building.

It was also impossible not to overhear the phone conversations transpiring around him.

To the right, a woman seemed to be ranting to someone about a sour breakup with a friend. “At least I don’t have to pretend to like coffee anymore,” she quipped.

To the left, a man in a suit carried an unkempt box of office supplies while speaking into his Bluetooth device. He seemed to be having some sort of breakdown. “They completely blindsided me,” he said. “I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do now.”

Maybe the stock market plummeted again.

In front of Troy, sat a pair of teenagers that smelled of smoke and looked higher than the 15th floor. They weren't talking, though. Just scrolling.

Behind Troy, someone was planning a Friday night celebration. "Bring the good champagne," they said. "This is monumental."

As the people all eventually dispersed to their respective floors and went off on their own ways, Troy stood there as the last person in the elevator. He suddenly felt a ringing sense of loneliness. And much to his surprise, he somehow missed the strangers that he was surrounded by for a few minutes.

During the final ascension to his floor, Troy thought about the ups and downs of life, what his future would hold or not hold, and just how empty his apartment felt without his beloved dog Bagel.

When Troy exited the elevator and got to the door of his apartment, he reached into his pockets and realized that he accidentally left his headphones in his car.

CUB SCOUT BLOWS IT WITH GIRL SCOUT

Casey Killingsworth

I'm sorry I didn't buy us tickets
for the dance. I had the money
sitting right there but I didn't know
how to talk to girls. Or dance.

I'm sorry I didn't stay in scouts
after my teacher told me I had
to wear the uniform or else. You
looked so good in your uniform.

I'm sorry I didn't make anything
of my life, sorry I didn't get that
degree, sorry I never memorized
the scouts' credo.

Except I'm not sorry, not sorry
I quit the scouts, not sorry I
can't tie knots, but I am sorry
I didn't buy those tickets.

A LOAF OF BREAD

Casey Killingsworth

My daughter asks me
if I can bake a loaf of
bread for the family
who lost a son to
another bullet.
No. But I will march
to that death house and
hold him close,
hold that child so close until
he breathes dreams again,
take a piece of
his childhood and patch up the
life the bullet pushed out.
I will go up there now and move
his lips until he begins
again to speak and sing,
until some future comes
out, words to his girlfriend,
college counselor,
boss or first wife,
a lover, his kids, strangers.
I will go there and fill back up
the empty bag religious people
revere (an empty vessel
is not better), help him rebuild
his place at the table, rekindle
the dead air where he used to sit.
I will pull him back
from the irrevocable
edge until I can convince him
it was just a passing mistake,
just a second to now go retrace
to come back into his own
to come back.

THE CUBICLE

Tom McEachin

I arrived at my cubicle this morning to find a security guard sitting back in my chair, feet propped up on my desk. He was a familiar face, someone I'd exchange a "how ya-doin" with when we passed in the halls, but I had never bothered to learn his name. The guard jumped to his feet, offering a contrite nod back toward my chair. I waved off his apology and said, "What's up?"

But I already knew. They must be on to the pencils.

For the past four years, two co-workers and I supplied every pencil used by students at St. Pervis the Ordinary Elementary School. Or more precisely, Western Cortronics provided the pencils, although the company wasn't aware of that particular detail. A few years back, when Sr. Mary Harold sent out a plea to St. Pervis alumni, Clint Northrop, Ozzie Bevalaqua, and I hatched a scheme where every few days, I slipped a box of pencils out of the accounting department supply cabinet. Clint, who worked three cubicles over, came by every week or so with a lunch pail to sneak the pencils out, stashing them in a carton under a cluttered back stairwell. At the start of each semester, Ozzie, who worked in maintenance, delivered the pencils to Sr. Mary Harold with our compliments. It was our way of giving something back.

The guard said, "Mr. Bublitz wanted three of you escorted up to his office first thing."

I blinked innocently, offering the most confused expression I could muster. "Who are the other two?"

"Clint Northrup and Johnny Bevalaqua."

Now I genuinely was confused. Johnny Bevalaqua was Ozzie's little brother, an intern who had just started at Western Cortronics. He didn't know anything about our pencil caper.

I set my briefcase on the desk. "You wanna cuff me? Give 'em a show?"

The guard laughed. “No, I don’t think that’ll be necessary, Ted.”

He called me Ted and I felt bad. I should have learned his name.

I nodded toward the hall, and the two of us chatted about the Broncos all the way to the elevator, no one giving us a second thought. On the fourth floor, he led me to the president’s secretary, who told me to go in.

“Wm. Bublitz, President and CEO,” it read on the door. He goes by Bill but you never saw that in writing. You never saw “William,” either. Only “Wm.” I had no idea how to pronounce something like that. Wum? Wim? He sat at his desk, writing, never looking up to acknowledge my arrival. Clint and Johnny sat in front of him, and a company lawyer occupied the leather sofa along the far wall, also ignoring my arrival. With nowhere to sit other than on the sofa next to the lawyer, I went back out to the waiting area to fetch a chair, which I pulled up between Clint and Johnny.

Clint and I exchanged nervous glances, then a quizzical look toward Johnny. I empathized for kid, but I felt bad for myself, too, wondering if my job was already gone. With fall semester a week away, we had a full cache of pencils. Did Wum’s troops already find them? If so, could they prove we were connected?

My eyes wandered to the floor and I nearly chuckled out loud. It occurred to me this was my first time getting called on the carpet, and I would have expected something nicer than this second-rate stuff in Wum’s office. The carpet was rusty brown, something you’d find in a cheap motel, but it matched the decor. The furniture was old cherry—not antique-old, but worn-out old—a perfect complement to Wum’s polyester tastes and ghastly hygiene. Watching him make us wait, his greasy brown hair pasted to his pallid scalp, dandruff snowing across his blue Sears’ Best shirt, I wondered, why am I working for this slob? It all felt so surreal.

Wum stood to retrieve some papers from an old cherry file cabinet behind his desk, still refusing to look our way. His glasses slid down his oily nose and he pushed them back in place. Content that he had made us squirm, Wum returned to his chair and shifted

his attention to Clint, twisting his head at an awkward angle to see through the smudges on his glasses. “You don’t see many accountants bring lunch pails like yours to work, do you?” Wum asked.

“I like a big lunch,” Clint said.

The boss scribbled some more, then set that piece of paper aside. Wum examined the next sheet and said, “Mr. Bevalaqua.”

Johnny crept forward in his seat. “I think there’s some kinda mistake,” he blurted out. Wum glared. “I’m new here and I wonder, maybe you have me confused with my brother? I’m only an intern.”

Wum scrutinized his papers, wrote some more, then rolled his chair back to the file cabinet. I assumed he was going to check the Bevalquas’ personnel records, but instead, he pulled out a sheet of paper from a folder and handed it to me.

“Do you recognize this, Mr. Horton?” he asked.

I could hardly disavow since my signature—in red crayon—covered the bottom half of the page.

Above was the heading,

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE NO. 17:
MISAPPROPRIATION OF COMPANY RESOURCES

The memo stated that we were not allowed to do things like steal pencils or make personal long-distance phone calls. Management demanded everyone sign the form, but when it showed up in my mail slot, I could only chuckle at the bureaucratic mundanity of it all. I shoved it aside, figuring everyone steals pencils from work, and everyone knows if they get caught, they could get fired. So why waste our time with this? Over the next two weeks, I was bombarded with reminders to “sign and return ASAP.” It all seemed so childish and I thought, *if they’re going to treat me like a kid, I’ll act like one*. Thus, the signature in red crayon.

“Looks like my signature,” I declared after careful scrutiny, sliding the page back to Wum.

“So, you’ve read this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you understand it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then where are the pencils, Mr. Horton?”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

He scribbled on a few more papers without so much as a peek in our direction. “Okay, that will be all,” he said.

We glanced at each other, then got up to leave, slipping quietly through the outer office and down the hall to the elevator.

“That was weird,” Clint said on the way to the first floor.

When we stepped off the elevator, the guard who had escorted me up was standing in the hallway. “How’d it go?” he asked.

“Not sure. Was that by any chance an administrative hearing?”

“I couldn’t say, but that seems to be the way they handle things these days. If so, you’ll hear the outcome before the morning’s out.”

None of us felt particularly productive, so we gathered in Clint’s cubicle. “My brother got me this job,” Johnny said as panic seeped into his eyes. “He’s gonna be pissed.” Johnny called down to maintenance and found out Ozzie hadn’t come in today. When Johnny couldn’t reach his brother’s cell, I shared in the panic.

“They’re just fishing,” Clint said. Johnny sought reassurance and latched onto Clint’s words. I wanted to believe him, too, but I pitied the kid for his desperation. Then, I got annoyed with him. I stepped to the edge of Clint’s cubicle and leaned against the entryway.

Twenty minutes later, Francine Zuwillager, the head of Human Resources, ducked in three cubicles away.

"Are you looking for me," I called out.

She peered up. "Mr. Horton, right? Ted Horton?"

"Yes I am."

She joined us in Clint's cubicle, and I introduced the others. "Oh, good," she said. "You're all here. I have the results of your administrative hearing." She flipped through some pages in a folder, then fumbled for her reading glasses, which dangled from a chain around her neck. With the glasses resting at the tip of her nose, she turned again to her folder and said, "Oh, yes, here it is. Mr. Horton, you've been terminated." She glanced up and offered an awkward attempt at a sympathetic smile. "You have one hour to clean out your cubicle." She flipped through more pages in her folder and added, "The other two as well," offering them the same awkward smile.

* * *

All I wanted from my cubicle were pictures of my kids, a coffee mug and my briefcase, so I was in no hurry to pack. I took a seat in front of Clint's desk. Johnny seemed confused what to do, so he sat next to me.

"Whaddaya know," Clint said, once the reality sunk in. He searched for something to hold his belongings. Finding none, he grabbed a wastebasket and flipped it upside down, dumping crumpled papers and a candy bar wrapper on the floor. He set the wastebasket on his desk and opened the top drawer. The things he wanted to keep he placed in the trash basket, and the trash he threw to the floor.

A few minutes later, a blonde from Human Resources named Cindi popped her head in the cubicle. Every guy in the building knew her, she made certain of that. She was a competent enough flirt but essentially inept at most everything else. She most likely landed a cushy H.R. gig by crossing and uncrossing her legs in front of Wum during her interview when, with her limited qualifications, she should be off cleaning motel rooms somewhere.

"Hi, guys. What's up?" she said in her pert, gum-snapping way. I grimaced, astonished that the owner and operator of a human brain could be so clueless. Johnny perked up and Clint flashed a look of contempt, although his eyes soon drifted toward her breasts.

I said to Clint, "Security must so busy dragging people upstairs to get fired that H.R. had to pitch in to oversee us cleaning out our desks."

It eventually dawned on Cindi what this was all about.

"Oh, yeah, geez," she said, snapping her gum. "That's a bummer you guys. If there's anything I can do, let me know."

"We're watching Clint clean out his desk," I told her, "then we're all going to parade over to my desk and they'll watch me clean out mine."

She nodded like there was brilliance to that plan. She leaned against the edge of the cubicle without coming all the way in. Clint worked his way through his desk, alternating between flirting with Cindi and sneering at her, startling us at one point when he threw a folder against the wall. "I'm gonna sue the bastards," he said. "What ever happened to due process and all that crap?" Then he calmly held up a couple pencils and said "Souvenirs" as he placed them in his wastebasket to take home. In his bottom drawer was a half-empty bottle of Smirnoff as well as a full one. He started to hide the booze from Cindi, but when it occurred to him that at this point discretion was unnecessary, he raised the bottles. "Want a drink?"

"I should find some orange juice," she smiled. But she didn't move.

He looked at me as he cleared out room for the Smirnoff bottles in the bottom of the wastebasket. "Might make a nice Molotov cocktail."

My mind drifted as he continued to clean out his desk. I thought about how much I used to enjoy working here. And I

thought about how things had changed under Wum Bublitz's leadership. His mission was to drive out the unions, but he didn't stop there. He tightened the dress code, which was fine. A little professionalism never hurt. Then he mandated ID badges, which seemed reasonable. But the memorandums and Administrative Procedures kept coming. Only two small personal photos in your work area. Only one small artificial plant on your desk. Assigned vacation weeks. Random drug testing for everyone. Random firings, too. He doubled the security staff and slashed Christmas bonuses.

With each new policy, each new memo, our morale, even the quality of our work, declined, but it happened so gradually I didn't even realize it until that minute. Thanks to Wum, Western Cortronics had turned us into drones, all of us, but as long as he fended off the unions, he was Golden Boy in the eyes of the directors, and nothing would change.

The back of my shirt was wet with sweat now, my pulse uneven. I had trouble concentrating, but indignation flowed like a salve over the pain I felt about getting the boot after eighteen years. I felt suddenly awake and alive, and I wanted everyone else to wake up too. I wanted to stand and scream. I wanted everyone to hear me and agree with me and follow me out the door right now. This wasn't about me but rather what he was doing to everyone. It was all so clear now, and I felt free. We should be celebrating. So why was Clint so angry cleaning out his desk? I thought, Don't you get it? Johnny didn't get it either. He looked like he wanted to cry. Just as my spirits were beginning to rise, the two of them brought me down.

Clint worked his way to the other side of his desk and snuck a stash of betting slips into his pockets. For a moment, I worried more for him than me. He drank too much. He gambled too much. His wife split. But I thought, screw him. All his troubles, he brought on himself.

After an hour of this, two security guards I didn't recognize approached. They called for Clint and Johnny, handing them their final paychecks. "Bring your personal belongings," one of the

guards told them. "You won't be coming back." And to me he said, "You can wait in your cubicle. Someone will be by for you."

They paraded down the hall, Clint carrying his wastebasket of contraband, Johnny gripping his final pay envelope with both hands. Walking past Cindi and out into the hallway, wondering if she would follow, I felt a cold sting on my back from the sweaty shirt against my skin. I went to my cubicle, not to follow orders but because I was getting depressed where I was.

I took a seat at my desk and Cindi struck a familiar pose at the edge of my cubicle. She smiled but didn't say anything. I stared at the pictures of my two sons, trying to convince myself I could fix things, still provide for them. Sure, I needed a job, but websites were fat with prospects. I'm a seasoned accountant, I told myself. I have a healthy bank balance. This will be all right. This will be better than all right. Lost in thought for half an hour, I remembered good times and bad times with my family, calculating the cost of sending two kids to college and counting up assets. Then, yet another guard I didn't recognize came by. I noticed he had no pay envelope for me.

"Mr. Bublitz would like to have a word with you," he said.

I stood and brushed my hand across the back of my shirt, relieved that it had dried. The guard led me to the elevator and up to the fourth floor, the same route I had taken a couple hours earlier. This time, Wum rose and glared at me as I helped myself to a chair. He walked around his desk and took a seat on the corner of it. As he cast his eyes down at me, the seams of his gray double-knit pants screamed under the strains of his chubby physique.

"I want the pencils, Mr. Horton, and you are the one who will tell me where they are."

He tilted his head the way he does to see past the smudges. "Sign a confession and give me the pencils, and I'll let you off. It's as simple as that, the pencils for your job. You've got fifteen minutes to think it over." He motioned toward the door. "Mess with me and you'll be gone so fast your head will spin."

He directed me to a chair across from his secretary. As he left the outer office and turned down the hallway, I laughed out loud at the thought of this blubbery creature threatening me. His secretary scolded me with her eyes so I controlled my laughter, but I couldn't contain my smile.

The only thing intimidating about Wum Bublitz was his zeal for messing with people's lives, the way he made sure we knew he would fire anyone on a whim. But mentally, emotionally, I had checked out an hour ago, so what power did he hold over me? Apparently, the futility of trying to intimidate someone after he has been fired was beyond Wum's grasp. He assumed I would spend those fifteen minutes wallowing in despair, but I saw his desperation. He needed the pencils as a trophy, a visual aid to remind the drones what happens to people who messed with him. My only problem was in finding a way to make a buffoon out of him on my way out. His preoccupation with the pencils would set him up nicely.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Wum returned with his lawyer and directed me back into his office. "Your time is up, Mr. Horton. And you're out of options."

"Okay," I told him, "you win. I'll tell you where the pencils are. But first, I need to tell you this. You know, your tie has enough doughnut crumbs and soup blotches to require its own nutritional information label. And you should clean your glasses once in a while. You look like an idiot with finger smudges all over your lenses."

Wum didn't flinch. He showed no particular patience for my insults, but he didn't seem bothered by them either. He was so pathetically obsessed with those pencils he would stand and take it. So I continued.

"Did you know everyone around here calls you Elmer Fudd? When you walk down the hall, I hear eight different people say 'Be vewwy, vewwy qwiet' behind your back. It's something to ponder,

you mean-spirited weasel. But I understand, your soul-searching must wait. You have pencils to find, so I'll let you get on with it. They're stashed in the women's restroom down on the second floor, last stall."

He couldn't contain his glee, this smug, superior expression on his smarmy face. He snapped his finger, literally raised his hand over his head and snapped at his lawyer as he raced to the door. The lawyer jumped and told me to wait. Two security guards met them, and they were gone toward the elevator. I sat back in my chair, contented, as I thought of them bursting into the women's room, greeted with screams and shrieks and insults, kicking some poor secretary out of the stall in pursuit of pencils, oblivious to tact or decency or even laws against sexual harassment. Surely, they would be talking about this day at Western Cortronics for years to come. The thought brought a satisfied smile to my face.

A few minutes later, loud voices echoed through the hallway and into the outer office. They were excited voices, but they struck me as being not especially upset. Wum stepped into his office alone. I thought he'd have a couple guards with him to haul me out to the sidewalk. He stood over me, hands on his chunky hips, smirking. "Alright, Mr. Horton, you're dismissed."

I figured him for the type who loved the word "fired," or at least "terminated." But "dismissed?"

"Pardon?" I said.

"I said return to your workstation."

I stood and we sized each other up. He had something in mind, I had to believe. He wouldn't allow me the satisfaction to a women's restroom searching for, of all things, a few lousy boxes of pencils. I conjured up all sorts of devious tricks he could spring on me, like perhaps while I was waiting up on the fourth floor, someone down on the first-floor planted drugs in my cubicle, or even a gun. Maybe he'll call in a SWAT team to drag me from the building.

I wandered back to my desk with no escort and sat there dazed. A few minutes later a couple co-workers invited me to

lunch. I figured they wanted the scoop on Clint and the second-floor raid, so I went. I didn't expect my key card to let me in the building afterward, so I grabbed my few things on the way out, stashing them in the trunk of my car before walking across the street to the restaurant. Over our burgers and diet Cokes, we chatted about the weather and the Broncos and every other sort of mindless banter, with no indication they knew anything about the firings or the bathroom raid. As our check arrived, one of my friends mentioned, "Clint's a lucky dog. I saw Cindi hanging out at his cubicle all morning."

I didn't know what to make of it. When I returned to the office, the key card chirped to let me in, the workday progressing like any other. So, I headed back to my cubicle to ponder my next move. Ozzie Bevalaqua spotted me and raced over.

"Wild morning," he said. "I've been looking all over for you. I got a message from my brother and came in as soon as I heard." Ozzie leaned closer and lowered his voice. "I had called in sick today so they weren't looking for me. Anyway, I ditched the pencils so I think we're safe." He checked over his shoulder, then leaned in closer. "Get this," he said with a proud grin, "I had Margaret Garside stashed 'em in the ladies' john up on the second floor."

My head began to swim. I reached for the back of my chair, spun it around and eased myself into it, matching Ozzie's proud grin. Looking up at him and his curious expression, I leaned back and propped my feet on the desk, striking the same pose I had caught the security guard in first thing this morning.

BRAINSTORM

Benjamin Harnett

It was a video meme, once,
fifteen years ago, a lifetime ago,
a little girl crying out
“brainstormmmm!”
with bright neon graphics
superimposed
lighting, etcetera,
we would play it on the computer
over and over again,
to each other. When meeting
one might cry out “brainstorm”
oneself, the other chuckling.

The moss is so green
on the cracked bark
of the elm out back
the crevasses inverted
bolts of black, from
stump arm to thick roots,
below ground they
feather out, and somewhere
neuron-like bundles
count, light and dark hours
and the passing of days,
which, when things start to warm,
will decide when to get
the sap flowing,
and when to offer
first buds to the storm.

THE MOUNTAIN HOUSE

Benjamin Harnett

How could we have known it was
the place our minds would return to
on days like this, house perched
on the shoals of the mountain
with its garden
of big cabbages and the water tank
that warbled
when it was full.

And the divan on the screen porch
where I fell asleep reading from
The Interpreter of Maladies
and a bit of thunder, and rain
on my cheek. The entire place
ran on 12 volts
from panels on the roof.
At night, the way was lit
by faerie lights; okay,
it was pretty nice.

The mosquitos didn't much bother.
It was August,
the Adirondacks, and it was
good. We climbed to the very top,
saw the high peaks,
pale in pale sky.
We showered together,
outside. It amused
the dogs, our pink nakedness.
It was a sacred place,
or a sacred time,

and we were
its gods.

BAD OMEN: JANUARY 1961

Emily Priddy

An icy draft found its way in around the newspapers Shirley had stuffed in the cracks around the windows, but the chill that racked her body as she sat up in bed wasn't coming from outside.

Something was wrong with the baby. She wrapped her arms around her belly and tried not to wake John as she sent a silent message to her unborn child. *Mama's here, little one. I'm doing the best I can for you. Stay with me.*

The dream had seemed so vivid. Even now, wide awake, eyes open, blinking in the dim light that filtered through the curtains from the pole light in the park behind her property, Shirley could almost make out a dark shape crouching in the corner next to the dresser.

"Stay the hell away from my family," she whispered, almost inaudible.

The shape faded into the familiarity of a wastebasket perched atop a hatbox, but Shirley wasn't fooled.

She'd been holding the baby, nuzzling the fine hair on top of his head and singing "The Gypsy Rover" to soothe him to sleep, but he was inconsolable, and she could feel the dark thing reaching for them. She'd screamed with him, trembling, trying to hold the creature back, but it was too strong for her to overpower. She'd sobbed helplessly as it commandeered her body, its presence an inky mist seeping into her veins and using her arms to carry the hysterical infant to the washtub where she'd bathed him earlier, forcing her hands to hold his head below the water, leaving her only when it was too late to save him.

John didn't put much stock in dreams.

Shirley did. All the Kavanaugh women did. The *bean sidhe's* influence ran in their blood. The stories stretched back to Ireland, long before the famine, back and back and back to a churchyard guarded by a sheela and a tale of a young novice who, after being

raped by a corrupt bishop, turned up pregnant and killed herself to save the infant from a life of ignominy. As the legend went, an old woman—in some versions of the story, the mother superior; in others, Brigid, the Morrígan, or any of various other faeries and goddesses—found the wretch bleeding in the courtyard, prised the knife from her hands, and cut the infant from her womb. The tiny girl survived and grew up in the abbey, and on certain nights, she would run to one of the sisters, wailing, insisting she could hear her mother crying outside. Invariably, the order would awaken the next morning to the news someone had died in the night, just about the same hour the girl had reported hearing her mother's voice.

Fifteen generations later, Shirley had learned to fear her own screams in the night, and tonight, more than three centuries and 4,500 miles from the origin of the Kavanaughs' *bean sidhe*, she wept in silence for the little one dying in her dreams.

BAY / SAN FRANCISCO

Marshall Farren



CHILE STORE / TEXAS

Marshall Farren



I-10 / SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Marshall Farren



THE JOKE OF I

Tenika Heidelberg

I laughed the first time,
I realized it was as joke.

Every time after

I cried, because
I realized.

I was the Punchline.

NAKED

Tenika Heidelberg

Stripped of everything
Except for you.

But you control that too.
Who's that, and who's who?

God damn you.

FINGERS CROSSED

Tenika Heidelberg

What is a promise
If even life can be broken?

A hope? Perhaps that
the words are not
rimmed with lies but love.

The promise is but a break
in your own belief of
reality and fiction.

Snap out of it,
Fingers were crossed.

THE NURSE

Mike Sheedy

The old man popped into wakefulness cool and clearheaded. His fever had broken. He heard a bird chirp outside and felt resurrected.

And then the smell of cigar smoke hit him. He opened his eyes and saw a man sitting in the open window, smoking and looking out at the desert. From the angle of the shadows outside it seemed to be an hour or so after sunrise.

“Where...where’s Domingo?” the old man croaked.

The man in the window turned his head and shot a jet of smoke into the room. He was young, dressed in black, and had shaggy black hair sticking out from under a black cowboy hat. Black stubble darkened his tanned jaw.

“I sent the boy away. I told him I’d take over.”

“Who are you?”

“I guess I’m your nurse.”

“Then help me to the crapper.”

“Help yourself to the crapper.”

The old man tried to outstare him, but it wasn’t even close to a contest. The stranger’s pale blue eyes weren’t just cold they were frozen, with no chance of a thaw above the curl of cigar smoke.

Finally, the old man struggled to a sitting position and then struggled to the bathroom. He blew out three days’ worth of backup, washed his face and brushed his teeth. The medicine chest mirror showed a skeleton covered with sun-spotted skin. When he’d made it back to his bed, he sat on the edge and massaged his aching knees.

“There,” the stranger said, “I knew you could do it.”

"What do you want?" the old man asked, huffing from his exertions.

"I want you. Let's go."

"Where?"

"You know where."

And the old man did. The stranger's eyes weren't so cold that they could hide the look of desire.

"I'm not up to goin'."

"Sure you are." The man flicked his cigar stub out the window. "You moved like a jackrabbit on that trip to the bathroom. Now it's time for another trip."

"I need to eat," the old man said. He couldn't remember when he'd felt so empty. He saw the tortillas and the glass of water that Domingo had put on the bedside table the night before.

"So dig in," the stranger said, gesturing to the food. The old man ate. The rough-ground corn seasoned with salt tasted wonderful.

"Where's it at?" the stranger asked after a while.

The old man felt better, stronger. He finished the last of the water and said, "About a three-hour walk from here. Or four, the shape I'm in." He belched. "What's your name?"

The stranger had been studying the desert from his place in the window. He turned and looked at the old man.

"Just think of me as 'the killer.' That'll remind you what could happen if you don't do what I say."

#

A couple of hours later the old man got his second wind. He'd been shaky when they started out, but maybe it was psychological. When they passed the halfway point he felt better and picked up

the pace a bit. That suited the killer, who'd been bitching about the trip taking forever.

Once he didn't have the pace to gripe about, he started talking about the lamp. He was nothing like the man of few words he'd been in the window. He yammered like a child.

"This is a long walk, but, you know, I walked a long way to get here. Or back there, where you live. Why don't you have a castle or somethin', since you live this close?"

"I don't mess with the lamp, and it don't mess with me."

"But that old house you're in is a dump. You should get yourself a castle. I'm gonna wish up a big one."

The old man stopped. He may have been feeling his second wind, but his joints burned from arthritis and exertion. He removed his straw hat and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"You wanna talk or walk, sonny? I can't do both."

The killer motioned for him to continue. He put his hat back on and resumed walking. Castles. He'd heard about some, but all of that was a lifetime ago. He thought back to when the lamps came down. At first, everybody said it was just a meteor shower—a strong one, but still just a meteor shower. The big glowing streaks bombarded the earth for two days and two nights. All told about a hundred hit, according to reports, and then suddenly they stopped. Communications were still up and running and the old man, who was young then, saw pictures and video of impact craters all over the world. The grownups didn't seem too concerned about the event. They didn't seem concerned either when communications started to go down, but shortly after that was when things began to change.

From what the old man was able to piece together later, governments everywhere went to work studying the meteors. They learned that they could grant wishes, so they came to be called "lamps," after the story of Aladdin. But the genies in the updated

story were fierce. Before long, the world was engulfed in war. It was a dark time of nukes, bioweapons, misery, and death.

So, the governments had their moment with the lamps, and then after they collapsed the power passed into the hands of people bold enough to seize it. Feudal lords ruled the earth. They arose, wished their castles into existence, and then turned their distrustful eyes on each other. The wars continued. They were fought with fewer numbers than the ones before, but they were just as brutal.

After the power mad were killed off, the less aggressive gained access to the lamps. They used them to wish for the traditional signifiers of importance. Rather than nukes and bioweapons, they conjured up things they'd been taught to value when they were young. Few wished for happiness or understanding, because they thought that wealth and position would lead to those. They didn't, of course, and people went mad wondering why they couldn't satisfy their yearnings. Many committed suicide, and many simply wandered away into the wasteland beyond care.

And now, the lamps were left to people who didn't make many demands on their magical powers. Either through genetics or philosophy, the inheritors weren't very interested in improving their lots in life, and when they brought wishes to the lamps, they were small ones. They wished for an easy childbirth, or for a green thumb so they could squeeze another turnip from a garden. They hoped for just enough to carry on.

But some people still had grand plans, the old man thought, people like his companion. No telling what he wanted, but it probably wasn't good. Anybody who would nickname himself "the killer" had a kink in his thinking.

#

"That's a long way down," the killer said.

They stood looking into the crater. It was about a quarter mile across and ringed with abandoned cars, luggage and other debris.

The rust-colored dome of the lamp was visible a hundred feet below.

"That's a long way down," the killer repeated.

"Of course it is," the old man snapped. His legs hurt and he was tired. "It fell out of the sky and hit the ground, hard."

"But the other ones I saw, the pictures of them, they had steps 'n stuff going down to them. Why didn't you put in steps?"

"Well excuse me, mister la-dee-dah. If I'd've known you was comin' I'd've set up a lemonade stand."

"So what do I do now?"

"You go down and make your wishes. Ain't that why we're here?"

"But it's a long way down."

"Fine," the old man shrugged. "I'm goin' home." He started to turn away but the killer said, "Wait! I'd never find my way back on my own."

"Then get busy. And leave the water here."

The killer handed him the canteen and stepped over the rim of the crater. The old man watched him skitter down the slope. He thought of the doodlebug traps he'd been fascinated with as a child. Ant lions dug perfect little cones in the sand and then waited at the bottoms for ants to slide in.

He turned back the way they'd come and sat on the ground. The desert stretched away in front of him shimmering with heat. He eased down onto his back and placed his hat over his face.

He dozed for he didn't know how long and then woke feeling refreshed. He sat up and looked around. The sun was well past its zenith and he was still alone.

"Mr. Killer?!" he called out, but he knew there wouldn't be any answer. He took a sip of water and thought back to when the lamp

changed. It used to be that people could climb all over it and then charge off full of vinegar, but nobody returned from the crater now. And the people who sought him out as a guide never listened when he cautioned them against going down. Most thought he was trying to hog the lamp's power for himself. But he didn't need much power. Just resting on the crater's rim for a while allowed him to draw enough for his needs.

He stood up feeling good. He looked at the backs of his hands and saw a few less age spots than had been there that morning. The lamp kept the clock rolled back just enough to keep him going, and that was all he asked.

He took another sip of water and set out for home. His legs felt better. He'd be able to help Domingo and his mom now. If they hadn't broken ground for the onions yet, he would do that.

DOG BEAUTY CONTEST

Duane Anderson

I had the television turned to the news as I ate my lunch, but that didn't matter to my wife as she changed the channel to one where a national dog show competition was airing. I liked having dogs,

but wasn't particularly interested in showing one off, except when taking it for a walk, which most dogs seemed to enjoy since it gave them new areas to explore other than examining the all too familiar backyard,

but now at least, I knew that the national news I was watching was a low priority for my wife, especially the political news which at times seemed to be a recurring rerun, as it was repeated day after day. Maybe watching the movie *Old Yeller*, or

an old *Lassie* or *Rin Tin Tin* television show would have been a more logical choice if she wanted to watch dogs, dogs that were heroes, instead of watching a dog beauty contest, so I ignored the channel, and continued eating my lunch.

STILL LIVES ON CANVAS

Patrick St. Amand

They were holding hands and looking at the canvas that ‘they’ had purchased online.

The canvas, now mounted on the kitchen wall looking down on their kitchen table, seemed significantly larger and more intimidating than either one of them thought that it would be. Both conceded, though they didn’t say this out loud, that they hadn’t really thought about what it would look like. Neither one thought that this would actually come into fruition—that is, them actually having the canvas. So the fact that the canvas was in front of them was almost as unbelievable as its size. The canvas that they had ordered “together” was a testament to their inability to understand standard area and units. What they assumed would be no larger than a pizza box now loomed over both of them, measuring one and a half by two meters.

“You almost have to glare at it to look at it.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s almost...too bright...”

“Yeah.”

This was partially because the wall on which they hung the canvas was painted a dark brown. Neither had liked the color when they moved in a year back, but neither had felt motivated enough to do anything about the wall’s fungal color. They weren’t lazy, not really, but they weren’t ready to make any drastic changes to their apartment either. The bleached canvas gave them three square meters of window that looked into nothing. It wasn’t transparent but was so obviously incongruous. Chris shuffled his feet after staring at it for a while, and Julie left to put on the kettle. She hoped that when she returned Chris, and more importantly she, wouldn’t regret their latest decision.

For them, making decisions wasn’t easy. Nothing they did as a couple was easy.

When they decided to move in together, it was more about safety than it was about love. They said that they loved each other. But when Chris said this, he always bit his lip a little bit, and Julie always looked away before saying this, while saying this, or right after saying this. They had sex regularly and held hands in public, but the essence of their relationship was safety.

At first, when Chris proposed the idea of living together, neither he nor Julie really wanted to. It just seemed that after dating for two years, they should. His friends continued to probe him about why he still lived with his parents when he was doing so well at the restaurant. When he asked the question, he knew her answer. He knew that his insincerity showed; her face hid nothing. Neither he nor Julie wanted to live with the other, so they decided that their relationship wasn't worth having. However, in the two years that they had been dating, they had grown to depend on each other. They were single again: faced with the reality that they had to meet new people, frequent new places, and display their vulnerabilities and weaknesses to absolute strangers. Suddenly, the ties that bind people when they have been intimate and comfortable for so long tightened. They found each other again after a few weeks of embarrassment, depression, resentment, and one case of contracted chlamydia. They kissed their familiar lips, held their familiar hands and they had sex—both sighing in relief at the comfort, the lack of spontaneity, the lack of everything other than the person with whom they had to know. They found an apartment the next week.

The time apart did make it apparent to them both that their relationship had found a form of stasis. So, Julie suggested they do something different—something to break the mold that they had made for themselves. What she thought seemed like a whim at first became a way to prevent them from breaking up again. She suggested a number of things that he immediately shot down: journaling, an hour of reflection each week, daily debriefs. When she suggested painting a canvas together, he conceded mostly to end the tirade, so Julie would be quiet. He didn't want to paint; he didn't want to do anything now that they were living together. He just wanted to work and make a comfortable home for them, but she was so insistent on doing something to strengthen the bonds of their relationship and break out of their predictability, that he

relented. Julie tended to follow up on only a few of her ideas, so he just assumed that she wouldn't bring this plan to fruition. Nine months later, when she brought up the idea again, he assumed it would fade away once more. Three months after that, they had their canvas.

It sat there over the kitchen table, for some time, before they even thought about painting on it. The idea had to be re-explained to Chris, who felt that he, with the exception of his job, had no shred of creativity. Give him a variety of fresh vegetables, meats and dairy! Out of these he could conjure up a beautiful mosaic; outside of the kitchen, he faltered. So did Julie, but at least she wanted to try.

The two of them stared at the canvas as they ate breakfast and dinner. The canvas' presence became overbearing. It glowed when the lights were out. It filled the apartment. Weeks went by with this overbearing object silently bullying them. Chris finally proposed an ultimatum: they paint on it in a week, or they get rid of it. Julie agreed. They went to bed happy that night. At least something would be done. The next morning, when they woke up, the canvas still glowed, but it had changed to green. The two accepted the change in silence.

When they arrived back at their apartment that night, they had both bought brushes and standard oil paints. She had bought a variety of primary and secondary colors, as he had too, but Chris also included black, just in case. They moved the table away and laid down some old newspapers beneath the canvas.

"So, we just, kinda, paint at the same time?"

"This is supposed to be cathartic."

"But why are we painting at the same time?"

"Cause this is supposed to be us representing our relationship together."

"So, shouldn't we discuss what we are going to paint?"

"No, we never discuss what we paint. We just paint together. Paint what we think our relationship IS."

For a long time, they just stared at the canvas. Chris thought about the first time they had made love together. It was on a beach, and they waited until it was well after dark before they started. He remembered being so scared of doing something wrong to her, and she was tense because she didn't want anyone to approach. He felt the same tension now, the same unnatural expressions of feeling.

When both overcame their own insecurity and the situation's absurdity, they started painting. They bumped into each other, nudging each other's elbows as they painted taking sloppy strokes. Specks of brown and green and orange drizzled onto the newspaper and sweat puddled through their t-shirts. Though they wouldn't admit it, not until their first picture was done, this was something they both really enjoyed. For a moment, they worked completely in synch, developing their own interpretation of what their relationship was—or at least, could be—to them. They became so enveloped in their own work that only through their peripheries did they dare to look at what the other painted. When the timer went, they stood back. She took a sudden breath in and he could feel his pulse quicken. They had both painted trees on their gigantic canvas, though some parts were incomplete. Chris had painted an interpretation of a spruce; Julie had painted an interpretation of a maple. Together, the trees looked incongruous, but the two knew that this surely had to mean something. Just as the canvas had turned green overnight. Chris' spruce still hadn't dried entirely, and the low hanging branches smudged together. His strokes were choppy and awkward. Julie's strokes were more delicate, more precise, but together, the two had clearly painted trees. They said nothing. They just looked at the canvas. If either wanted to talk about what this meant, neither spoke.

"It's certainly progressing."

"Hmmm, yes, yes, whose idea was this again?"

"Mine."

"Well, yeah, Julie's."

The four of them sat at the dinner table. Rene and Chuck were the third couple they had invited over for dinner after they painted the two trees. After the first two couples came to visit, Chris and Julie tried painting again. Chris had added a beetle to his spruce,

which inevitably looked like a giant cockroach about the size of the spruce's trunk, and Julie had painted a butterfly, disproportionately small compared to the maple, the spruce, and the cockroach...or beetle. This had been the first disagreement they had endured in quite some time. They had never spoken about the trees after they had painted them. It seemed speaking about the work you did somehow made the entire process disingenuous. But Chris couldn't help but ask why she had painted a butterfly. And Julie retorted asking why he had painted a cockroach. When he explained, slowly, butterfly. And Julie retorted asking why he had painted a cockroach. When he explained, slowly, that it was a beetle, she could tell she had hurt his feelings. But, truth be told, his feeling that a beetle represented their relationship pissed her off.

"So what does this mean?" Rene asked.

Julie and Chris looked at each other, and then at Rene. Neither answered her question, because neither knew the answer.

"We don't know," Julie replied.

"Well, didn't you two paint this thing?" Chuck asked.

"Yes, we did."

"Then why don't you know what this is?"

Again, Chris and Julie looked at each other, and then at Chuck. Their dinner guests eventually resigned and changed the subject, but their eyes wandered to the canvas, trying to figure out just what exactly it meant and what on earth those trees and those insects meant.

About a year passed, and they occasionally added to the canvas. When Chris and Julie got into a large fight, they immediately went to the canvas. Completely in silence, each selecting a gamut of different colors. Chris' strokes, when he was angry, were uneven and paint dripped from the canvas; Julie's strokes remained calm and even, as though the anger that she felt forced her to be even more meticulous. Often, when they finished painting and looked at the other's work, they felt calm, if not somewhat saddened, by what they did to each other.

The canvas, in those first few years, became more abstract; after the trees and the insects, they hardly painted any tactile objects; instead, they used colors to represent where they thought their relationship was. A palimpsest of paint began to form, and the surface of the green canvas, formerly white, was slowly buried.

Every morning now, they would walk into their kitchen and see the canvas, a wild array of different colors that suggested to them that this is what their relationship had become; a collection of inarticulate moments that surmounted to this narrative. They didn't paint on it for some time. Julie became busier at work, and Chris' schedule changed at the restaurant, so every night, when he came home, Julie would be asleep or still at the office. It was during this period that the canvas began to fade. The colors didn't change. Nothing new was added to it. But the paints faded. Julie and Chris would look at it in the mornings and wonder what was going on. The canvas wasn't in direct sunlight, nor did the paint on the walls around the canvas appear to be changing either. Neither one spoke about this.

One night, a few months after the canvas began to fade, Chris came home and noticed a new addition to the painting. A stick figure—something you would expect to see from a kindergarten student—was in the bottom right corner. He froze, not out of surprise, but from an immense anger that Julie had the audacity to paint without him. The rule became an unbreakable one: do not paint without the other. And though they hadn't painted in some time, they had spoken about continuing. Chris stared at this stick figure, unable to comprehend why she would have painted without him.

When Julie arrived home, she found Chris waiting for her, looking at the painting. For a moment, she thought that his silhouette had been engulfed into the canvas.

Chris didn't turn around to greet her. He didn't say anything. He just stared at the canvas, frozen, as though he were a piece of furniture set exactly where it was meant to be. Julie walked up to him and looked at the spot he was looking at. There was a stick figure, childish, simple, and she wondered why he had painted it there. But then, from one stick figure appeared another to its left, a bit more polished, and then another. She quickly saw a row of

them, each one becoming more lifelike, taking on new features, as though it were a flipbook. From right to left, the stick figures morphed into someone: a man, a man she recognized. A man she knew too well.

For the next few weeks, she stayed at her mother's house. Chris stayed in the apartment, and though he was tempted to get rid of the canvas, he didn't have the physical strength. He woke up every morning, reeling from the night before and the dreams he endured. In the dreams, he saw nothing more than Julie; usually she was running from something, and he was in a large bus or a truck—the vehicle had no back. He reached for her, and as she ran toward him, she reached out, panic on her face. She was being pursued by something, but the dreams never showed him what it was. In the end, he would wake up feeling sick because the dream always ended with the distance between the two of them growing. She would get a cramp and hold her gut, or the truck or bus or whatever vehicle he was in would accelerate. He would wake up panting, go downstairs—still smelling of the dinners he had prepared at the restaurant—and eat a bowl of Cheerios or a piece of toast and look at the fading colors of the canvas. The only color that didn't fade was the black that traced the stick figure metamorphosis.

Julie called. He dodged the call. She called again and he picked up. She had called during one of his dreams, at night, and in the dream a siren on the bus blared. Out of surprise more than anything, he picked up the phone. When he heard her voice, sounding so defeated on the other end, he knew that she would be moving back. Julie moved in the next day.

They took white paint and together they brushed over the canvas, giving the canvas a new coat of white, trying to smooth it down as much as they could. Bumps still jutted out, and some of the brighter and darker colors shone through, but they found this to be the most cathartic painting they had done. A way to literally start over. They didn't miss the symbolism of the event. They made love that night with more passion than they had in some time. As Chris lay snoring in the bed, Julie crept into the kitchen and stood in front of the canvas, admiring the paint job that they had done. It was some time before she noticed the purple streaks running

vertically down the canvas. As though some giant cat had stuck out its claws and let gravity drag them down, purple lines ran the height of the canvas. They hadn't used purple before, had they? She couldn't remember. But this must have been some leftover paint from before, or some trick of her eyes. She drank a glass of water and went back to bed.

They left the canvas for some time, not willing to paint over the purple streaks or the new white that shone around it. They were surprised now how much they enjoyed the canvas. Instead, they painted a bit around the canvas, and repositioned some of their furniture around it. The canvas never moved. Rene and Chuck came over, as did other friends, and though they admired the new renovations, they seemed genuinely discouraged that the trees were gone. Rene and Chuck confessed to how they too had bought a canvas and tried doing the same thing. Rene showed Julie pictures of it on her phone. Chuck confessed to Chris that he too really enjoyed this "artsy fartsy" stuff. When they left, Chris and Julie looked at their own canvas, now aware of inadequacies in it. Thinking of Chuck's comment, Chris wondered if this entire endeavor seemed stupid. Julie played over in her head the pictures Rene had crafted on hers and Chuck's canvas. They went to bed that night determined to paint again...soon.

At one party, someone had tripped and splashed red wine on the canvas. People spoke about how the stain would add color to the repainted canvas. They were wrong. Within an hour, the stain disappeared, despite everyone's predictions. Chris and Julie had sex that night in front of the canvas, around spilled popcorn kernels and beer caps on their carpet. The setting meant nothing to them. The act, in and of itself, meant nothing to them. The only thing that had some meaning now rested in the fact that they were together and seemingly happy with their lives and with each other.

It wasn't long until Julie, no longer able to hold the secret, informed Chris that she was pregnant. He took the news sitting down, and they both cried, and they both knew that this would call for something extraordinary. And so, they thought to paint. They made their way to the canvas. They lay down tarps, and where the vertical lines of purple were, they added to them, creating the image of a crib. Whereas before they painted separately, their own

impression of what their relationship was, now they painted a shared goal: a crib. That was all they would paint at that time. In time, Chris surmised, they would need to paint a variety of different symbols and a variety of different colors and pictures that could describe the joy and anticipation that ran through the house. The crib, after a few hours, lay complete on the canvas. They held hands and anticipated the future.

The next week, after tears had been shed, they looked at the canvas and saw that the crib was gone; instead, there rested only the vertical stripes that had originally been there; the canvas paint, no longer white, now seemed to be deep vermilion.

Throughout the next years, albeit their jobs provided some variety to their lives, they felt as though they accomplished nothing other than the painting that went on the canvas. Throughout the next years they attempted to paint six more cribs onto the canvas. Three of the cribs stayed on for longer than a week—one crib even stayed on for five months. The cribs, interwoven with the purple lines that were now regularly on the canvas, no longer amounted to any significance for them other than representing a life that didn't matter anymore, a symbol for something that didn't matter, that wouldn't come into fruition. They painted their cribs, only to find them erased when the news came. After five years of painting cribs onto the canvas and doing nothing else other than falling into themselves and rejecting each other, they gave up painting anything.

As they lay on their sides of the bed, the same bed that held the contours and outlines of their bodies, Chris heard Julie crying quietly, as she had been crying quietly now for several years. He got up and went to the washroom where he splashed water into his face. He went and he looked at the canvas, noticing that the vertical purple lines were no longer there, but the canvas was merely blank, as it hadn't been blank before, and now it shone aquamarine, and as he looked at this canvas, in a daze of blue and wonder and stupefaction at the falsity of everything they had projected onto it, he wondered if he should throw it out. He wondered if he should awaken his wife and get her to help, or he wondered if he should just leave, now, as he should have left some time back, when he had noticed the opportunity. Instead, while

looking at the canvas, knowing that there was nothing left on it but different changing colors and a way to represent the truths that he thought he once knew, he picked up a paintbrush and did something that he promised his wife he would never do: he painted on the canvas by himself. Any sacred routines that their relationship had formed, he was obliterating. He knew that this would be an intolerable act, because in doing so he was betraying her, but he knew that he needed to paint, and he knew exactly what he wanted to paint. And so, he painted. Sweat poured down his forehead. Paint splashed all over the place. His arm ached and he took a break from painting. He sat and looked at the canvas so far, and realized that there was still work to do, still something, something that he needed, that he wanted, and so he continued, working through the cramps in his shoulder and the sweat that pooled between his nose and lip. Only breaking for water, he painted into the morning, and even then, he continued to paint.

Finally, when he decided that he was finished, he sat down. Sitting down, looking at the painting, he saw that it was complete, like nothing he had ever done before, and he closed his eyes and slept in the chair. In his sleep, he dreamed of working at the restaurant, serving faceless people and listening to mouthless people and wondering how he knew they were and what they meant but he did—he was in control, and he knew, fully, what exactly he needed to do. And then Julie came to him in the dream, speaking, uttering words; she was distinct. In his dream, he realized, as he had come to realize some time ago, that he did love her, more than anyone else he had ever loved in his life.

When he woke, he saw that the canvas was empty. The work he had done throughout the night had vanished, gone, dissipated. The bright white of the canvas shone against the vermillion walls. There was nothing there. The canvas lay blank. He got up and walked to his bedroom, where there was only a single bed, nothing more. Any reminiscence of Julie, and her presence, were gone. Chris walked back to the canvas and examined the stretched material; it was truly blank, and though he thought he understood, and thought he was relieved, he couldn't help but feel as though something had gone terribly wrong.

BURNING FLOWERS

Lucy Martinez

Uncle loved burning flowers every day at 3.
Why would he pay no attention to me?
"You can't see.
It's a secret ceremony"
But what ceremony burns flowers?
A definition of beauty,
not sacrality.

Uncle loved burning flowers every day at 3.
He claimed to do it to get rid of bad energy,
but it smelled like a skunk
spraying away an enemy.

Ever since I was in elementary,
Uncle loved burning flowers every day at 3.
But at eighteen,
the smell of burning flowers
became my escape to serenity.

THE WEDDING NIGHT

Paula Hernandez

It's Saturday morning and Veronica is in a bedroom with her mother. She stares at her wedding dress in determination as her mother speaks. The whitest-white, story-tale-princess-gown. Her stomach is flipping. She twists clumps of her hair with her fingers, ripping strands out as she shakes and tries to comb through it. Her mother puts her hands on her hips.

"Okay, let's go over this just once more."

"No. I can do this."

"You don't want it to hurt, right? You need to be ready."

"No, I don't want there to be pain. But I can do it."

"Okay, good. You'll be a woman after this. You'll feel powerful. You'll have power over your husband."

Veronica sits on her bed, crosses her arms, and closes her eyes. "Are you sure he will he still like me after... Ya know... the first night?"

"Yes, of course," her mother embraces her hands, "Be confident. You are strong."

She squeezes her mother's hands, "Okay, I can do this," she stands up and gazes at the candle next to her bed. "This is normal, right? Every married couple does this on the wedding night?"

"Yes. You are not alone. I still remember my wedding night. It can be really scary. But you'll be fine. Just don't say anything. Just do it."

"What if I do something wrong?"

"Just read the instruction book I got you right before the deed, or I don't know... Just watch some of those videos. Maybe it'll help you to see other couples doing it."

"No, thank you."

* * *

Samuel and his brother wake up on the couch of their parents' house. It's about noon. PlayStation controllers are being cradled like a teddy bear. The coffee table is covered in the crumbs of potato chips, Cheetos, and popcorn with empty cans of Dr. Pepper and Red Bull.

"Sam, get up. You got a few hours to get ready."

Sam yawns and stretches, squinting at the ceiling. "I can't believe we finished the campaign in one night."

"Yeah, it was a good one. I usually just skip to online."

"I guess I should start getting ready."

"Oh, definitely. You don't want to keep your bride waiting."

"No, I don't. I want to start off on her good side."

Their dad walks into the living room, suits in hand. "For the groom and his best man."

"Thanks, Dad. The rest of the boys should be showing up soon. I told them to be here before one."

"Okay, great."

Sam gets up from the couch and walks over to his dad. He looks at the floor as he speaks. He asks, "Dad, how was your wedding night?" Sam jokes, "Should I be worried about anything?"

Sam's brother heard what he said. He gives a concerned look to his father and shakes his head "no."

"No, son. Don't worry about anything. You'll be safe."

"I'll be safe?"

"You'll be great, I mean. You'll be great. You'll have fun."

Sam gets up right next to his dad and mumbles, "Can you buy me some condoms? I forgot to get some last night..."

His dad grabs him by the shoulder, squeezing it after each syllable. "Sure, Sam. Anything to make this day the least stressful for you."

"Thank you?"

* * *

Veronica arrives at the church at three o'clock with her five bridesmaids. The bridesmaids' dresses are maroon, the color of roses. The photographer is running late, so they wait in the foyer. It's covered in white candles surrounded by tiny, decorative bees. Veronica's mother picked them out; she said they are symbolic. The thought of their meaning makes Veronica's stomach twinge.

Veronica's younger sister paces around the foyer, eyes jumping from wall to wall, "It looks so beautiful in here. I can't wait until I get married."

Veronica rolls her eyes. "You can wait."

"What's your problem? You are supposed to be happy to be getting married."

"I am... I just don't think you should rush into getting married, especially when you have no idea about all the details of marriage."

"Neither do you! You're barely getting married today, silly."

She frowns at her fingers, picking at her cuticles.
"You're right..."

One of her bridesmaids chimes in, "Roni! Cheer up! Aren't you excited about the sex?"

The bridesmaids gasp together in shock. But after a moment of silence, their heads turn to gawk at Roni, waiting for her answer.

With serious eyes, Roni holds her finger up, "Actually there's more to it than—..."

The photographer bursts through the door, "I'm here! I'm so sorry I'm late! Is it okay if we start in here?"

She lets out a breath, "Oh, thank God. Let's go outside, please."

* * *

The "Bridal Chorus" begins, and Roni is holding tight to her father's arm. He can feel her shaking. They're standing behind the doors. Her stomach is flipping again.

She looks him in the eyes and frowns. She chatters through her teeth, "I'm scared."

Her father smiles, "If I got through my wedding day, so can you. It's okay."

The doors open and they walk down the aisle, covered in more unlit candles. Roni was still shaking. She puts on mock smile after the camera starts flashing. In between each flash, she sees a relative smiling back at her. She could see the details of every face.

Yikes, auntie got an upper lip wax that gave her a rash.

Tiff's eyebrows look great. Does she do them herself?

When I am grandma's age, it won't matter that I have long and dark facial hair. Good for her.

Oh shoot, did I forget to trim my nose hair?

She almost trips on her dress, but her father keeps her up. They reach the altar and she gives her bouquet to her sister. Sam walks over to Roni and her father. *He trimmed his beard all nice... Aw.*

Sam shakes her father's hand then locks arms with Roni. They walk to the middle of the platform, between the bridesmaids and groomsmen. They hold hands and the pastor asks everyone to be seated. Sam beams at Roni.

She looks so beautiful. This is gonna be awesome. I hope I don't cry.

* * *

Roni and Sam arrive at the reception and are met with howling and applause. They sit down at their own little table, with hot plates waiting for them, while the guests rush to the line for the food. A couple of guests make their way to the little table instead, someone's great-great aunt and uncle that someone met as children. Roni and Sam cut off the food in their mouth and stand up, preparing for side-hugs and chit-chat.

"You are a beautiful bride and groom," says the aunt, almost yelling.

Roni and Sam speak at the same time, "THANK YOU!"

While the aunt is locking eyes with Roni, mumbling about the memories of her wedding night, Sam's eyes move to the uncle standing next to the aunt, "Thank you for coming. How are you?"

The uncle grins, angles his eyes towards Sam's crotch, then begins to grimace and shake his head from side to side. Sam gives a confused grin in reply. The aunt and uncle hold hands and stroll away.

Roni and Sam sit back down to finish their food. Roni sits back and sighs, "I need something strong to drink before more people come to talk to us."

Sam laughs, "I brought my flask."

"Perfect, thank you."

Roni grabs the flask and her wine glass. She pours half of it in.

"My classy lady."

"You say that now... Just wait until tonight."

* * *

It's 9 o'clock, and the father-daughter and mother-son dances have just ended. The DJ turns on the LED lights and starts playing "Neon Moon." Sam and Roni are sitting on their little table, with an empty flask.

Roni stumbles, "H-h-hey let's... let us... Dance!"

Sam grabs her hand, "Kay!"

Once on the dance floor, they slump on each other, barely balancing. Roni's head is on Sam's shoulder. They sway from side to side. He could feel her breathing in his ear.

"This... is fun."

"It is fun."

"We probably look sooooo... stupid," Roni giggles.

"Maybe."

"Sam..."

"Yeah?"

"Will you... still like me... after tonight?"

"Of course."

"Thanks..."

"You look really pretty."

"Thank..." Roni seems to lose her train of thought. "Sam, I... I need to tell you some... something."

"You can tell me anything you want to."

The "Cha Cha Slide" starts to play. One of the bridesmaids walks up to them, "Can I borrow her, please? I'll make sure she doesn't fall."

Roni looks at Sam with empty, glossy eyes. Sam feels like he needs to pee.

“You ladies have fun. I gotta go to the little boy’s room.”

He takes small, swift steps to the bathroom, barely letting his legs come apart. He opens the door to hear someone throwing up and another person grunting. He starts peeing in the urinal, letting the urine go where it pleases. Someone flushes and starts to unlock one of the bathroom stalls. Sam straightens up and grabs his penis. A man comes out, sweaty and red. He walks right over to Sam. Sam turns his head to meet eyes with the man. The man joins his nose to Sam’s. The man points at Sam’s penis.

“YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT’S COMING FOR YOU!”

Sam stops peeing and screams, “Whaaaaat?”

The man backs away and staggers to the door. Still making eye contact with Sam the man says, “I’ll be praying for you.”

Sam zips up his pants and washes his hands. As Sam dries his hands, he starts to wonder if wedding night sex is supposed to be painful. *Maybe he was talking about marriage. Maybe he was talking about an STD he got. Yikes. I’m fine. This is fine. It’s just the alcohol.*

* * *

Roni and Sam are driven from the reception to the hotel. Roni grabs the bottom of her dress with one hand and Sam’s arm with the other. The bellhop grabs two duffel bags and a small, white suitcase. Eating wedding cake and Taco Bell nachos helped soak up some of the alcohol, but their minds are still buzzing. Roni sits down in the lobby while Sam checks in.

“For the honeymooners, please.”

The receptionist hands him the room key with an expression that can only be described as pity. *She just feels bad because I’m drunk on my wedding night.*

Sam takes Roni’s hand and they reach their room. The bellhop leaves the cart with their bags. After opening the door, Roni

immediately strips her dress off to reveal white, lacey matching bra-and-thong set.

Sam ogles, "Very nice."

Roni ignores him and grabs the white suitcase and places it next to the table by the bed. She paces to the bathroom and twists her hair in a bun.

She demands, "Get naked and lay on the bed."

"I can do that."

She unlocks the white suitcase and takes out a miniature pot with a cord attached to it. She pours some beads in it and plugs it in.

"Is that a Scentsy? You didn't have to do that, babe."

She goes back to the suitcase to pull out four special handcuffs. She locks each cuff on Sam's hand and ties the other side to the four-corner poles of the bedframe.

Sam exclaims, "Very, very nice."

Roni paces back to the bathroom. She looks at herself in the mirror and points. "You can do this. Just do it. Don't say anything, just do it." She vomits in the sink. "This is fine. We all do this."

She walks back to Sam and smirks. She goes to the suitcase and pulls out thick, popsicle sticks. She dips one in the miniature pot and twists it.

Sam interjects, "Roni, what are you doing?"

Roni replies, "Sssshhhhh... just close your eyes."

He closes his eyes, and she lifts the popsicle stick out of the pot of melted beads. She blows on it and twists it again. She walks over to Sam. Her heart starts beating fast. Her hands begin to tremble. She darts her hand to Sam's crotch area and spreads the wax on the pubic hair to the left side of his penis.

Sam's eyes open wide and he screams, "WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT? It's hot!"

"Sssshhh, I'm sorry. You're gonna be fine. I'm trying to make this as quick as possible." She rushes back to the pot and gets more wax.

Sam continues screaming, "What is going on? Are you taking my penis?"

"No, dumbass." Roni rushes back to Sam and spreads wax on the right side.

Sam begins to get lightheaded, "This is how I'm gonna die, huh? All those crime shows you like to watch. I should have known..."

Roni holds his penis down to the right and pulls on the dried wax, ripping off the pubic hair to expose pink skin. Dots of red started to show up. Sam screams at the top of his lungs. "No! No more! No! No! No! No! No!"

"Yes, I have to. This is tradition."

"I don't care. No one told me. Mmmm-mmm. No more."

Roni grabs for the other side of wax and Sam starts wiggling.

"Stop! I'm almost done!"

"No!"

Roni grips a corner of the hard wax and pulls as Sam wiggles. He screams again. With each wiggle, Roni pulls a bit more until half of it is off.

"Just let me get this last piece off and that'll be it, okay?"

Sam closed his eyes, with tears peeking out of the edges. She holds down his penis again and rips off the last piece. He let out a brief scream.

"There. Tradition upheld. I'm so sorry, but it had to be done."

“Who told you this was tradition?”

“My mother. Her mother told her. My aunts know. My cousins know. The friends that are married know. All their spouses know. I thought everyone knew.”

“Now I know.”



THE LETTERS

Abigail Warren

Right now Schrodinger's cat
is alive
and you can see us walking
3rd Avenue
all the way down to the Avenue
Bearing the Initial of Christ into
the New World.
And I can still imagine you
Shuffling along
mastering the death of the rat,
first taking off your symphony clothes,
putting on yard clothes
for the rodent's burial.
Here, now, you are as ephemeral
as that cat still in the box.
And I too, may still be
the Queen of your dreams,
the one you've been waiting
your whole life for.
Because magic happens when
all we have are these barbaric yawps
where we show off like primitives;
you and your sheet brute strength
slaying anything that comes near our cave.
You bring me fresh flesh
for the hungry days to come.
I've gathered some berries
to lay before your feet.
These purple gloves glisten
and the brightest star of the night
carries an olive branch
telling us land is near,
the water is receding.
We don't know yet,
we don't know.

Because all we have now
is a hunger.
Are we ready to abandon
these new weapons?
So shiny and cunning,
beginning and ending everything?

YOGA & CIGARETTES

Abigail Warren

When I'm not doing yoga, I'm smoking cigarettes. There's nothing like a good smoke after Power Yoga. I'm hoping they balance each other out, cancel the other one. Though once a teacher told me not to do "chest openers" when you have a cold. It spreads the cold virus into your chest. One yoga teacher came over to my mat to give me an "adjustment." I'm pretty sure she smelled the cigarettes on me, despite my constant mouthwash routine and hand-washing. She then proceeded to talk to the class about "overcoming addictions" with yoga. I think she had me in mind. But this leads me to wonder what about "heart openers" when you're grieving. Does it spread the grief into your body, too? I pondered that, I meditated on that. Then went out for a smoke.

THE WAVE FUNCTION

Richard Wirick

Professor Wollheim, a quantum physicist, had need of a new housekeeper and personal secretary. The last one had left to take care of her deteriorating mother and gave only three- or four-days' notice. Though he felt some discomfort showing up on campus, given recent events and obscure allegations against his work, or his lack of a working team, or something, he rode his people-mover down to the bulletin board in the Union and posted, in black marker, a sign that said: PERSONAL ASSISTANT NEEDED; LIVE-IN; COMPUTER-SAVVY; COOK & CLEAN; NEATNESS A NECESSITY. His hands trembled as he sunk the push pins, bright orange, into the flesh-colored, crowded pressboard.

Ever since he'd had the TIA ("mini-stroke" one doctor called it) he found he couldn't move as fast, his hands had less control, not shaking so much as simply failing, giving out, dropping things. The forgetfulness bothered him more, increasing his dependence on other academics he'd regarded as less talented, less seasoned and polished, and less competitive, given that physics posts were in short supply and job security was more solid than it had been before the 9/11 hiring boom.

Professor Mana passed him in the hall, gave him what Wohl regarded as a condescending pat. What was he doing here? In a student building? Wollheim was more used to seeing him at the faculty club, in conversational circles Wollheim was never invited into. Sometimes all of them were looking in his direction. Most were gracious, but there were one or two smiles that bordered on smirks.

Was it Nietzsche, Schopenhauer? Someone of that pessimist ilk had thrown out an aphorism Wollheim woke to now in the mornings and often several times a night. *When fate comes, it comes with both hands.* The "peer review" of some of his work was faltering.

Though most of his colleagues, at all colleges, worked mainly

alone, tinkering alone in digital isolation or on sheets of foolscap, his findings were too close to those of neighboring university to not give a suspicious tang to his latest papers. But he had worked on the issue—the collapse of the wave function—as long as they had, as imaginatively and thoroughly, and beginning—though these days it could work against you—before some of them were born.

“Wollheim,” said a loud voice at his back. He turned to see Yellen, a trustworthy colleague, one who always seemed to freely give of what was asked of him.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Wollheim said, “a good bit better. Thanks.”

“I saw your sign. Mary has someone she knows, someone from choir,”

Wollheim leaned back against the wall, put his hands down into the deep pockets of his khakis,

“You vouch for her?”

“Oh Bill, she’s great. A dependable contralto.”

Wollheim smiled, worked his eyes up toward the ceiling.

“A little eccentric, very intense. Very diligent.”

“Send her over,” said Wollheim. “Give her my cell and we’ll set something up.”

* * *

His phone, he hated these things, was ringing as he pulled into his drive. It was her.

“Professor Wollheim?” Her voice was pitched higher than a contralto’s. More like a soprano, one who could tremolo through the most warbling of arias.

“I could come, could come...could...I could be there between

five and six. Don't want, don't want to interfere with any family dinner, or family dinner, I was..."

"Don't have a family," he said, in the tone of a rebuke. "Can you find your way to the Aquatic Park cul-de-sacs?"

"Yes, I'm at the Divisadero Mall now. I'll GPS."

He gave her directions and noticed the halting and repetition in her speech again. When she hung up, he wondered at its high register, her stuttering, and the echoes of getting the clotted words out. He held the phone away at arm's length. He had the idea that these features of her speech were something laying in the device itself, like one of its tings or sudden lights.

She was thin and short, almost dwarfish. As he pulled in, he thought she was speaking to one of the bushes. She later explained, when her keys were on the table and they'd sat down, that the bushes could use a trim.

Describing the work she'd done for others, she allowed herself to slow down some. She talked as her mother had talked, the kind of chatter that comes from keeping a pot of coffee on the burner all day. She'd put on one of her hippie caftans, one of those British things one of her fellow vocalists called by some Arab or Berber name. Looking around the house, seeing its absence of monitors and yellow pads, she knew immediately it needed organizing, that organization was everything to him, one of those kinds of people with one of those minds.

"Nothing is ever misplaced," she said. "I do not lose things," she added. "I keep clients' premises much cleaner than my own. Not that mine is dirty—I'm just so seldom there."

"But I know," she said after a pause, "that order is the essence of things. Especially for a man of your abilities. Your discipline and your abilities."

He stared at her.

"Your work," she said.

She stared at him as though she were looking through him, at the lightening of the sun on the wall.

"I'm sure, sure, sure I can do it, Professor." She reached into her bag, also something North African, and pulled out a sheet of references. "Any one of these people could..."

He raised his hand.

"Start in the morning?"

Her eyes widened under the squiggly, nervous wires of her hair.

"Oh Professor, that would be lovely."

That night as he drifted off, tided into the Ambien haze his doctors had prescribed as the data scandal grew, he felt good about her energy, the sparkle and zest of it. He liked the intensity of the old hippie-dippiness, its uplifting velocity. He had a sense she could keep the piles clear and separated, that she could give the place some un-overwhelmed emptiness and peace. And there he would be able to gather himself—however he might be failing—for what now seemed to be the fight of his life.

* * *

Greta loved to keep her hands busy even when they were not attending to the professor. She doodled and drew on small pads she brought from Staples, and wrote friends—old-fashioned letters, none of the e-mail stuff—she had kept from caregiving facilities elsewhere. She loved crosswords, keeping them folded into squares and slid neatly down into her apron pockets, and leaving them sometimes laying on top of his own stacks of work. When this happened, she chided herself, tsk-tsking without saying anything more as she lifted the squared newspaper away from his strange materials.

She was shaming and correcting herself, her bushy hair swaying, one afternoon when she found a pad of her squiggly drawings laying in front of his shelf of German physics texts.

She was particularly upset with herself that day, dissatisfied with her mistake. It was a hot September afternoon, more like midsummer than the chill that would be coming in an Indian Summer. She remembered it being called that from her childhood, her aunts would say *We're having an Indian Summer here, aren't we?*

Just as she was lifting the drawing, she heard his stockinged feet and a second or two later the waft of his stinking breath floating over the papers. She didn't look around when he asked her where she had come from, what her name was. He asked her how long she would be staying with him.

She looked down at the drawings as if they were something else, then turned around slowly, her hands fidgeting with the papers, and said: *Why Professor, I did not know you had forgotten my name. It is Greta. I come from the Service. And I suppose, if it is OK with you, and we work out OK, I'll be here as long as I'm needed.*

One night, Professor Wollheim sat Greta down and told her about quantum mechanics. She sunk deep in her chair and ran her almost uncontrollably busy fingers along the ridge the cushion made with the sideboard of the chair, so he couldn't see. She said she remembered Newton, but when he raised his hand, she knew she was in for something splendidly new. He said that one of his predecessors' discoveries was that light, which had long been thought by some to be particles and by others to be waves, could form small beams or ripples that played through the spaces of dark air like the old movie searchlights. He told her at one point the particles were so thick that they took on, out of the sumptuous negation that surrounded them, a mass of their own that would waver and coarsen like a grainy sort of soup, and at that point the particles just collapsed—that's the word he stressed—into waves. It was this that was called the wave function, or the collapse of the wave packet. Her hands moved along the ridge of the aging fabric and she finally brought them up, joining them together like praying hands so they would not look too busy. She pushed them toward him in a thrust of appreciation.

"My stars," she said. "That is just the most amazing thing. Is everything that you study this exciting?"

He rested his head in the high-pillowed chair and told her to put out one of her fingers. The look on his face was amused, but in a sinister, almost grisly way, and he asked her if she would be surprised to know if the atoms, the atoms and parts of atoms in her hands, could have a relationship—*relationship*, he stressed the word—with the atoms in something far away, perhaps a universe far away?

Her eyes widened.

“That would indeed surprise me. And how would you know it, Professor? How could it be proved?”

He smiled, wider now, the darkness leaving his face.

“That,” he said, “is for the next lesson.”

* * *

The next lesson was on a day when her hands were so nervous they seemed to be flying everywhere, like small animals you kick up in the grass and get away before you can tell what they are. For a while they kept busy arranging tiny things on his desk—marbles, paperweights, objects bought in expensive German-named stores in Union Square, long black boxes with what looked like beams inside them and which she knew had something to do with his science but were more like decorative toys or games. Outside, the Professor was standing in what had before been a lush interior garden but now, in the drought, was a drooping crosshatch of brown shrubs and barkless eucalyptus. His own hands, too, were busy, but in a slower, more thoughtful way. Thoughts were all that occupied him now—that or forgetfulness, the new gaps she had noticed in his memory. He stood against a tree, his hand braced against it. He ran his hand up and down the slick trunk and when his spread palm stopped at a spot he began talking to himself, caressing the tree as he muttered. He frowned as he babbled, the dark, pin-sharp edge of his mouth fallen downward in the reddening, deep-lined skin.

When he came in and she said, “I wanted to tell you, Professor, how much I enjoyed the talk the other day,” he slumped into the

guest chair in front of his desk and took the cue to begin talking physics again, begin trying to get through to her how it was the narrative structure of the world, the picture of all possible forms of reality itself. He didn't expect her to understand but took it as practice once all the idea theft and plagiarism blew over and he might be invited back for an emeritus lecture, a 'short course' they called them now.

He smiled at her condescendingly, joining the tips of his two fingers together in front of his nose. She grabbed one of her hands, twitching now, in the palm of the other, and kept both under the drop of her apron.

"Measurement," he said, "is everything in physics. Who measures. What's measured." He paused. "Is there something there at all if we don't measure it?"

He wasn't looking at her but over at the desk.

"What did you do?"

"Excuse me, Professor? I was straightening for you. Tidying."

His skin blushed more like it had outside.

She needed to soften him and thought of a wedge she could enter with. "I redded it up. Isn't that the funniest word? It's a Midwesternism. Some German word, I think. To red, a verb. Like: 'red up the table.'"

"Don't move things," he said. "Dust around them but don't move..."

He stopped.

"Gladys," he said, "*DON'T* move."

"Oh, Professor, I apologize."

"Gladys, don't ever move *anything*."

"Professor, my apologies. And you must have forgotten my

name. My name is Greta.”

He looked at her with a mixture of fury and blankness.

“Greta,” he said.

“So, measurement,” she cued him to continue.

“Greta, how did you get here?” He twisted in his chair, staring at her, clutching his hands on its arms like a man adrift on a log, in dark water.

* * *

When she came back in the room with tea he was slouched back down in the chair, watching the fire. She laid his saucer and spoon the way he liked it, separate from the cup. She sat down and crossed her fingers, running the tips of her nails over each knuckle, underneath the apron’s trim.

“Measurement,” she said. “We were going to talk about measurement.”

He stared at her.

“There’s no measurement anymore, no calibration, no weighing. There’s no assessment. There’s no way to tell what anyone has achieved.”

She turned her head into the angle of a question.

“All this,” he said, pointing to the computers. “The discoveries, experiments. The work of it, whoever did it, belongs to everyone now.”

She said she thought his achievements would certainly be, certainly were, credited to him, that there were patents and such, legal protections to give credit to the person who truly created whatever it was.

“I devised a thing or two,” he said. “My T.A.s, my grad students took it elsewhere. Took it to new places. To businesses.”

She made a “tsk” which she knew made her sound old.

“Gladys, when you reddened, redded, whatever you call it, what happened to the papers?”

“Why Professor, I put everything back where it was. I wouldn’t do anything, move anything.”

His flesh was scarlet now, glistening.

“I certainly wouldn’t *remove* anything.”

The stare bore through her like a steel rod.

“How do I know,” he asked, “that you didn’t take something? One of the equation sets?”

“Professor, I wouldn’t dream of anything like that. I put everything back in its place.”

He stared.

“And please, call me Greta. I know it’s sometimes hard to remember.”

He rose up slightly, his body bending into an odd angle from his refusal to take his eyes off her.

“How know, how did I know you’re not in with them?”

“With who, Professor?”

“With them,” he said. “The students. You came from the school, the job boards.”

Now he was rising, wobbling, his hand reaching for his cane.

“Professor?” she said loudly, wanting to shout her resentment. When she looked down, she saw that he’d spilled tea on the crotch of his pants.

“Let me get you to your room,” she said. “You need a new pair of trousers.”

He raised his hand as he had in his talks, but with the cane in one of them.

“Don’t touch me.”

Greta smoothed down the front of her apron and said she would simply steer him toward the door of his room.

“Don’t touch me!” he said again. The saucer and spoon had now fallen to the floor.

“Who are you?” His voice was rising with each word. Beads of sweat, large drops, ran down the ridges of his nose and onto the end table. She saw the wetness pooling there.

She ran ahead of him and flicked on the light switch.

“Who are *you*?” he yelled.

“Professor, what’s wrong? Let me take your arm and help you onto the bed. I’ll get you fresh trousers from the closet.”

er hands were frantic. They struggled with the closet knobs.

“*WHO ARE YOU?*”

“Pajamas,” she said. “What was I thinking? It’s your pajama bottoms you need.”

“I don’t know you,” he said, standing stone-still, his back rigid now, his long finger in the air, crookedly pointing.

She went over to the pillows, the fresh pressed cases she’d ironed that morning.

“You’re death,” he yelled. “*You are DEATH.*”

He would not sit down.

“I want to go home.” He bent himself at the waist and then straightened again. “I want to be *home*.”

“But, Professor,” she said calmly, smoothing the pillows with her suddenly calm hands. “You’re home. *You are home.*”

EXCAVATING

Gene Barry

Dressed in a Cimmerian shade,
the restless pony saddles up again,
the rein-pulling jockey active
and galloping toward early triumphs.

An altercation of restless roof crows,
soldiers of that nocturnal skyline
changing dancefloors frequently,
omnipotent in their unity.

A chorus of the socially mediated
beg for illumination while
nocturnal bed guests liquidate
dream sequences and nightmares.

An umbilical of trading notions
gift pick as they move playgrounds,
while social inheritances imbue with
mind shovels and emotional picks.

Growing debris of wordless arguments
summate lotto wins and naked models,
wooded homelands and red tipples,
swimming pools and holidays.

At cockcrow the whistles of dawn
ignite my batch of agitated bed colliers,
who decisively cease this excavation,
stuffing their crater with irrevocable repose.

NINEONEONE

Jean E. Verthein

The train slowed to make the riders tardy. "I'll be late!" One passenger leaped out the sliding open door to flee.

Outside the train windows the lidless, white mosaic eyes stared back at the insiders. When the train jolted, the eyes almost blinked. The train moved, peculiarly; other riders glanced sideways at each other, as if to see each other one last time.

Finally, off at Chambers and Fulton stops, Rea ran several blocks to the university entrance. There the department chair, coolest of cools, was agitated over his daughter's whereabouts. He shouted. Rea said, "Call her work."

Usually she avoided the stern man, wavy-haired, pocked scar face.

Rea entered her calm, stay-put self and dialed her own daughter's workplace.

"She's called in and arriving," the chair father said, panicky.

One of Rea's grad students, Reiko, was outside of her office. The girl's long, black hair glistened from the rising sun through a window cracked open for breezes from the plaza. Smoke wafted in.

The globe was mounted on the top wall-unit shelf that was surrounding her corner L-shaped office. "Call your parents in Osaka so they won't worry about you." Life would never again be the same, ever.

Because her sister cared for their grandmother and her parents in Osaka, Reiko was staying here for master classes. The culture no longer fit her there. So she was free to marry her Italian American boyfriend. "I'm happy to be free."

Rea raised her arm to turn on the globe light. Sometimes she let students peek into it to see costumed persons all over its latitudes and longitudes.

* * *

Outside her office, monitors for crime attacks converted into television were telescoping smoke-topped skyscrapers. On the train she'd been slowed beneath towers being sliced by planes.

"No, no one will ever worry." Reiko replied to her adviser, Rea.

Next Rea tried crying out by phone to her daughter on the other side of the continent. But the line was busy.

All communications on and near the high towers, it was whispered around the campus, were destroyed, the FBI's and the PBS from the towers. "We need walkie-talkies," the chair said.

"Everyone must give blood." Wait is six hours. You see standees out there.

But another student, Arlen, breezed in, slack-shouldered, and smiled below her deep-blue eyes. Oblivious within her soft cotton sweater that set off her unselfconscious beauty. "I'm going to do Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey? You know, the Constructivist Theory will stir our disabled students to energize their learning."

Did Arlen spy up above them at the sky on fire? Her garnet earrings flashed a bit. Did she not see others clustered around below the flaming monitors' views with the planes cutting through buildings? "Huh, oh?"

"Yes," said Rea, without meaning. Arlen and two others ripened from two name universities had not known what a "hypothesis" was. She was theorizing. "Nice going. Keep going. Come back in a week."

Sirens cried. What island mountain volcano did she live on? Rea wrote down Arlen's appointment on her big magnetic calendar. Another knocked on her door.

* * *

Understandable within smoking towers, one crashed.

Ben, at Rea's office door, called out.

"We better hie to the bank ATM," her instructor friend said, "never know when the system will give out."

Listlessly or cautiously, they tried enlisting student reactions. They nodded. The last time the two of them had just sat and talked about their Irish grandmothers. His had visited him in the hospital every day. Hers had died when she was a kindergartner.

On this here eerie day, without pinpointing what was happening, she checked the uptown subway, which had stopped running four hours earlier. How would she get home? She pulled out money for fares and food. He did too.

Her stern, abrupt chair would host her if she could not get to her home. His firmness obtained what he wanted. By 5 p.m. the subway train was not rolling.

"Not everyone will survive," was heard on the inside commons, where the monitors droned on.

Still she mounted the platform and train. It squeaked between the columns of eyes. Could they shut for good? A home and train neighbor squinted her eyes. "They want state-licensed gravediggers, doctors not on call, and social workers at the Registry." Nurses, Rea assumed, are needed in hospitals for the wounded. For two hours she pondered returning to her apartment.

The dust and smoke surround the train, or is the train having train trouble? After two stops she hopped off, passed long blood donor lines. Persons stirred there near public housing and Lincoln Center. If only the symphony struck up an overture.

* * *

Block by block, nothing was comprehensible. Seven years earlier, in the Harlem Heights elementary school, the exact locale was imprecise, the phone rang for the school authorities all over the district to use loudspeakers to announce that children visiting the World Trade Center (WTC) were delayed. Children, whoa. A truck was believed to have struck the center to blow it up.

Two years earlier Rea had taken her parents there to see the Manhattan expanse between New Jersey to the left and Long Island to the right, when the WTC was still upright. The trip up on their elevators was swift and grueling.

Seeking to think while striding toward the door, "Forty floors of skyscraper have just fallen," an unknown bartender bystander was saying where they'd gone for lunch.

* * *

Once again inside the tennis-sized court, others trickled in to sign in within their license category. She'd never known her required number.

"A lot of needs out there." Voices hooted.

* * *

Dr. Scott was again saying, "We'll be okay. We've all done trauma."

How'd he know? Injury narrowed the traumatized person's feeling range while eying the heavens.

Flying swords had been stabbing the towering twin pyramids. They downed them like tents in an ancient desert storm.

Back down in the screening room doorway, Dan the affable, head crouched into football shoulders, was charged with finding missing persons under this skyscrapers' collapse. The PBS monitor drilled info about the crashes three-four times an hour into viewers.

Wandering in, a public health VD investigator who'd lived the crash saw it and screamed. Rea sought to comfort her.

"You," Dan interrupted to say to Rea, "oversee the phone bank to scout lost persons." Before his 2 a.m. departure, he'd brief her. She'd supervise the data gathering from calls in from all over the world. Callers would be desperate about their loved ones, neighbors, close family members, playmates, and best friends.

Some most highly educated researchers, physicians, and treatment specialists in Manhattan stood ready to answer the phones and act. They'd elicit data: silver-filled dental caries on x-rays with silver fillings or ones for bones to identify the digging up of persons. Any worn jewelry known about, any tattoos or birthmarks, moles or scars.

"Avoid harsh word use, like 'dead bodies' or other insensitive terms."

A teacher's old-style desk bell rang. Another person lived. Cheers arose in a jubilee.

In the viewing room, three volunteers culled hospitalized patient lists: scrolls of survivors, not cadavers.

* * *

Racing toward the towering sacrifices—Babel on fire—volunteers flew in to rescue their ground-down peers. Faces of gravediggers were grim, masked by persons missing.

Jingling and awaiting her assignment for late evening, actually early morning, Rea asked Amitia about her brother, scrunched in sleep, lying on the couch. "Yes," she whispered. "The Thomases are happy, like my family, because my brother lives."

By 11:45 p.m. on attack night, news anchors and show hosts peeked in to check reality on the monitors above lost systems.

Hundreds still lined up to help. They waited for hours for an assignment to dig out the missing persons and their relics. Rea discovered food pyramids delivered from restaurants.

Outside, hardhats acted. Firefighters, grave diggers, and builders set to work pronto with heart. With tools, pickaxes, and masks, they sang and fast-stepped into Broadway to scoop out Ground Zero victims.

Soft-headed volunteers waited for their posts, voicing incredulity. "Stay? Go home?"

“With extraordinary patience, people are,” Dr. Scott said, “waiting to serve.” In his midtown hospital emergency room, from the psychic fallout, he’d treated thirty for “panic, stomach sickness, and trouble breathing.” One sad schizophrenic laughed at the attack.

Next to him another physician, Ella Conway, found few victims at her hospital one hundred blocks north. “We’ve all met the vulnerable emergency room.”

Interrupting thought, the bullhorn roared. “Thirty chosen will phone families and friends.” Rea was called first from among the hundreds of others waiting to go. She shivered.

One, choose life with callers and be assigned to oversee call receivers at PBS TV channel. Two, accompany families to identify bodies at the city morgue. Three, pick Ground Zero to work with excavators.

She chose the channel rather than the morgue. “Did we expect such assignments?” she asked the fellow nearest her. Leaning against the wall, holding it upright, he sipped one bottle of free water from pyramids of bottles. He and others awaited transfer by van to their new work.

“God knows!” this tall, buff man said. He leaned against the wall and wore his wire glasses slipping below his keen gray eyes to his nose. Bewildered about a toy plane bashing a plastic skyscraper, its audience was rapt toward the screen when ultimate reality hit nearby overhead.

“Yes, yes” to his experience jibed with hers in the college lobby, near her office. There a monitor exposed the students, faculty, and staff to close-ups. Smoke was billowing in the near distance, like bomb testing in the Nevada desert, pictured in history books and never-never land. From the crushed towers, across the river and bridge, thousands were fleeing on foot past Tillary down Flatbush, Manhattan to Long Island and beyond.

Straining to escape the atrium of his corporation building to the outdoors, hundreds of others praying to escape falling debris. Eyes

dribbled and sweat pulsated out of glands. Inside, people stood around as if waiting for a thunderstorm to end.

* * *

“THEY BETTER.” An older man, about six-six in height, listened in on Rea and a security specialist named George. “Remember ‘93? That truck bomb, then, slammed the Trade Center. I was out on Worth Street with a cigarette when the crash came. Did anyone do anything about it? No.

“And there I was, ten years later, same place. Only this time, puppets were coming down on strings. One hell of a performance. A dumb show. I’d seen mountain climbers go up the sides of the Trade Center. But shit, coming down was real folks.” He was hanging out to be allowed to go all the way south to Ground Zero to exhume them.

Rea and another volunteer nodded.

“So, where is she?” she asked George, the younger man.

“Who? Jane? Oh, she got out of her class at 8:45 a.m., saw the first tower go, and ran onto the number two or number three train for home.”

* * *

No one trained Rea for her new post. No resume was submitted. Never in the army. No uniform, only New York black worn. She remembered that her cousin received a security clearance for army duty on the Turkish border with the old Soviet Union. But she’d earned no status.

Three G-men with navy vests lettered in FBI reflectors combed the area.

Fearing she would botch up her new responsibility, she twitched. Next, she scolded herself for her quibbling over her job.

The one in charge, Rea checked in and wore a chartreuse, glow-in-the-dark vest like subway workers’ ones and acquired a

gray over-vest with the big red cross. Next to her skin, her own black cashmere sweater with elbow holes comforted her during her assignment.

* * *

Incoming calls detailed the MIAs—missing persons. In an assumed husky voice, she pointed information posters, checked her notes, and tried sounding official. Twenty volunteers dedicated themselves on their phones to accuracy.

“Problems?” One caller’s search for her cat led Rea to suggest the animal rescue shelter.

As more phones rang, they screamed in tone and swayed from left to the right. Hectic volunteers worked the left. Crowded wires cut out chat. So, Rea rotated through to the long room for calls needing her expertise.

N.J. Lucent in N.J. called to donate transponders to spot cell phones on persons alive or dead beneath the collapsed tower detritus. This opportunity was relayed to the project manager. He ordered her to validate it hoax or truth. “Might be terrorists. Sounds real, though.”

If the apocalypse closed in as the Gates of Hell, thousands might be buried alive. What else? Callers seeking ones loved and lost preferred specifics, not guesses. Grotesques hovered.

One caller feared a hellcat perpetrator of this Draconian event when he handed this motel-clerk caller a hundred-dollar bill stack to pay for his room near the airport. What to do?

Because the FBI was invisible, outside the doorway and down the big hall, she ordered, “Call 911, police matter.”

In nine hours calls ring throughout the world. The universe compresses into a hiccup or a sob.

FBI agents order, “Bomb threat. Evacuate.” From a movie years ago about burning towers and deaths on elevators, Rea reacts. She waves the squadron out of the call-in room. “Take the stairs,” she yells. They leap down six flights and dash toward the river.

People wave from the Westside Highway, and rumors announce that the Empire State Building next door will fall. A dog sniffs a suspicious bag.

So the evacuees race along. Rea borrows a cell phone from a woman met hours earlier. This department head at X Foundation sat near Rea and said, because you know where to find food.

Her best friends and neighbors, a mathematician and statistician, would go feed her dog.

Some volunteers return to the phones. Others, weary, go home. Mr. Patel, the brother of Amitia, awakens. "My building's gone." He worked in bank marketing and arrived at work at 8:15 a.m. at 130 Liberty Street, next to the World Trade Center. By 8:48 he witnessed the first attack by plane hijackers. When hit, he'd decided to leave. "Everyone ran to the stairs. By about the seventeenth floor, there was crazy shit everywhere." On the ground outside he saw "parts of airplanes... We're thinking a bomb will explode. The sky is falling. Must be thirty floors on fire with dust engulfing us. I ran two or three blocks."

Like him, victims averaged thirty years of age. All ten colleagues were missing. Only his manager lived.

* * *

Phone answerers as listeners bowed to deliverers of free turkey and beef sandwiches for meat eaters and veggie pasta for the vegetarians. Salads were there also.

* * *

Back in the university commons office suites, another roared: "Man with gun loose in the university." Campus ATM contents stolen near campus exit. Guards halted exits. The sound system recommended, "Scoot out fast."

To Alicia, Rea said, "Forget your damn dissertation in your office. Your life's more important!"

Smoke above still meant fear of newest nine-one-one fallout over the sky. "Run, exit," against the SWAT team with shields and guns to exit.

* * *

The cab north to home, alas, sped at 90 mph. "Go slower?"

"Nah, I want to get the hell out of here."

Thereafter, on every train north or south, passengers did not crow over where they'd been in hell on 9/11. They did rapture over their accomplishments over their betters as losers.

Not gobbling the air between talker and robber of sound management...

Listening was solace.

SELKIE

Raven Lente



MEDUSA'S PAIN

Raven Lente



LIBERTY ATOMS 46

Christopher Barnes

Eczema-grizzled bikini,
Wrong-pulls on the line.
Sun-Ra disarmed by cloud-veil.
Maisie ransacked 13 Hennessy balloons
Into a whatnot.
Her thunder sweated
On the parquet of an unrelated room.
Engraved into the kitten heel:
"They key was still in the lock outside,
But had not been turned."

LIBERTY ATOMS 48

Christopher Barnes

Venerable clock, obstructed with silt
Unhoused its recollections.
Mechanism catatonic, lead-the-dance trauma.
Kitten in long grass (spirit of a baby)
Navigated his throat.
Maisie flopped on cushions,
Resolved to be goosefleshed.
Actor on waveband:
"Harry had not yet revealed to his beloved
The existence of this flat."

OUR DREAMS ARE BONFIRES

Richard Bentley

Our dreams are bonfires.
Our words are flames.
When you puncture us, we bleed magnetic sparks.
When you scrape us, we split and increase.

Our mothers molded us from cloud-love
and smiling wisps, but our
songs are upheavals and tempests. Our balm is thunder
like drilling for oil and rattling down through the earth.

When our mothers embraced us, we showered from the sky.
When they left us, we rumbled and turned into
Lightning. We are not the sleep our parents gave us.
We are the stories we tell ourselves.
And when we close our eyes,
we are the gold-plated fillings inside the mouth
rattling downward.

UNDER THE WEATHER—A FUNERAL

Richard Bentley

Damp church pews glisten with
grief. Sorrow poured out and rushed freely
from our eyes.

Our pain came
as if from a hidden song in the Bible.

We suffered, knelt, pleaded, chanted,
compromised with God while asking
for words of certainty.

We blasphemed, sought assurance, we mourners in black,
full of holy struggle, our hands and faces damp,
from the edges of understanding.

TRAFFIC REPORT

Eric D. Goodman

This is your eye in the sky, the WCHL Traffic Copter. If you're just now tuning in for the first time today, here's a word of advice: stay home. You heard me right, folks: authorities have advised everyone in the Chillicothe area to remain indoors today and to stay off the roads. If you're already driving to work, go back home. It's a zoo out there—literally.

Lions and bears, wild cats and wolves have all escaped from a local animal reserve here in Chillicothe. If you leave your house today, you're walking into a danger zone. It's best to stay indoors.

For those of you braving the commute, be advised that bears have been spotted along Main Street headed into the downtown area. Already this morning, four reports have come in of bears attacking cars at stoplights. No windows have been broken or injuries reported, but there have been some frightened passengers and some dinged up vehicles.

A pride of lions—that's a whole family of them—is reportedly traveling together. I haven't been able to spot them from up here, but authorities believe they were in the city early this morning and may be headed north outside of Chillicothe. They could still be in the downtown area, so stay alert.

Also, leopards and panthers and other wild cats are on the loose that have not been found since their escape yesterday afternoon. I'm telling you folks, it's the day to call in. If you can stay home, you'd better do it.

Right now, I'm looking at a major traffic jam entering downtown Chillicothe on Main Street, and the cause is a bear that keeps banging into bottlenecked cars. Police are aware of the bear and are said to be on their way.

Oh, my! I'm seeing police respond now! The police—two of them, racing up the shoulder, jumping out of the car and . . . yes, they have opened fire. The bear—yes, yes, it's down. It looks like the bear's dead, right in the middle of Main Street. Wow.

Folks, the bear is down, but lions and other wild cats remain on the loose, so today is the day to avoid the roads. Do not leave your house if you don't have to. All state, federal and local government have implemented liberal leave for the day—you will not be denied leave—and schools are closed throughout Chillicothe and the surrounding areas. Businesses and employers have been asked by police to approve requests to take the day off, and everyone is encouraged to stay home.

If you're just tuning in, folks, a bear has been shot and killed by police on Main Street only moments ago, and that's causing a major backup. Other wild animals are on the loose and may possibly be in downtown Chillicothe and the surrounding area. I'm your WCHL eye in the sky, looking today not only for traffic conditions, but for the animal conditions in Chillicothe. Stay indoors and stay safe.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

Matthew J. Spireng's book *What Focus Is* was published in 2011 by WordTech Communications. His book *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published in 2006 by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. His published chapbooks are: *Clear Cut*; *Young Farmer*; *Encounters*; *Inspiration Point*, winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition; and *Just This*. Since 1990, his poems have appeared in publications across the United States. He is a nine-time Pushcart Prize nominee and winner of *The MacGuffin's* 23rd Annual Poet Hunt Contest in 2018 and the 2015 *Common Ground Review* poetry contest.

MARK BELAIR

Mark Belair's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Alabama Literary Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poetry East*, and *The South Carolina Review*. Author of seven collections of poems, the most recent are the companion volumes *Taking Our Time* and *Running Late* (Kelsay Books, 2019). He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize multiple times, as well as for a Best of the Net Award. Please visit www.markbelair.com.

MIKE MATTHEWS

A Chicago native, Mike Matthews is known for weaving the intricacies of tragic love and desperate hope into a kaleidoscope of adult literature. Mike believes there are two types of writers in the world, those who plan out every page, and those who hear voices. He is the latter. For 30 years, Mike has memorialized the real events of people he has encountered in his many travels. the president of North Avenue Publishing and the last, surviving founding member of the Windy City Writers Club formed in 1984.

THOMAS PIEKARSKI

Thomas Piekarski is a former editor of the *California State Poetry Quarterly*. His poetry has appeared in publications internationally,

including *Taj Mahal Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg*, and *South African Literary Journal*. He has published a travel guide, *Best Choices in Northern California*, and his most recent poetry books are *Ballad of Billy the Kid* and *Monterey Bay Adventures*.

DANIEL MOORE

Daniel lives in Oak Harbor, Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems are forthcoming in *Weber Review*, *Tule Review*, *January Review*, *Plainsongs*, *The Cape Rock*, *Artifact Nouveau*, *Magnolia Review*, *Kestrel*, and *Emerge*. His first book, *Waxing the Dents*, was a finalist for the Brick Road Poetry Book Prize and was released in February 2020. Visit him at Danieledwardmoore.com.

ALLISON M. PALMER

Allison M. Palmer is a municipal park ranger, writer and visual artist in San Diego, California, with work appearing in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review*, and other publications. Palmer's current projects include photo collage pieces that explore serial images and the textures of urban life.

NAOMI LOWINSKY

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky's poems have been widely published, most recently in *Serving House Journal*, *Ginosko*, and *Stickman*. Her poem "Madelyn Dunham, Passing On" won first prize in the Obama Millennium Contest. She has also won the Blue Light Poetry Chapbook Contest. Lowinsky's fourth poetry collection is *The Faust Woman Poems*. Lowinsky is a Jungian analyst in private practice in Berkeley, CA and the poetry and fiction editor of *Psychological Perspectives*, which is published by the Los Angeles Jung Institute.

JAQUELINE HENRY

Jacqueline Henry is a writer, editor and creative writing instructor. Recent and forthcoming poetry credits include: *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*, *After the Pause*, *boomerLit*, *California Quarterly*, *The Cape Rock*, *Carbon Culture Review*, *Clarion*, *Euphony*, *Front Range Review*, *LitBreak*, *Prism Review*, *The Round*, *Slant*, *Streetlight Magazine*, and *Writer's Digest*.

DS MAOLALAI

DS Maolalai has been nominated four times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019).

JONATHAN FERRINI

Jonathan Ferrini is a published author who resides in San Diego. He received his MFA in motion picture and television production from UCLA.

ROBERT RENE GALVAN

Robert René Galván, born in San Antonio, resides in New York City where he works as a professional musician and poet. His last collection of poems is entitled, *Meteors*, published by Lux Nova Press. His poetry was recently featured in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Azahares Literary Magazine*, *Gyroscope*, *Hawaii Review*, *Newtown Review*, *Panoply*, *Stillwater Review*, *West Texas Literary Review*, and the Winter 2018 issue of *UU World*. He is a Shortlist Winner Nominee in the 2018 Adelaide Literary Award for Best Poem. Recently, his poems are featured in *Puro ChicanX Writers of the 21st Century*.

JOHN DORROH

John Dorroh used/uses writing as a learning tool with his high school science students. They often complained that "This is not an English class," to which he replied, "Thank you." His poetry has appeared in about 75 journals, including *Dime Show Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Os Pressan*, *Blue Moon Literary & Arts Review*, and others. He also writes shorts fiction and the occasional rant.

NATE HOUSE

Nate House's fiction has appeared in *Poydrus Review*, *Monday Night Lit*, *Kudzu House*, *Avatar Review*, *Apt*, *Sentenia*, *The Pebble Lake Review*, *Armchair Shotgun* and other publications. His nonfiction has appeared in *The Cleaver*, *The Rambler*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Philadelphia Tribune*, *The East Falls Local*, and other

newspapers. His novel *Float* was published by Aqueous Books in 2011. He currently teaches English and Mass Media at Community College of Philadelphia.

JAMIE LOGAN

Jamie Danielle Logan is a fiction candidate at the University of Memphis where she served as Managing Editor of *The Pinch*. Before coming to Memphis, she graduated with honors from Tulane University. There, she received the Studio in the Woods Fellowship for Creative Writing. She now teaches Creative Nonfiction at the University of Memphis and writes obsessively about myth and Mississippi.

STEVE BELLIN-OKA

Steve Bellin-Oka's first book of poems, *Instructions for Seeing a Ghost*, won the 2019 Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry and was published in 2020 by the University of North Texas Press. He is also the author of three chapbooks, most recently *Out of the Frame* (Walls Divide Press, 2019). His next chapbook, *Elegies for the Gasoline Age*, a collaboration with the sculptor Richard Zimmerman, is forthcoming in 2021. He earned his MFA from the University of Virginia and his PhD from the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers. Currently a Tulsa Artist Fellow in Poetry and a Research Fellow at the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities, Bellin-Oka is also the founding director of Tulsa Glitterary, a regional LGBTQ+ writers' organization, as well as the Tulsa Glitterary Conference.

GLORIA KEELEY

Gloria Keeley is a graduate of San Francisco State University with a BA and MA in Creative Writing. She collects old records and magazines. Her work has appeared in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Emerson Review*, *The Ocotillo Review*, *El Portal*, and other journals.

CODY WILHELM

Cody Wilhelm is an English major attending Eastern New Mexico University and is currently in his junior year. Cody enjoys writing

poems in his free time; Cody's pieces attempt to capture universal human experiences and express intense emotional reactions to various interpersonal relationships. Cody is from Lubbock, Texas.

GRACE TSICHLIS

Grace Tschlis is a senior English major at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. Her previous fiction stories have been published in her university's literature magazine, *Voices*. Other than reading and writing, she enjoys baking, traveling, and stand-up comedy.

ALAN ELYSHEVITZ

Alan Elyshevitz is the author of a collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund* (SFA Press), and three poetry chapbooks, most recently *Imaginary Planet* (Cervena Barva). His poems have appeared in *River Styx*, *Nimrod International Journal*, and *Water ~Stone Review*, among many others. Winner of the James Hearst Poetry Prize from *North American Review*, he is also a two-time recipient of a fellowship in fiction writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. For further information, visit <https://aelyshevitz.ink>.

NELS HANSON

Nels Hanson grew up on a small raisin and tree fruit farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California, earned degrees from U.C. Santa Cruz and the U of Montana, and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016. His poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.

SARA KINARD

Sara Kinard is a freshman at Eastern New Mexico University who is majoring in English and minoring in Education. She wants to become a famous creative writer in the future. Her goal is to have her novels give readers a place where they can escape and discover new worlds.

DORTY NOWAK

Dorty Nowak is a writer and poet living in Paris and Berkeley whose poems and articles have been published in the U.S. and in France. She is the co-founder of Duologues, an international collaborative visual arts and poetry project. She holds a B.A. from Northwestern University and an M.A. from The University of Chicago.

HARLAN YARBROUGH

Educated as a scientist and graduated as a mathematician, Harlan Yarbrough has earned his living as a full-time professional entertainer most of his life, including a stint as a regular performer on the prestigious Grand Ole Opry. Harlan's repeated attempts to escape the entertainment industry have brought work as a librarian, physics teacher, syndicated newspaper columnist, and city planner, among other occupations. He lives, writes, and continues to improve his dzongkha vocabulary and pronunciation in Bhutan but visits the US and Europe to perform and thereby to recharge his bank account. Harlan has written five novels, three novellas (two published), three novelettes (two published), and forty-some short stories, of which thirty-six have been published in six countries. His work has appeared in the *Galway Review*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Red Fez*, *Veronica*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and many other literary journals and won the 2019 Fair Australia Prize.

TASHA VICE

Tasha Vice is an Assistant Professor of Literacy in South Texas. She has published poetry and fiction in *El Portal* and literacy research in *READ* online journal. Although she enjoys preparing literacy teachers for professional practice, she garners fulfillment by writing poems about family, the environment, and other observational musings in her spare time.

ZACH MURPHY

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer who somehow ended up in the often chilly but charming land of St. Paul, Minnesota. His stories have appeared in *Peculiars Magazine*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *WINK*, and the *Wayne Literary Review*. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly and loves cats and movies.

CASEY KILLINGSWORTH

Casey Killingsworth has work in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Two Thirds North*, and other journals. His book of poems, *A Handbook for Water*, was published by Cranberry Press in 1995. As well he has a book on the poetry of Langston Hughes, *The Black and Blue Collar Blues* (VDM, 2008). Casey has a Master's degree from Reed College.

TOM MCEACHIN

Tom McEachin is a Professor of English at Laredo College on the Texas-Mexico border. His fiction has appeared in *South Dakota Review*, *Limestone*, *The Dos Passos Review*, and *The Madison Review*. He received his MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

BENJAMIN HARNETT

Benjamin Harnett is a poet, fiction writer, historian, and digital engineer. His poetry has appeared recently in *Poet Lore*, *Saranac Review*, *Juked*, and *ENTROPY*, and forthcoming in *SLANT* and *The Evansville Review*. His short story "Delivery" was Longform's Story of the Week. He was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize in Poetry and has been nominated for a Pushcart. He lives in Beacon, NY with his wife Toni and a menagerie of eccentric pets. He works for *The New York Times*.

EMILY PRIDDY

Emily Priddy is a graduate student pursuing an M.A. in English at ENMU. She lives in Tucumcari and teaches English and journalism at House High School. She is currently writing her second novel.

MARSHALL FARREN

Marshall Farren is a writer and photographer from Indianapolis, Indiana. His photography has been featured in *Mangrove*, *Oakland Arts Review*, and *Tributaries*, and is forthcoming in *Ligeia Magazine*. He was also the featured artist of Issue 16 of *The Susquehanna Review*. When he is not writing or walking around with his camera, he enjoys watching baseball and yelling out answers while watching *Jeopardy!*

TENIKA HEIDELBERG

Tenika Ann Heidelberg is a 23-year-old now finishing her BA in English at Eastern New Mexico University. She uses her poetry to convey the pain of a thousand lives in one, each piece subjecting the reader to a reality faced by all and acknowledged by few. She plans to continue writing in the name of her departed brother Bryson, as he was a constant reminder to reach for the stars, remembering always the beauty of life in death, and the essence of pain in existence.

MIKE SHEEDY

Mike Sheedy's short stories have appeared in various magazines over the years and he's self-published some projects that are available online. You can check out his work at MikeSheedy.com.

DUANE ANDERSON

Duane currently lives in La Vista, NE, and volunteers with a non-profit organization as a Donor Ambassador on their blood drives. He has had poems published in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Fine Lines*, *The Sea Letter*, *Cholla Needles*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and several other publications.

PATRICK ST. AMAND

Patrick St. Amand lives on the shores of Lake Huron in Sarnia, Ontario. When he isn't teaching, he's cycling or fretting about honeybees. He's published a few stories. Probably his best one is "Over by Four" in *Sequestrum!*

LUCY MARTINEZ

Lucy Ruth Martinez comes from a household filled with many different cultures and points of view. She wishes to express this adverse childhood experience through her poetry and writings. She does so to connect to people, especially her future students, so people can understand that no matter the title we hold in work, we are all human beings.

PAULA HERNANDEZ

Paula Hernandez has been attending Eastern New Mexico University since the Fall of 2019. She grew up in southeast New Mexico and has been living there for most of her life. She is majoring in communicative disorders and plans to become a speech-language pathologist. She uses different pen names depending on the subject matter of the work and likes to write because for her it is freedom – possessing the ability to make up any person, place, or thing that comes to mind and making it into a reality.

ABIGAIL WARREN

Abigail Warren's work has appeared in over thirty literary magazines, including *Forge*, *Big Muddy*, *Stonecast Review*, and others, as well as in the anthologies *30 Poems in November* and *Howling Up to the Sky* by Pact Press. She was awarded the Rosemary Thomas Poetry Prize and a 2018 Pushcart Prize. She is also a Terry J. Cox Poetry Prize finalist, and her chapbook, *Air-Breathing Life*, has been nominated for the Massachusetts Book Award, 2018. Warren teaches at Cambridge College in Massachusetts; additionally, she is a board member and chairperson for *30 Poems in November* at The Center for New Americans.

RICHARD WIRICK

Richard Wirick is the author of *One Hundred Siberian Postcards*, a *London Times* Notable Book for 2007 and a nominee for the PEN/Bingham for best first work by an American author. It was followed by *Kicking In* (Counterpoint, 2009), a collection of stories. His novel, *The Devil's Water*, was published in 2016. Another story collection, *Fables of Rescue*, as well as a book of essays, *Hat of Candles*, is forthcoming in 2021. He writes for a variety of publications in the U.S. and U.K. He practices environmental law in Los Angeles, where he lives with his family.

GENE BARRY

Gene Barry is an Irish poet who has been published internationally. His poems have been translated into Arabic, Irish, Hindi, Albanian and Italian. Gene has read in Australia, Holland, Kosovo, England,

Staint Lucia, Scotland, the Seychelles, South Africa, France, Belgium, Texas, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Arkansas, Florida, New York, Michigan, and Massachusetts. Barry's chapbook *Stones in their Shoes* was published in 2008. In 2013 his collection *Unfinished Business* was published, a collection that has been critically acclaimed. *Working Days* was published in 2016 and *Flaking the Rope* was published in 2019. Barry has edited over 20 anthologies and poetry collections.

JEAN E. VERTHEIN

Originally from Mississippi, Jean E. Verthein traveled through Italy, Iran, Japan, and Mexico before settling in New York City. She bused across Afghanistan and Iran in a study tour while learning about the literature of the two countries. She's worked as an adjunct assistant professor at Columbia University, and as a counselor for disabled students. She earned her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and received two writing grants from the Ragdale Foundation. Verthein's work has been published by several presses, including *Artifact Nouveau*, *Litbreak*, and *Poydras Review*. Adelaide Books recently published her novel, *The Last Gentleman in the Middle Distance*.

RAVEN LENTE

Raven Lente grew up reading folk tales, myths, and fantasy stories that she could escape to. She absolutely loves history and culture, and all of this is what inspires her. However, in her work, she likes to bring new ideas and visions to those stories of old; reframe them but keep their spirits. This is what drives her fine art and what drives her in her other creative ventures.

CHRISTOPHER BARNES

In the Christmas season of 2001, the northern cultural skills Partnership sponsored Christopher Barnes to be mentored by Andy Croft in conjunction with New Writing North. He made a radio programme for Web FM community radio about his writing group. These poems are an eye-witness account of mental breakdown, fiction of course.

RICHARD BENTLEY

Richard Bentley has published fiction, poetry, and memoir in over 200 journals, magazines and anthologies on three continents. His books, *Post-Freudian Dreaming* and *A General Theory of Desire*, are available on Amazon, Powell's Books, or at www.dickbentley.com. His new book, *All Rise*, contains recently published stories, poems, and graphic "wall poetry" that has been displayed in art galleries. His short story "Health Care" was selected "Best Microfiction of 2019" by the Editors of *Pelekinesis*.

ERIC D. GOODMAN

Eric D. Goodman is the author of four books, including *Tracks: A Novel in Stories* (Atticus, 2011) and *Womb: a novel in utero* (Merge, 2017). "Traffic Report" is an excerpt from the new novel, *Setting the Family Free* (Apprentice House, 2019). Learn more about Eric and his writing at www.EricDGoodman.com.

EASTERN
NEW MEXICO
UNIVERSITY

Explore.
Experience.
Excel.

