



EL PORTAL

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About *El Portal*

El Portal offers a unique venue for the original work of writers, artists, and photographers. Published biannually, *El Portal* is funded by a generous grant from Dr. Jack Williamson, a world-renowned science fiction writer and professor emeritus at Eastern New Mexico University.

Founded in 1939 as the creative forum for the students, faculty, and staff of ENMU, *El Portal* was given its name by Dr. Williamson, along with his vision to showcase the region through art. Since then, we hold a soft spot for the West, but our eclectic tastes make us open to everything. Consequently, views expressed in this issue do not necessarily reflect those of ENMU.

Our mission is our name: *El Portal* is a door to poetry and fiction, photography and art, non-fiction and flash works striving to transgress boundaries, straddle borders, and most importantly, move us. *El Portal* is accepting original, unpublished short stories, creative non-fiction (<4,000 words), flash fiction (<1,000 words), photography/art, and poetry.

ENMU students, national, and international writers are welcome to submit their works for free. ENMU students are eligible to win cash prizes awarded to first-, second-, and third-place winners in each category.

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.

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Category Winners in this Issue

Prose

1. Rough Start, *Emily Priddy*
2. My Father's Eyes, *Sierra Beverly*
3. The Burning Tree, *Sara Kinard*

Poetry

1. So...if we get married, *Caitlyn Winkler*
2. To Hades, *Veronica Morgan*
3. The Month After, *Cody Wilhelm*

Photography/Artwork

1. Free TV, *Emily Priddy*

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My Aurora Borealis

Danny Best

I had an amazing experience under the Northern Lights

as I recall

it was like midnight Angels blanketing full over me
with wide rippling bands of ghostly long trailing ribbons

all dressed-up

in the creamy lime greens, sapphire blues, and crimson pinks
of a slowly meandering aurora borealis

serenely igniting brightly each while sauntering their way up
through the all-but-invisible glistening frosty atmosphere

dancing sky high above me

then graciously reaching downward

to just shy of within my very own

transient

palpably iffy little space

almost as though some part of it were attempting to touch me
to reach out and connect with me

playfully yet obediently colliding head-on

against the easy drift and flow of those brisk

chill-ya-right-down-to-the-damn-bone

invigoratingly raw

northern night winds

I felt as though I had learned something

something that the Artic people have always known

something spiritual

like a nod from God

Foxes and Coyotes

Zach Murphy

The tulips grew apart from each other that Spring. The ground cracked and crumbled in ways that I'd never seen before.

I watched the foxes and the coyotes battle all Summer on Cesar Chavez Boulevard, where the blood would leave permanent stains on the concrete. The reckless packs would flash their teeth, mark their territories, and steal more than just scraps.

Me, I was a squirrel. I was small. But I was agile. I hustled from sunup until sundown at a frenetic pace. I always minded my own business and stuck to my own path. I didn't want to get involved with the vicious nature of pack mentality.

My best friend was a squirrel, too. We grew up around the same nest. We used to climb trees, chase tails, and break soggy bread together. We'd walk the wires between safety and danger. And when we got too deep into the mess, we'd get out just in time. Growing up, I always wondered if we would live long enough to die from old age, or if the environment and its elements would get to us first.

That Fall, my best friend got caught up with the foxes and the coyotes. Now he's gone.

The foxes and the coyotes lied low in the Winter. Me, I trotted across the frozen ground and desperately hoped I'd see my best friend's footprints once again.

The Paradises Outside Time

Yuan Hongri

Translated by *Yuanbing Zhang*

The heavenly flower from paradise on my palm
 make the wine of time twinkle with a smile of dawn.
 When the ancient in your bones play Guqin leisurely,
 you will see the prehistoric self, who riding like the wind—
 the mountains will be transparent and greet you,
 the rivers will be mellow, as if surrounded with the jade belts.
 There are a great many golden palaces on the clouds,
 that's where your paradises outside time.

时光之外的乐园

我手掌上这朵天国之仙葩
 让时光之酒闪烁黎明之笑容
 当你骨骼里的古人丁丁而弹琴
 你看到了乘风而行的史前的自己
 群山透明向你致意
 河流芳醇如玉带萦绕
 在云朵之上有巨多的金殿
 那儿是你时光之外的乐园

The World Is Just A Lie

Yuan Hongri

Translated by *Yuanbing Zhang*

The world is just a lie,
truth is on the other side of the world.
We can neither see the light of time
nor know that everything is a shadow on the running water.
There is another me on another planet,
you have never been born or died.
When the maze becomes transparent, the door of time-space opens,
you will shake hands and smile with the giant in the heavens.
The words are both music and the epic of the soul,
Tells you that the palaces of outer space are incomparably lofty,
as if they are as endless as the mountains of gold.

世界只是一个谎言

世界只是一个谎言
真理在世界的另一面
我们看不到时间之光
不知道一切只是流水之上的影子
另外的星球上有另外的自己
你不曾出生也不曾死去
当迷宫透明时空之门敞开
你将和那天上的巨人握手微笑
那词语是乐曲也是灵魂之史诗
告诉你天外的宫殿无比的巍峨
如黄金之山岳连绵而无际

An Illusion in the Bright Mirror of Eternity

Yuan Hongri

Translated by *Yuanbing Zhang*

Every day is an illusion in the bright mirror of eternity.
 You see yourself from a teenager to an old man with gray hair,
 as if you are a role in a play.
 And the peace of mind makes you smell the fragrance of flowers
 from the Heavens.
 You recall yourself in outer space with a smile—
 that golden giant and fragrant light;
 the huge number of palaces looks lofty, resplendent and majestic,
 they rise and fall, like a sea of gold.
 Billions of years are like the drops of nectar
 crystal clear, sprinkle the music of intoxicated soul.

永恒之明镜里的幻影

每一天都是永恒之明镜里的幻影
 你看到自己从少年到白发
 仿佛一个戏剧里的角色
 而心灵的宁静让你嗅到了天国的花香
 你微笑着回忆起天外的自己
 那黄金的巨人 芳香的光芒
 那巨多的宫殿巍巍峨峨
 起伏若黄金的海洋
 亿万年的时光犹如一滴一滴甘露
 晶莹剔透 洒下醉了灵魂的乐曲

A Refreshing Breeze of the Dawn

Yuan Hongri

Translated by *Yuanbing Zhang*

I came from the outer space,
came from the giant city of the platinum.
My lines, words of the gem
twinkling with the future interstellar smiles,
made the wings of your soul to wake up from the dream
made you see yourself in outer space—
time was sweet as wine
the palaces of the heavens were as brilliant as the flowers of gem
the music was a refreshing breeze of dawn that brightened the soul.

黎明之清风

我来自天外 来自那座白金巨城
我的一行一行词语之宝石
闪烁未来之星际的笑容
让你的灵魂之羽翼从梦境醒来
让你看到那天外的自己
时光甜美如酒 天国的宫殿
灿烂如宝石之花
乐曲是洗亮灵魂的黎明之清风

The Song of the Universe—Thy Song

Yuan Hongri

Translated by *Manu Mangattu*

Sweet soul,
let thy breath be sweet
Let thine eyes shine as the stars
Reflect about what thou shalt see!
Thou shalt forget the words
The song of the universe is thy song
The peace of the universe is thy peace
If thou shall speak
it is almost like God
Let there be light! And there was light.

宇宙的歌声是你的歌声

甜美的灵魂
让你的呼吸甜美
让你的眼睛多如星辰
想想吧 那时你将看到什么
你将忘了词语
宇宙的歌声是你的歌声
宇宙的宁静是你的宁静
如果你说话
那就如同上帝
要有光 于是就有了光

Day and Night in Kingdom of Heaven

Yuan Hongri

Translated by *Manu Mangattu*

Last night, gazing at the stars
I saw those countless gems smiling
numberless from my past life
limitless in the silver kingdom
Sprung from the light of thought
forging ahead to superluminal chi
Five hundred years later, or may I say
After a thousand five hundred years of the world
I saw a giant of a spacecraft
The eyes of those men and women
were tranquil, serene as a diamond
Then I knew, once and forever: on the new planet,
in the Kingdom of Heaven, there is neither day nor night.

没有昼夜的天国

昨夜仰望星空
我看见无数个笑容
无数个我的前世
无数个白银的王国
思想的光芒
以超光速驰来
我看见了五百年后
一千五百年后的世界
我看见乘坐飞船的巨人
男男女女的眼睛
宁静的钻石
新的星球之上
没有昼夜的天国

Another Try

Timothy Dodd

The sun disappeared as Drake drove under the interstate underpass where he once searched for aluminum cans in the embankment's thick grass. In his teenage days of *X-Men and The Defenders*, enough recyclables afforded him two more comic books each month. Around the next curve, Little Aldo's appeared in the distance between road and river like a tiny birdhouse. Drake pushed down on the accelerator for the final straight stretch, crumpling his Mallo Cup wrapper and tossing it on the floor—the old bar couldn't come soon enough. Colored mountains of October loomed behind the Elk, and on the other side of the river a plane drifted into Yeager Airport. With the sun nearing the horizon, Drake squinted to follow the jet as it glided lower, then disappeared behind the mountains.

He pulled slowly into the gravel lot, scanning the automobiles. Old Man Klass' wheels were parked by the door as usual; legend had it he even kept a cot in the bar cellar. Rich's Pontiac was tucked away in the corner of the lot, and Itchy Jimmy's ugly, yellow El Camino stood out as usual, making Drake laugh as he pulled into an open spot a few spaces down from the bartender's black Trans Am. Getting out of his Explorer, Drake felt for his wallet in the front, left pocket of his jeans, then dropped his keys in the right pocket and tightened his belt. He took a deep breath as he approached the bar entrance, his work boots crunching through the chalky stones of the parking lot. Little Aldo's sign had lost at least one more bulb, but its remaining neon lights brightened an otherwise nondescript building.

Drake opened the door and stepped inside the darkness of Little Aldo's warm and cozy brooding. His eyes adjusted as the bar chattered with clinking glasses. No one rushed to greet him—folks would speak in their own time. Billiard balls smacked into one another in the next room, and Ricky Goodman, son of a councilman, blurred himself in the corner drowning Molly Hatchet

out of its own chorus. Old Man Klass sat at his regular place at the bar. Drake plopped down on the stool beside him.

“Sizemore, where have you and your twenty-four years been all this time? Ain’t seen you for ages,” the retired carpet installer said with a half turn of his oversized frame. Even without looking at the young man directly, Old Man Klass knew it was Drake from the flash of his gold-rimmed glasses and Amish-styled red beard.

“Going to church there for a while, Old Man,” Drake answered softly, honest as usual, as he removed his jeans jacket and looked at the ball of hair growing inside Klass’ ear.

“Church? You hear that song playing now, boy? ‘Flirtin’ with Disaster.’”

“Yeah, well just thought I’d give it another try.”

“So you been too damn busy putting John 3:16 bumper stickers on your wheels to join us for a beer?” Drake looked down at his lap sheepishly and didn’t answer.

Pheasant leaned toward him from a couple stools down, a can of Old Milwaukee in hand to match his cap. “Let me guess. Jesus didn’t work out, did he? No payouts until you’re dead.” Again, Drake didn’t answer. “Hell, I’d rather be drunk on this bar stool than drunk like them Jesus freaks.”

“So, are you saved now, or can I buy you a beer?” Klass asked as he nodded to the bartender.

It didn’t take a minute for Joe to deliver a tall can. “There you go, Drake. Never too good for a Schaefer’s. I don’t care what they say.”

“Met some good people, believe it or not,” Drake said to Klass, taking a sip and enjoying the sour brew after a three-month hiatus. “They were calling me up, inviting me out. Even took me over to a Reds game in August. I’ve never seen nothing like that field. Even the dirt was clean.”

“Riverfront’s a damn good stadium,” Klass agreed.

Drake's voice lowered, his head stooping slightly. "But then a few weeks after getting saved, everything started to peter out." Old Man Klass didn't move, as if he'd already heard the story. "It was like getting married or something. Well, worse, I guess. Linda didn't go cold on me until our second year together."

"Don't take it personal, Drake. You ain't the first."

Drake took another sip, followed by a long gulp.

"They can say what they want—beer is still man's best friend," Klass said, holding up his own drink in a salute, his way of telling others he was disengaging from conversation.

Five minutes later, Joe brought Drake a second beer and broke the silence. "This one's on me," he said. "You gonna start coming regularly again, Drake?"

"I figure I might, Joe, but don't know for sure. To tell you the truth I'm trying just to sort out some things right now."

Joe wiped the countertop with his cloth. "You're not the only one, buddy. But you might as well sort them out here."

"Yeah, you might be right."

"Don't tell me you still got one foot in that church, Sizemore?" Klass asked, jumping back into the world of his bar mates.

"Nah, they've called me a couple times since I quit going, but I'm not going back. I get the feeling it's like they lost another customer."

"Well, they probably did," Klass said. "How much you put in their shiny, little offering trays? Enough for that Reds game?"

"Ah, forget about it, Drake," Joe said. "Go shoot some pool and get your mind off things."

"Good idea," Drake said, climbing off his bar stool, beer in hand.

Drake walked to the corner of the room and peered around where the bar opened up into an area large enough for three billiard tables. Empty beer bottles filled the window ledges and

the small table in the corner. Rich hung over the third pool table, shooting with a group of Drake's casual friends. His stick slid back and forth between thumb and forefinger, licking at the cue ball with money on the line. Drake knew better than to distract him during a shot—no one liked to see this old high school friend of his pissed.

Drake took another drink. Eddie stood nearby, stick in hand, waiting his turn. Drake didn't know Eddie well, but he'd heard Eddie just signed up for the Navy. Elizabeth, Rich's girlfriend, sat on a stool next to her friend Tammy, and Itchy Jimmy gabbed at her side like a jester.

Rich let the cue ball fly. It traveled the length of the table, cut the three-ball just enough to drop it into the corner pocket, then banked and fled. Rich stood up and Drake moved forward toward the table as the cue ball stopped.

Elizabeth spotted him first. "Hey, check it out! Drake's here." Others turned and looked. Drake and Elizabeth had dated in high school, long before Rich got interested in her, and at times Drake still thought that if it wasn't for Rich, he might try to pick the matter up again. After all, he had more fun with Elizabeth than any of his other girlfriends, even more than with his ex-wife. The grin on Itchy Jimmy's face showed he had similar thoughts about Elizabeth.

"Drake, where you been?" Rich asked, turning away from the table between shots.

"Yeah, Drake, where you been?" repeated Jimmy.

"Just been thinking through some things," Drake answered. "Doesn't matter now. Nice to see everybody." No one replied, but Elizabeth caught his gaze, the subtle invitation, and she popped up to grab two sticks and her beer, handing Drake the longer one.

Itchy Jimmy snickered. "Now that's for shooting pool. Don't go poking around where you shouldn't with it." Pool stick in hand, Drake smirked as he remembered some months ago when Rich

told Jimmy to “shut his ugly beaver hole.” At least Jimmy always knew to fold when things got heated with Rich.

“Nine-ball?” Elizabeth asked, her head tilted toward the table.

“Of course,” Drake answered, tossing the cue ball onto the green felt.

Elizabeth pressed him on his three-month disappearance while she racked the balls. “So, you really been all right, Drake? What you been thinking about?”

“Ah, it’s nothing,” he answered, grinning. “Just trying something else out. How you been anyway?”

“Things are all right,” Elizabeth replied as she prepared to break, knowing Drake was really asking about her relationship with Rich. “You know, like it always is, Drake.” The stick shot forward in her hands sending the cue ball racing.

Drake smiled, remembering her skill as two balls rolled in. “And how’s work?”

Elizabeth stood up and glared at him for a moment, then scanned the green for her next shot. “You had to ask, didn’t you? Thinking of working two jobs to get out of that salon.” An uncharacteristic miss followed, giving Drake a turn to shoot.

Itchy Jimmy wandered over and butted in. “Ready for deer season, Drake?”

Drake didn’t need to answer—at the next table, Rich and Eddie were getting heated.

“You lost. Now pay up, Eddie,” Rich said.

Eddie shot back with a few rough words, most of them profane, and Tammy moved next to him, rubbing his arm in an attempt to settle him down. Elizabeth set her own stick against the table and rushed to Rich’s side. Jimmy laughed as the slander and threats worsened. Rich’s head started shaking, his face a furious red. At any moment, a beer bottle might fly at Eddie’s

head. Hearing the ruckus, Joe came around the corner. With Tammy's help, they escorted a yelling Eddie outside.

Drake watched Elizabeth carefully as he finished his beer, their conversation lost.

"He ain't getting away with it," Rich repeated, his nostrils flaring and neck veins flexing.

"Let's just forget about him, Rich," Elizabeth said, her hand patting his chest as she led him outside. "Don't let it ruin our night, hon." She gave Drake a flick of the head goodbye.

Not wanting to remain near Itchy Jimmy, Drake returned to the bar where he talked to Pheasant about his part-time work at Dale's Auto Body, listened to Old Man Klass tell a story about an old preacher he knew, and thought a little more about Elizabeth. Three beers later, Drake feeling it, Eddie and Tammy reappeared like nothing had happened, sitting down at a table in the corner to order a new round of drinks.

Near ten o'clock, Drake stepped outside for some air. He pulled his jeans jacket tighter around his old, WVU Sugar Bowl t-shirt, then stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked down at his work boots. The temperature had dropped more than expected, and the smell of rain dominated the night as Drake stood under the neon lights.

Another airplane approached Yeager. Drake checked his watch and readied himself to go back inside when the sputtering motor of a red Firebird pulled back into the lot. Rich parked in his usual spot and got out of his car, Elizabeth no longer with him. Stern faced, he threw his cigarette butt on the gravel and stomped to the door.

Intervention rolled through Drake's mind like a fog. Warn Eddie? Prevent Rich? Inform Joe?

Rich stopped at the door momentarily, then turned, walked back to his car, and pulled a baseball bat out of his trunk.

Within seconds, it came down on Eddie's windshield with a deafening crash.

Rich walked to the entrance of Little Aldo's again and held open the door. "Get your ass out here, Ed Blair," he yelled. "If not, I'll be dragging it out."

Drake slid away from the entrance and pulled his car keys out of his pocket. Unlike the others, he had no interest in frothing over a fight. Drake walked by Eddie's car, thousands of tiny, turquoise-edged pieces of glass sparkled in the gravel.

He pulled out of the lot just as a dozen or more people rushed outside of Little Aldo's, his twisty driving mirroring a mind contemplating lost friendship and conflict. Even Little Aldo's seemed to deliver its fair share of both.

Drake rolled down the window. He gripped the steering wheel tightly and leaned closer to the windshield as it caught drops of light rain. Few cars passed him on the stretch between bar and town, and the bright lights from I-79 above cast a shadowy glare onto the road. Drake slowed, sped up, then slowed down again, a driving dictated more by the ideas moving in his head than by the road itself.

The rain came down harder as he pulled into a parking spot at Go-Mart. Inside the store, the young cashier took a long look at her lone customer as he walked to the rear and took out a six-pack of Schlitz and a twenty-ounce Mountain Dew. Drake unscrewed the top off the soda and took a long drink, enjoying its sweet burning at the back of his throat. A rotating stand of comic books stood in the corner, catching his eye as he walked toward the checkout counter. He set his Mountain Dew and Schlitz on the floor and rotated the stand until locating his favorite title, *Rom the Spaceknight*.

For a few years, Rom had been one of his favorite comics, despite the more recent issues of weaker writing. When the first issue had come out in 1979, the cyborg first touched down on

Earth in West Virginia, although in a fictional town called Clairton. Using his “Analyzer,” Rom could recognize and destroy Dire Wraiths, evil creatures disguised as humans that the general public never recognized as anything beyond their human form.

Drake leafed through the *Rom* issue quickly, then added issues of *Alpha Flight*, *Micronauts*, and *The Avengers* from the racks as well. He picked his soda back up from the floor but left the six-pack on the ground.

At checkout, he greeted the flannel-shirt wearing, recent high school graduate and set his comics and soda on the counter with a smile. “You’re not a Wraith, are you?” Drake asked, his comic book interests bleeding into his socializing.

The girl played along as she rang him up. “Don’t guess I am unless listening to Def Leppard qualifies,” she replied, her braces flashing.

Tipsy, Drake flicked at his nose and giggled. “Fair enough,” he answered. “Oh, I better add this too,” he said, reaching down for a Snickers bar. He laughed harder and leaned over the counter. “My Neutralizer runs on chocolate.”

The cashier backed away from Drake and punched the price of the Snickers into the cash register.

“What’s my total?” Drake asked.

“Four dollars and twelve cents please,” she answered, her lisp now more noticeable.

Drake handed her a five; she deposited his payment into the register and gave him change. Drake received the coins awkwardly, as if perhaps he wanted her hand to linger on his. “Well, I’ll see you later,” he said with a smirk after letting a little too much time pass. He took another drink of his Mountain Dew and stepped away from the counter.

Back behind the steering wheel, Drake opened his Snickers and bit off a large hunk. He turned the light on overhead and opened

the *Micronauts* to read. Overall, the series had declined since its first two years, but recently, it had improved on account of the approaching final battle with nemesis Baron Karza. Drake guessed the book would soon come to a close, but with the coziness of his car and the aura of the surrounding night, sweet liqueur in hand and sugar running in his veins, he could almost accept it—accept the things he wished would never happen. He finished reading the issue in ten minutes but kept the other three comics tucked away in the paper bag for later. He finished his Snickers and Mountain Dew as well and considered going back inside for a second round of sweets before finally turning on the engine.

Out of the Go-Mart lot, Drake turned left and raced back toward Little Aldo's, his spirits improved but his head still a bit fuzzy from alcohol. When he passed by the bar five minutes later, slowing to roll his window down, the lights of three police cars flickered blue and Itchy Jimmy's hands gesticulated to loud sirens. Rich's car was gone, and a group of people had massed together at one end of the lot in a quiet sort of occasion. A body lay on the ground in front of them, unmoving. Drake put his hand on the bag of comic books next to him and stepped down on the gas.

The Boat

Daniel Barbare

The boat wanted to be a poem
So I let it slip into the
 Water
 And the words began
 To float
I turned on the motor
 And that gave it motion
 Like a propeller
The boat had rhythm
 Across the glassy water
It was evening time as the
 Lights of it glowed.
It was a peaceful literature
As the wind and water
Flowed through my writing
 Hand.
The ending was a graceful and
 Quiet wake.
And a sunset across the page.

The Sweeper

Daniel Barbare

Happy to be
Handle and broom
Sweeping my own way
Honest as straw
 And dustpan
Stitch for stitch and
 Equal too
Oh, how clean is the
 Floor.

My Castle

Daniel Barbare

As
if
inside
me

I'm
rich
as
a
castle

I
have
so
much
money
I
don't
know
what
to
do
with
it

but
I
am
happy

and
want
nothing
more.

Consuming Streets

Gary Beck

Midtown Manhattan
once a hub of prosperity,
now each corner
ravaged by empty stores,
festooned with the homeless,
one tale after another
on cardboard signs
of desperation,
abandoned citizens fear
there is no salvation,
as they slowly dissolve
on indifferent sidewalks.

The Inner Artist Never Dies

Anna Fells

What happens if you banish a part of yourself?

I learned to read at the age of three. As a child, I was happiest when alone, curled up in pillows on the sun-splashed blue-shag carpet floor of my bedroom with my favorite companions: Pippi Longstocking, feisty and hilarious; Nancy Drew, clever, resourceful and independent; and Laura Ingalls Wilder, impassioned, outspoken and free to roam.

Inspired by these girls—friends, mentors, and soul-mates—I began to write, a natural segue since I so loved reading. I was especially proud of a story that featured a heroine who solved a mystery in a haunted Colorado mining ruin and befriended a ghost. I was also proud of a poem that portrayed my terror of and delight for the dark and mossy Pennsylvania woods on my grandparents' land. But they were by another girl, in another time. Not me.

The vice-tightening started in grade school. Gretchen and Tara, whose minds I coveted, were truly creative. My stories were good, perhaps, but I was no Mozart-of-the-written-word.

Rather, people said, I was more suited to hard work and concrete facts. I could study for hours and ace any test you put in front of me. My math homework would complete itself, and I'd get assignments done weeks before they were due. I was lucky to have such a knack. I should build on that skill set.

Some of my teachers encouraged me to stay with writing, though. In 9th grade, after he read my story about a girl looking for her lost brother in the Middle Ages, Mr. Rice gave me an A+ and wrote a personal note telling me to keep it up. Mr. Thomas, in 10th, told me that what I had to say was genuine and raw, and I was offered a spot in AP English in junior year.

But I was also offered similar spots in biology, calculus, and physics classes. These subjects were more practical and promised more financial independence and security. And the hard sciences won out.

In my Freshman year of college, ostracism became expulsion.

One day, I sat at a table on the patio of an outdoor cafeteria overlooking Sproul Plaza at UC Berkeley. I was trying to study but was distracted by the merry ruckus of greetings between students moving to or from class, the babbles of an incoherent religious zealot, and the occasional shouted invitations to come check out a booth touting some political position or other. As was often the case in Berkeley, the sky was blue, the temperature in the upper 60's with no wind. Nude sunbathers with genitals painted in florescent colors may have also been dotting the landscape that day; this was the early '90s, and the era of the infamous activist, "The Naked Guy."

One by one, a crowd of students gathered at the table next to me, growing steadily into a group of animated six or eight, stealing two chairs, as they overtook the space available. They had the look of the kind of people that drew me to apply to Berkeley in the first place, in their canvas jackets, beaded necklaces, holey jeans, and disheveled hair, and they were talking animatedly about their creative writing class assignment. I heard their delight as they shared about their stories emerging, characters driving their plots despite themselves, and their experiences of feeling consumed by the process.

Their playfulness and excitement sent a warm, shivery feeling into my chest. I could suddenly breathe again. They were pursuing what really matters: freedom, self-expression, truth. I wanted to ask them who their professor was, and what class they were taking, and wondered, for a moment, if I could take that class too, next semester, to invite out and discover what might be hiding in me. Because it felt like there was something – no, a storm of somethings – that wanted to reveal themselves.

But, as I raised my hand to tap the student sitting closest to me, a girl with enviable long dark hair and big curls, an old lady image rocketed into my mind's eye, gnarled pointy finger, hooded, knotty cane, wrinkly skin, pointy nose, severe expression, and cried "STOP." I, with my mediocre grades in last semester's English class was NOT a writer. If I were to open myself up to them, these students would shun me. Plus, I had no fashion sense, no pluck, in my Gap jeans and Kelly-green cardigan and simple gold chain necklace. I belonged in the tribe of the hard-working masses, the tribe that followed rules and took the safe route.

The crushing shame that followed forced my hand back into my lap. I made a decision to exile her, the adolescent girl that wanted to write, and with it all of her bravery, color, honesty, rawness, and passion.

**

I follow the well-trodden path, leaving the bushwhacking to the braver and more talented. I do the thing. I become more educated. I go to medical school. I make it my goal to help people. I am in a career that is stable and sure to be lucrative. I choose internal medicine because they have protocols, and I complete my training.

I feed my exiled adolescent girl scraps. Science, which admittedly intrigues me with its miraculous ability to explain how things work, isn't enough for her, and I know it. But I trust the wisdom of science, and of what others much more brilliant and experienced than I say, over my own inner insights.

The girl is restless, even explosive at times. Sometimes she transforms into a wannabe-giant-woman, and she gnaws at my insides. Sometimes she screams.

I drink a lot in my free time.

When drinking, and alone, I often fancy myself a writer. With alcohol-inflated self-esteem, I think about quitting med school and residency to explore the creative life. I could travel and drink

all day and just live freely. By night, I go to the dive-bar and write stories and poems and thoughts, goaded on by melancholic Wilco and Jayhawks songs, and Sierra Nevada flowing free. By day, I throw the journals in my closet. I go to work.

Ten years pass like this.

I finally realize I've had enough. I'm sick of myself and join AA. The room feels like the bar, its members casual and scruffy and outspoken and genuine and hilariously funny. I laugh. I feel hope. I keep going. I stop drinking.

On a whim, one day, I look at the oft-unintelligible scribble in the journals from the previous decade in my closet and am embarrassed by the adolescent drama, the crushes on boys, and the self-indulgence, and I throw them in a box in the garage.

The girl still writhes, and struggles, in my gut. Something is missing. Something in me has the potential to BE instead of living hidden below the surface, no more conscious to me than a fleeting thought but aching to be so much more than that.

I build a house in the mountains in Colorado, and although I love the aspens and snow-capped peaks, I admit after a year that I hate my job as a primary care doctor, white coat and stethoscope like a straitjacket.

Now screaming again. The girl dyes her hair with streaks of pink.

I apply for and am accepted into psychiatry residency. It's a step in the right direction; the girl concedes, remembering her envy for the psychiatry residents when I was training to be an internist. After all, she thinks, our humanness resides in the brain. Maybe this will be enough.

And then, she jumps for joy when I treat myself to a mostly unstructured solo trip to India for 5 months before starting the residency.

It's a world on the brink of death. At the edge of human tolerability, its intensity, sights, sounds, and smells shocking and also brilliant beyond words. Cows and elephants wander the streets, women are bejeweled and swathed in miraculous color, men squat in peaceful repose, and horns blast so often it becomes background noise. I have insights, I think of potential essays and stories, I observe, I describe, I record the experiences and my inner world's response to them in notebooks and pages. The notes are written desperately sometimes, on the backs of food wrapping and napkins and scraps of paper while sitting in busses, bouncing along dirt roads for hours, waiting on sweaty trains.

The girl now sports a brightly colored salwar kameez, orange and aqua and yellow, and big bangle earrings; she dances with her arms in the air, reveling in its wonderous craziness.

When I get back, I type all the notes in my computer—almost 100 single-space pages—and then put them in a folder. I have visions, while typing, of what I will make of them. I'll get back to them, I tell myself, as soon as I finish this second residency of mine.

But I don't. Instead, I become a psychiatrist, then I specialize in addiction psychiatry, then I move into academia and research. I write grant applications, I get grants, I run studies, I publish papers, I teach, I see patients.

And all the while the girl is almost completely forgotten, the notes from India remain in a folder on my computer, unused.

Fifteen more years pass.

And then, out of no-where, I start to become an insomniac. It worsens, and worsens further, still.

The girl takes up boxing, and I wonder where she's been all these years.

Agitated, frustrated, uninspired, confused, and grieving about something that I don't even understand, I finally decide to leave the university.

“The Law of Dependent Origination” is a Buddhist principle which emphasizes that “all phenomena in the universe are relative, conditioned states and do not arise independently of supportive conditions.” At the age of 44, more financially secure than ever, I tell people that I quit because of academic politics, and to “slow down a little”.

Secretly, I tell myself that I am creating conditions that are supportive for exploring creative writing.

In the relative quiet of my light-filled office, work to-do’s complete, birds chirping, and tea steaming next to me, I open myself to what’s there, intending to let my creative girl out, to let her adorn herself in whatever she chooses and dance again. But, as the chasm opens, all that comes out is the old lady, again, larger than life, and in charge.

She tells me I don’t have a creative bone in my body.

My head is clogged when I sit down to write, even on my second cup of coffee, and I feel like I have a hangover. I have nothing original, novel, or important to say. Nothing happens and no words come out. My journals are just worries and to-dos. They say look inside yourself for inspiration. What if there’s nothing there to see? Other times, I have millions of random thoughts and ideas, but they are mundane thoughts or—in retrospect—embarrassing. It can be easy to write about single moments in time, but I can’t create an arc, an evolving concept. I may have lots to say but nothing adds up. I’m suspicious that ideas I think are original are probably just rehashed ideas from others that I’ve forgotten. I feel I could spend decades writing and rewriting things and I’ll never know which versions are the best, because I just don’t have what it takes to know what’s good. The openness, the lack of guidance, the fact that it’s just me out there making all the calls, immobilizes me.

She says, “See, you don’t have what it takes.”

When I look at my notes from India, it seems like a stranger wrote them. How did I possibly come up with all that? From

whom did all these descriptions and perceptions and depth of feeling emerge? What if it's too late?

Writing is hard. It's not what I imagined. I get fat because every time I sit down at the computer I want to get up and have a snack. I take some classes, but the students are so much more brilliant than I.

I start to truly doubt those people that say “anyone can be a writer.” Julia Cameron believes that there is an artist in all of us, and Natalie Goldberg states that if we let the words flow freely onto the page the story will emerge naturally. They, and many others like them—such as on inspirational online blogs—say “if you have the yearning, you need to follow it” and “if you have a desire to write, then you are meant to be a writer” and “if you just write every day the habit will bloom, and your talent will emerge.” But there's the other side out there too. Sigrid Nunez speaks critically of “James Patterson, the bestselling author, (who) believes equal success to be within the easy reach of, well, anyone,” if you only purchase his video lessons. She thinks claims like this have bred a world full of mediocre writers.

In clinical trials, participants that dropout of treatment studies are usually the ones that are not improving, whereas the ones that stay in are the ones that are benefiting. When you analyze the data, if you ignore the dropouts, the treatment may appear much more effective than it actually is. Are those that encourage you to explore your inner artist similar to the patients that stay in the studies in that they are the successful writers, and therefore biased? We don't hear from those that fail.

Think rationally, the old lady lectures, this is a frivolous and wasteful pursuit. You have no talent.

I wish there was a questionnaire or a cognitive test to identify those with hidden talent, that would be predictive of “success” (whatever that is). Or a study to identify whether succeeding at writing is a matter of work, talent, or a combination of both. Then

I'd know whether this I-want-to-write-fantasy is ridiculous, or whether I should push through the self-criticism and persist.

I start to think that this whole writing thing is indeed a: "waste of time."

And when I say that the girl screams again. She just won't give up, like a dog with a bone.

I'm stuck in a middle space, ambivalence, a painful place.

I take on more patients in my private practice, so I don't have to feel it.

Two years pass.

I see a play directed by a friend of mine, "A Doll's House Part 2." It's brilliantly done. Nora is a mother and wife who leaves her children and husband in the 1930s to find herself. In order to see her own truth, she has to rid herself of the internalized father/husband inner voice that judges her for her selfishness. The only way to do that, she decides, is to go into silence and live in a barn for two years by herself. She does this, and succeeds, emerging one day, her fully realized self and a good writer.

Afterward, I stand in the parking lot for an hour with my dermatologist friend Angela as the sun blares down on us, making us sweat and our throats parch. We can't stop talking about it. We, too, have internalized society's "shoulds" and are stuck.

Nora is like me, and like many other women, who are told that if they seek their own truth, they are selfish. I allow myself to hope, again, maybe these are my two years. Or maybe I, too, need to really do two years and go live in a barn.

I clear my schedule again.

I keep at it.

And then the final piece of the puzzle falls into place. I realize I've been alone with this writing thing for too long. I meet with a

writing coach recommended by a psychiatrist friend. I share with her some writings that I think are probably junk but the best I've got right now. She's encouraging. And her suggestions are rich and thoughtful and focused.

There's a bubbling that begins to build on itself, a fascinating and stimulating force that, in some way, begins to pull me along with it. I begin to feel joy with writing again. I meet with her a second time. It goes even better.

Even more important, I start to realize that the old lady might be carrying some wisdom in her rants too. After all, I am basically a novice. The coach tells me to think of it like going back to school.

I've been a good student before, and I'll be a good student again, I reassure the old lady. But this time, I also state firmly, the subject of my studies will come from *me*. The old lady sits back in her chair some, rests her cane next to her, and watches, considering. I think I might see a whiff of a smile from time to time.

And then one glorious day, the girl impulsively throws her arms around me one day and cries, "You're finally getting it right."

Hope grows. Something begins to transform.

On a morning walk, I am thinking about how to end this essay, and a familiar shame washes over me as ideas are generated and rejected by my energized brain. The old lady is wagging her finger at me again. I want to extinguish her. Or just concede and give up on this writing thing and do something else.

But then it hits me. I have an insight. Maybe there is some truth there, in what the old lady has to say. Maybe she's right, that there are good ideas and bad ideas, and perhaps her discernment will help me choose. And, oh, how lovely...I can just come home and edit a little more. Try something else on for size.

An image pops into my head of the old lady and the adolescent girl now sitting together at the table overlooking Sproul Plaza, chatting, having tea. My chest opens.

Mindwave

Robert Beveridge

The tactility of the flip,
feel of plastic, of cardboard
under fingers. The joy that comes
with the discovery of that record
you've been searching for your
whole life but didn't know it.

The transaction, the bills, the coins,
the resultant paper or plastic.
The drive home, the anticipation.
The black platter dropped
onto the turntable. The needle
lowered. The spin. The subtle
static before the first note.
The revolution. The variance
of speed. The injection straight
into the medulla. The bypass
of conscious thought. The wall
of static given, received.

The Sum of All Rust

James Tyler

I like it at the end of the day
when the sun grows rusty
then lets the moon paint the sky.

Our skin grows rusty, too.
We shed a coat a little at a time
and the new one isn't as vibrant

as the past, just a flaky shadow
of what used to shine under the moon,
fingers that pointed to flowers grow brittle.

How will we be painted at the end?
Will we be golden with diamond eyes?
No doubt we'll be a mound of treasure

in our graves. I think of a Joan Baez song.
Maybe I'll learn to fingerpick a tune
that goes along with this poem

or this poem will die with too much silence
because, with time, the voices fade away
and all we're left with is the buzz of a fly.

My grandparents had an old, rusty porch swing
in the backyard and I peeled the white paint
when grandma wasn't looking.

What stories that swing could tell,
arguments that went on late into the night,
glasses of lemonade or countless cans of beer,

a place where my mother could have kissed a boy
when left alone, or wishes made despite the stars.
The constant rub of time, that madness of gravity is guilty.

But the porch swing died along with my grandparents
and I am left to pick the paint from their coffins
as I slowly turn to rust, a mound of the most wonderful treasure.

No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service

Duane Anderson

The sign said:

*We would like to see you naked,
but state regulations require shoes and a shirt,*
so I put on my shoes and a shirt
to see if they were really sincere in their
wish to see me naked, one,
in my old man period of life
rather than in my youthful period.

No shoes,
no shirt,
no service.

What kind of service will I receive
wearing only the minimum required,
some things hanging loose,
airing out, for all of those to see
in all their naked splendor?

Desire Has a Burden

Laine Derr

My body aches
not to question,
not to despair.

I share what is lost,
compassion for softness
slowly formed.

Are you near or
does my honey-dipped
blood sing regret?

Medellín

Laine Derr

Over beer and pizza, she speaks of a present predicted,
red-wine nights, soft words shared on a single bed,
fingers weaving lilac-covered days. He, too, speaks
of a future, rustic blooms blushing blue, blissful years.

Riding Out the Pandemic

Catherine Evleshin

In the high desert plateau west of the Rio Grande, Jack and Paco collect mesquite for a fire to keep away wolves and cougars that have returned since the lockdowns. The horses nibbling mesquite pods, the crackling fire, air passing in and out of Jack's lungs. His heart has pumped for thirty-five years and he has ignored it, like a faithful dog nobody notices. Jack is a universe...at the same time, a molecule under an infinite sky.

The cry of an owl in the distance...Paco strikes a match and blows on the tinder until it ignites. Jack spreads his blanket and lies back to watch a million diamonds slide across a black inverted bowl. Beautiful from a distance, but he has seen pics fed back to Earth—barren rocks, poison gases. He feels his body grow weightless. Paco's voice in the silence. "The world's pretty nice, even after we fucked it up."

A sore point for Jack whose ancestors had respected these lands for millennia. "We didn't fuck it up. It was the scientists who thought they were smarter than nature."

Paco throws a branch on the fire. "They're not all bad. I hear a rattlesnake coiled to strike, I'm gonna jump my ass out of the way. That's what science does—gives us a heads up."

"Nobody listens till it's too late."

"*Verdad*, a lot of 'em waste their brains comin' up with stuff for lazy gringos who wanna sit on their ass and live forever. They miss the point. Nothin' feels good like gettin' in at the end of a back-breaking day and falling in bed with...you know what I mean." Paco acted like he accepted his lot as a farm laborer.

Jack—not so much. The workers had fought for a better life, until La Covid struck, and they just tried to stay alive. "We appreciate the good times when we been through hell." Peyote

makes philosophers out of farmers. Jack doesn't know if it's the desert air, the stars, or the cactus buttons, but everything in the universe is right where it should be, if he doesn't throw up.

Paco stirs the fire. "Your stomach okay?"

"So-so."

Paco hands him a tortilla. It helps. Jack can't gauge how long he has stared at the jeweled heavens, nor does it matter. At times their thoughts come together, then Paco seems to drift into his own head.

A dark knot grows inside Jack. A silent scream that wants to escape his body...He scrambles to his feet. His shadow appears in the sand. He turns to the light source.

Loping toward him, a halo fringing his body like an eclipse, the unmistakable stocky silhouette...of César Chavez. "*Cómo anda*, Joaquín. You called me?" His smile washes over Jack like a cool spring.

Jack has chewed too many buttons. "I'm confused."

"You've been confused for a long time, *compá'*. The little man shakes his head. "So much anger."

"Don César, you know why I'm crazy."

"What happens, happens, mijo. But we can choose how we feel about it. So far, all that bull-rage has left you in the desert talkin' to yourself."

"You got mad sometimes."

"For effect."

"I'm not a saint."

A smirk on the bronzed face. "Few of us are."

"I lost everything."

“*La cubana?*” The love of Jack’s life, who returned to her homeland to be with her family when the Virus spread like wildfire in El Norte. “How do you know about her?”

“I live in your head, *cuate*. I’m, shall we say, intimately acquainted with the lady.” Turning away, the gentle warrior calls over his shoulder, “*Hasta luego*, Joaquin Esquivel,” and vanishes behind an *ocatillo* cactus.

Jack’s stomach muscles tighten, and the shadow of a cougar leaps out of his head into the night sky, blocking the stars. When it fades, he sees a waning moon over the buttes on the other side of the river. A whirl of owl’s wings, wetness on his cheeks. He flops back on his blanket. “It’s gone.”

Paco lifts his head from the sand. “What’s that, man?”

Jack exhales, for what seems like eternity. “I dunno, but it’s gone.” He laughs at the moon, at the diamond blanket overhead, until a cold wind blows through his body. He hears himself groan. “I miss her.” A coyote sings in the distance and another takes up the call. The wind subsides, the moon waltzes across the sky, but the hollow in Jack’s body remains.

Red dawn, and Paco is shoving a cup of coffee into Jack’s hand. On the ride home, Paco wears his usual serene face, with no hint of the events of the night. For Jack, everything has changed—sharper-edged, and at the same time, mellow. Listless attempts to love his wife, his abandoned children, his hatred of the bosses, death of his parents in the Pandemic...*la cubana*.

Jack examines, without flinching, sins he has committed and those committed against him. He forgives himself and he forgives the others. Or it doesn’t matter. The diamond mantle will fall into the western horizon each night, the river will cut through the Valley, and the coyotes will sing, because they are alive. Earth is not empty space sprinkled with fire and ice. Battered she is, but she is a survivor. So is Jack.

A Flame

Len Krisak

You roll your eyes.
I call her name.

After the Game Show

Len Krisak

My consolation prizes are all gone
But one, which is a lamp that's sitting on
My desk—a turned-down bowl of glass hand-painted
Inside out, like pinchbeck Tiffany.
Trapped in its shade, two fritillaries flit
Forever, fixed by double lightbulbs lit
Like little suns. I have been one acquainted
With the light they cast to help me see
My way clear to what words I've left to write.
And I have stopped my scribbling now and then,
To walk the neighborhood even in rain,
And then to walk back, hangdog, home again,
To man my desk and jerk the cord in vain,
Despite this shade and its relentless light.

Phoenix

Jay Lee Ellis

Cutout cardboard mountains
the light washed up faint behind
from Mesa

Mesa lies no longer a mountain
Gorges water concrete mist the
supermarkets
of pensioners.

A red light flies below the single star
below the moon full dies
and love feels disappeared behind
the mountains scrim

Two tight lights high up against the
mountains curtain
below peaks of giant trembling

At my doggishness she loves me—
This time cleave life and tender the art
on hold.

(The ice melts I imagine before it strikes
the dry desert in the darkness
outside the balcony rings of light)

Life in this desert
even with these lights
dies not to move

What grows here never dies.

Lens in the Forest

John Davis

Bear can wear a mink coat
down the runway, jut her hips,
attitude intact in four-inch claws,
flick the coat over her shoulder
back and neck straight
stocky legs moving forward
paw in front of paw not parallel.
Bit of a myth that models sway hips
not bear whose hindquarters flair
a stride that struts, bending at the knee
the way horse would if horse were
taking longer strides, catwalking
like a model. Bear is wearing
the forest down her runway of twigs
and brush. Bit of a rush seeing bear
square to the camera in transparent
apparel—least that's the photo shoot
I shot in Alaska where bear's nose
never broke her cheek.

Pérdida

Millicent Eidson

Katie's freckled cheek is warm to my lips—then, her body convulses in a massive seizure that jerks her hand from mine. As an alarm blares, Dr. Monod pushes me into the corridor, and a team rushes in to save her. Hospital staff saunter by, chatting and snacking, as if my daughter's life doesn't matter. Electrical charges course through my limbs and I collapse against the wall. Then a flash of movement—Faye steps in front of me, her expression grim.

“The PFGE patterns for Katie's stool sample match with environmental and animal samples.”

Her gravelly voice echoes through a tunnel as my eyes fixate on the intensive care room, but a few of my brain cells kick in. “PFGE?”

“Pulse field gel electrophoresis. It means we're certain where she got it.”

The ICU door opens in a slow arc, and Dr. Monod's dark eyes are moist. His Haitian Creole accent is soothing, but the words are harsh. “I'm sorry, Marisol. We lost her. Earlier brain images showed damage, and we did our best. You can have a few minutes with her.”

My knees give way, but Faye stabilizes me. Wrapping an arm around my waist, she guides me inside. I lie down on the hospital bed and hear the door click as she leaves.

Tugging the white sheet away from Katie's small body, I summon memories of how she looked two weeks ago, before our world fell apart. Back then, in her cozy trundle bed close to mine, no dialysis tubes supported her kidneys, and no bandages wrapped her abdomen from an emergency appendectomy that found nothing. Her skin is cool, dark curls soft, and leaden eyes a crystal blue. Today should have been her first day of school. “Hija, how am I going to survive without you?”

§

Katie's finger follows the words as I read *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten*. "Ms. Campos, I have good news and bad news."

I drop the book to the hospital bed pillow at hearing the voice. The handsome young doctor rocks on his toes near the door of Katie's room at New York-Presbyterian Lower Manhattan Hospital. Dark, trim, and energetic, just the kind of guy I'd gone for in the past before confirming I didn't swing that way.

"And you are?"

"Sorry, Emmanuel Monod, infectious disease specialist." He extends his hand. "Katie doesn't have appendicitis, but we removed it just in case."

"You ripped her open for nothing." My tone is low and curt.

His enigmatic smile fades. "Given her extreme abdominal pain and low-grade fever, the surgeon felt it was critical to rule that out. However, we now have a diagnosis. She has HUS, hemolytic uremic syndrome, due to *Escherichia coli* O157:H7."

"What the heck is that?"

"*E. coli* is an enteric bacteria, usually transmitted through ingestion—swallowing. This strain is a bad one, and in some cases, can harm the kidneys. That's the reason for her rapid heart rate and shortness of breath."

So, the beep-beep of the monitor is too fast—it's not my own rampant imagination.

After moving to the opposite side of Katie's bed, he reaches for her face. She twists her head away and asks, "¿Mamá?"

"Está bien, angelita. The doctor needs another checkup. I'm right here."

"The paleness inside her lower eyelids is a sign of anemia—

red blood cells breaking down.” His fingers gently touch bruises on her arms and legs. “These are from blood clots.”

Blackness fogs my eyes and I brush long hair back from my neck as it heats up. “How will you treat it?”

“Intravenous fluids and a transfusion. Based on her kidney function, we may need to add dialysis.”

Katie probably doesn’t understand what we’re talking about, but her gaze darts between us and my eyes burn.

“Dialysis—you mean like old people waiting for kidney transplants?”

He turns for the door. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. While we work this out, a veterinarian from the city health department wants to consult with you.”

I lift Katie’s hand and kiss it. “Mamá will be right back.” The nurse nods, and I follow Dr. Monod into the hall.

A tiny, sturdy woman with gray-streaked red hair stands to shake my hand. “Ms. Campos? Faye Simpson. As the city’s Public Health Veterinarian, I’m here to find out how Katie caught her infection.”

Monod disappears, and I sink to the chair. “Not sure what I can tell you. I’m not sick, and I haven’t heard anything from our friends. She hasn’t been in daycare this summer because I’m an actress between jobs.”

“Some coliform bacteria are normal flora in the human and animal intestines, not causing any problems—probably helpful for digestion. But others like Katie’s strain are nasty. They’re shed by animals and picked up through food and water, or direct animal contact. Can I run through my questionnaire with you?”

§

Diarrhea odor wafts forward as I hit the Honda’s ignition button to head out for a final excursion at Coney Island before

the excitement of kindergarten next week, right after Labor Day. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I spot tears streaming down Katie's face. After turning off the car, I leap out and yank her from the backseat booster. We rush into the bathroom of our Brooklyn brownstone. She's so weak I hold her up, and blood glistens in the toilet bowl behind her bare bottom.

My arm snakes the iPhone from my purse without letting Katie go. Her pediatrician says to bring her right in. I spread a towel on the cold tile floor and lay Katie down. An unused toddler diaper from a bottom cabinet and clean clothes—she's ready for my frantic rush to the clinic. My mind obsesses as I navigate the jammed-up streets. Food poisoning? Something from the cat? Did she eat a toxic plant in our back yard? Maybe all she needs is antibiotics.

§

A bracing breeze ruffles the white lace curtains, countering humid heat of the mid-August day, and the corner taqueria wafts a toasty aroma.

“Mamá, play *Coco*. What color is Dante's nose?”

After adjusting the white bows at the end of her two dark braids, I turn on Disney+ to rerun the movie for the tenth time this month. These last few weeks of uninterrupted time with Katie are magical, but once she's in school, I can audition for a new musical and find another lunch-time waitressing job. Money's tight, but we get by.

“Mamá, where's pink?” Her eyes dart between the TV screen and the ugly dog's outline I printed from Disney's website. She takes her time coloring between the lines of his dangling tongue. So careful, unlike me.

Coco's her favorite film, probably because of my Mexican heritage and frequent visits to mi familia in Tucson for holidays, including El Día de los Muertos at Halloween. The animated animal movies like *The Lion King* and *The Aristocats* are other

favorites—that’s what led to Gatito, our own cuddly tabby who cruises our legs at the kitchen table. After the art project is finished, we head to the closest county fair in New Jersey.

A musty stench tickles my nose. The petting zoo is at the edge of a large open barn door, close to the indoor pens with 4H animals. Kids groom their cows, sheep, and bunnies as families stroll by, fingers stuck in cages despite the signs. A piercing peep alerts my attention to the caged Chinese Golden Pheasant with red body, yellow legs, head, and back, blue wings, and black and white striped tail twice the length of its body.

The bird’s beauty contrasts with the pervasive smell. Staff are cleaning, using shovels to pick up poop, rakes to adjust hay bedding, and hoses to wash away urine. But they’re not keeping up enough to suit my senses, especially in the metal pen with the baby goats.

“Ex-CUSE me.” Katie bumps me with all forty pounds when shoving through the swinging gate.

I lean over the fence and yell “Watch out!” when a goat’s head is about to butt her from behind. Makes me nervous to leave her in there alone—when an animal lifts up to put front feet on her shoulders, she giggles. We’re here for fun—I can’t let my mom anxiety bleed through to her joyful experience.

Then my stomach grumbles and scorching sun absorbs through my thick hair—should have worn a hat. She’s been romping for an hour—how could anyone love animals that much?

“Querida, let’s eat lunch soon.”

She removes her hands from a baby goat long enough to fold arms in front of her chest, stamp her feet, and turn her lips down in a grimace. “I’m not hungry.” She gets her dramatic bent from me, and a disciplinarian I’m not.

Too cute in her flowered blouse, green shorts, and flip-flops. I give her fifteen more minutes to chase the animals around the ring,

screaming and laughing, with hugs for each one and affectionate tugs on their ears. When she pulls a tail, I can tell she's tired and out of control. A sign next to the exit advises handwashing. She scrapes her goat-poop shoes against the lower wooden rail and wipes dirty fingers on her shorts. At the nearest faucet, they're out of soap, and she races off for cotton candy.

§

At the birthing center, my pink little creature screams from the bassinet and the nurse nests her in my arms. With minimal encouragement, she latches and nurses with vigor—I'm overwhelmed with my power to satisfy her. This will be a piece of cake. The delivery last night was tough but I was so focused on the outcome, I forgot the pain within hours.

None of my family members are here, since they disowned me when I came out as a lesbian. The Big Apple corrupted me—being gay isn't acceptable for Catholic Hispanics. When they meet this beautiful doll, they'll change their minds. The first grandchild is momentous. She has a full head of hair, unlike an Anglo baby, and her skin smells like heaven. Her eyes are a sparkling blue, not from my side of the family. The color could darken, but they're a sharp reminder of her father.

He's a struggling thespian, too. We had a rowdy night to celebrate my hire for the *Hamilton* ensemble cast, but it confirmed what I already knew—guys don't float my boat. After several months, the weight gain wasn't compatible with the athletic singing and dancing, so I lost the job and never told him about the pregnancy.

This bebé is my everything, and my only thing. Probably won't have another with my age and no relationship. Who's interested in a confused, financially unstable single mom, anyways?

I call my mother from the bedside. The wonderful lilt of her slight Spanish accent lifts me when she answers. “¿Bueno?”

She blocked my cell, but the hospital number fooled her. Will she hang up when hearing my voice?

“¿Mamacita?”

Long silence, which I rapidly fill. “It’s a girl, Mamá. She’s named after you, Catalina. It’s good luck to be a namesake for a Catholic saint.”

Still no response, but she doesn’t disconnect.

“Represents purity—you taught me that was important. Can you help me make it so?”

The line finally clicks. So, it’s me and Katie, alone, against the world. Motherhood is God’s greatest gift and woman’s highest purpose—that’s what the priests told me. One thing on which we can agree.

Upward

Diane Webster

Grove of trees bundles
together into one trunk
and spirals upward
like Jack's beanstalk.

Formidable in unity
of entwined single-minded
growth it rings from dirt
and confronts wind.

Branches gyrate
like 10-year-old girls
in made-up dances,
but trunk endures
its stance as one.

You. Froze. Me. Solid.

Sophia Vesely

Your hands around my waist, cold icicle fingers leaked remnants of sleet down my skirt. But that's okay, i chose to be the roof in winter and bear the weight of your solid frost. You were so cold to the touch, yet i thought i could feel the ice between us melting when your warm breath was on my neck, that maybe i would no longer be your timeworn ice box. But i should have known that breath always turns into words. You found what dripped wet, everything that slipped through my fingers, everything i couldn't hold into one, but had managed to keep warm enough on my own. You gave me more icicles when you know i need round edges. i tried to lick what was mine, to taste what i had before

You

Froze

Me

Solid,

but my tongue got stuck to what i couldn't recognize. So, you played in my throat, built snowmen of my words so icy numb they couldn't thaw into sentences, choked me till you held all the frozen oxygen in the palm of your hand and rationed it into bite-size snow-

bullets. Now i still can't remember how to breathe on my own.

Even after I took the axe to your ice block.

Upchuck

Sophia Vesely

You messed me up so good,
 I want to puke so hard.
 My stomach churns,
 beats its greasy fists against the mucosa
 chanting for an opportunity
 to spew acid,
 to spit biled blood
 that curdles
 and stays smelling on clothes weeks later
 like your cologne of a dog's shit
 that you call *musk*.

And ohhh, I almost have it too.
 I get so damn close
 to upchucking your memory
 that my whole abdomen feels like
 a rusting tilt-a-world,
 yesterday's tuna fish, last night's lo mein,
 and peanut butter
 have their eyes rolled in the backs of their heads
 and make a frittata with this morning's scrambled eggs.
 I'd kiss that nausea right on the lips
 if only it'd last.

But then you always pop around
 or, *for the love of God*,
 star in my nightmares,
 and my stomach has to relent.
 It becomes too preoccupied reaching up on its tiptoes
 with the acid cloth
 to gag a screaming heart.

Words

Sophia Vesely

You were never good with words.

I broke your honor with honest syllables,
so you demanded a pistol duel.

At dawn
while the moon
and our dear stars
receded as molten mumbles
into the fiery crevices.

On the cobblestones
where the black crows,
a family of six,
pecked at discarded seeds
for breakfast.

We agreed upon ten paces,
enough for you to realize that
love *is* honor.

But when I raised my gun to the sky,
yours fired into my gut.

I kneeled to the ground,
caressed the hole you left in me,
let the blood drip off my fingertips.

I traced *I love you* on the stones
in a red ink that still
pulsed.

Border Incident

Mark Mellon

It was already hot that mid-July morning when Juan Cortina rode up on his big, bay stallion. Flaco sat in a live oak's shade while he braided a new lariat from long, narrow rawhide strips. Cortina wore a fine, gray felt sombrero. He'd put his fancy charro saddle on the horse, black leather with silver and turquoise inlays, with a matching bridle. A large pistol gleamed in the holster on his right hip, a Remington 1858 Army Model.

"*Soy yendo a Brownsville*, I'm going to Brownsville, Flaco. Tell my mother I'll be back before supper."

Flaco sighed. He stopped braiding and looked up at Cortina. "Cheno, why look for trouble? You know the Anglos have a warrant to arrest you. Who will stop them if you ride in alone?"

Easy in the saddle, Cortina gently shrugged. "They won't try with my friends there."

Flaco set down the half-braided lariat. "Wait. I'll saddle my horse and get my pistol."

Cortina shook his head. The restive stallion shuffled sideways, eager to be off. "Watch the herd instead. Ride out and see if the *muchachos* are keeping an eye out for rustlers. You can never trust Anglos, especially that son of a whore Glavecke."

Cortina mangled the foreign name with a strangled hiss of contempt. Flaco grinned, but then resumed his serious face.

"You still haven't said why you're going to Brownsville."

"Because I like Gabriel's coffee."

Cortina clucked at the stallion, tapped his flanks with high heeled boots. The big horse eagerly trotted forward, slipped effortlessly into a ground devouring lope, and Cortina was gone.

Flaco could only shake his head as the mounted figure swiftly receded from sight.

The trail to Brownsville from the Rancho Del Carmen hugged the Rio Grande's sinuously looping left bank. Cortina rode alongside the wide, green-brown river, fringed by tall palms. The sun was hot on his back, a powerful, but familiar presence, the same strong heat he'd known all his life.

After he'd covered four miles at a lope, he let his horse walk. Despite the heat, the air was full of birdsong and teemed with blue, red, and orange butterflies, drawn by the river, the lazily flowing artery that kept the region alive. A bright green jay chirped from a cattail grove. Beneath the bird, long snouted javelinas rooted out grubs with their curved tusks.

Cortina rode by a resaca, an oxbow loop recently cut off from the river by a sudden storm, the remaining water turned swampy and fetid. His keen eyes saw a mottled feline form carefully pick her way through dense canes in search of prey, almost perfectly blended in with the thick brush, a rare spotted ocelot.

The horse rested, Cortina set the stallion to a swift trot. He was strong, with marvelous endurance, and loved to run. Cortina liked to give the horse his head, let him course along the uneven trail, his troubles momentarily forgotten in the thrill of ceaseless, rapid motion.

The sun was near zenith when Cortina reached Brownsville. Hot and humid, a sinkhole for disease, ravaged by cholera, Brownsville still flourished as a river port, a bustling center of commerce, even a thriving metropolis by South Texas standards, some two thousand, mostly Tejano souls in a town consisting of the steamboat dock, the transport company warehouse beside it, and a few grand buildings, churches and a courthouse, surrounded by wooden homes, most no more than shacks.

The trail broadened and leveled out until it resembled a road, although unpaved and heavily rutted by wagons wheels'

ceaseless passage. Cortina rode down dung-strewn, fly-ridden Elizabeth Street, past two-wheeled buggies and heavy freight wagons headed toward the market square. Usually impassive as they went about their day's business, Tejanos brightened at the sight of him. Men doffed sombreros; women smiled and waved. Cortina courteously greeted them in turn.

Anglos reacted differently. Upright, sweaty, and miserable in broad brimmed hats, boiled and starched linen shirts, and dark broadcloth suits, they perched on round-bottomed wooden chairs under front porches' shade while they resentfully muttered among themselves and shot hateful glances at Cortina as he passed by, mouths stuffed with wads of chaw.

"Can't believe Cortina's got the sand to show his face here. Where the hell is Shears to serve that warrant when he's needed?"

"As if Shears would even try. If I was heeled right now, I'd shoot that Mexican right off his saddle."

"Speak louder, Bastrop. I don't believe he heard you."

"A HAW HAW HAW HAW!"

There were loud brays of derisive laughter. A mustachioed Anglo in a canted plug hat turned red faced. Cortina ignored them and rode on. When he reached the market square, Cortina carefully rode past the stalls and shoppers gathered to purchase that day's meal. He dismounted and tethered the stallion's reins to a cast iron hitching post outside Gabriel Castel's cantina.

Inside, a boy swept the punchboard wooden floor with a palm frond broom. Castel greeted Cortina with a deep bow and a flash of gold teeth.

"Ah, *buenas tardes*, good afternoon, Cheno. Your friends await you."

Two men sat nearby, plainly Tejanos although dressed in the Anglo manner in tight fitting suits and plug hats. They waved

for Cortina to join them. He smiled thanks at Castel and sat at their table. Cortina removed his sombrero. The older man poured coffee for Cortina into a chipped china cup. Cortina added a generous spoonful of blackstrap molasses, stirred his coffee thoroughly, and drank it appreciatively.

“Castel roasts and grinds the coffee beans exactly.”

“Just as you say, Don Jorge. Now what of my legal affairs?”

“Let my junior colleague Rodrigo speak. He’s much better versed on the details.”

Cortina nodded and drank more coffee. He picked up a fresh baked roll from a wicker basket and dipped it into his cup. Bright eyed and fresh, Rodrigo edged forward on his seat, eager to report.

“Don Juan, as you know, I can’t represent you since the local bar won’t admit me, but I can still watch the court sessions. More importantly, some of the Anglo lawyers speak to me about your matter.”

“The same ones that robbed my mother of her land?”

Jorge and Rodrigo both vigorously shook their heads. “No, not those men, Don Juan. These are men who are close to the grand jury.”

“Business associates,” Jorge said.

“They talk about a deal, Don Juan. Nothing concrete, they’re too much the lawyers to speak plainly, but they mention five thousand in American gold or Mexican silver.”

Cortina snorted. “That’s what they want to make this go away?”

Rodrigo nodded. “That or a thousand steers in prime condition, with no questions asked where they came from.”

“*No sirve*. It won’t do. How much do they want from Glavecke to let his charges go? Let the Anglos give back Brownsville

instead, this land they stole from my mother. Then we'll forget about the warrant."

"Now, Don Juan, we must be reasonable. If the county judge has you arrested and tried like he threatens to do, you might well end up hanged by the Anglos."

"They'd never find a jury that would convict me, not in South Texas. Tell them to come up with a better offer than--"

"GODDAMN YOU, YOU PELADO SON OF A BITCH!"

The deep, whiskey roughened roar drowned out all conversation in the cantina. Everyone instantly focused on the disturbance outside. An Anglo bellowed threats and curses, interspersed with occasional inaudible responses from a Tejano, his voice quaverous with age. Cortina finished his coffee, donned his hat, and stood up.

"I'd better see what this is about. Good day, gentlemen."

Cortina walked outside. By the Cometa dry goods store at the market's other end, an Anglo and a Tejano struggled back and forth. The Anglo was Deputy Marshal Roger Shears, a wad of chaw in his left cheek, a dusty, black derby hat tilted back on his head, and a Walker Colt tucked into his waistband. The Tejano was elderly, his scant hair white, plainly the worse for drink.

"*Deja me solo*, leave me alone," he cried as he tried to break free. "I wasn't bothering anybody. Let me go."

"I'm tired of you damn, dirty, drunk Tejanos hanging around the market, thieving things off decent folks. Reckon you stole cattle too. Anyway, you're under arrest, so just come along."

"No, *Señor*."

"You insolent son of a bitch."

Shears yanked his pistol free. He slammed the barrel down on the old man's head. The Tejano groaned. He slumped down

only to be roughly yanked to his feet by Shears, a raw, red gash on his forehead. Anglos on their porches laughed to see the fun. Tejanos could only hang their heads in shame. Shears dragged the old man away from the market, toward the courthouse on Tenth and Levee Streets.

Cortina undid the reins from the hitching post. He swung into the saddle with his usual easy grace and urged the bay into a trot. Cortina swiftly caught up with Shears and his prisoner. He turned his horse and halted, blocking the way with the animal's bulk.

Shears grew even more red faced than usual. "Damn you, Cortina, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Cortina leaned low from his saddle. He fixed Shears with his dark, serious eyes. "Why are you hurting this man?" he said in English. "I know him. He's Tomas Cabrera, a vaquero on my mother's ranch."

Shears' weathered face contorted into a sneer, a one-eyed, scornful squint. He spat brown tobacco juice at Cortina.

"This man's my prisoner and I'm taking him to the courthouse. What's it to you, you damned Mexican?"

The stallion took a pace forward. He bumped into Shears, jarring him back.

"What? Push a peace officer-"

Shears pulled the Walker Colt from his waistband, cocked the hammer, and fired off a round. The .44 caliber lead ball bounced harmlessly off the saddle's horn, just another example of the extraordinary luck against shot and shell that followed Cortina all through his long, dangerous, conflict-ridden career.

Cortina wheeled the bay around. He pulled his pistol free from the holster and cocked the hammer as the horse turned.

BDDDAAMMMM

The first shot passed an inch over Shears' derby hat. Cortina cocked the hammer again and fired.

BDDDAAAMMMM

The second bullet hit Shears in the left shoulder.

The heavy .44 caliber slug shattered the joint into gory, mangled flesh and bits of bone. Shears moaned and clutched at his ruined shoulder with his right arm. He fell and lay motionless in the dirt street. Cabrera gazed in drunken, open mouthed wonder at his Anglo tormentor, brought low by his *patron*, Don Juan Cortina, Cheno.

There was complete silence in Brownsville. So smug and sure just moments before, Anglos nervously eyed the Tejanos all around them and slipped their hands to their sixguns. Even the all-important business of money grubbing was momentarily stilled by the awful event that had just occurred, a direct assault on the Anglos' system of order and control, the web of law, institutions, and violence they'd constructed with so much time, money, and effort to ensure things were run their way in the lower Rio Grande valley.

Cortina holstered his pistol. He reached down with his open right hand. "Mount up behind me, Tomas. I'll take you to Matamoros where you'll be safe."

Cabrera wiped the blood from his forehead. He shook his head and pulled himself together like the tough old vaquero he was. Cabrera grinned.

"*Por seguro, patron*. For sure, boss."

Cabrera pulled on the saddle with his left hand while Cortina hoisted him up with easy strength. The old man wrapped his arms around Cortina's waist and tightly clenched the horse's flanks. Cortina urged the horse into a trot. Tejanos gathered to watch him ride off. They lined up along the street, ordinary vaqueros and

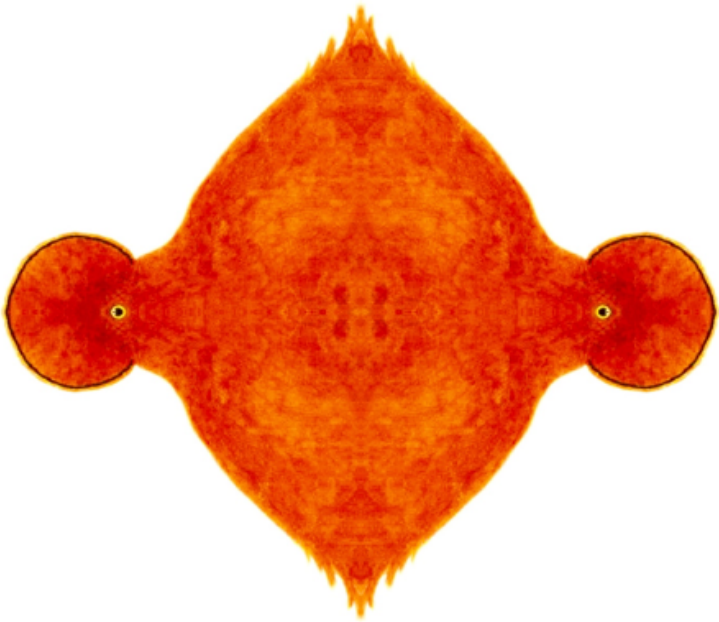
their women in rebozos, smiling and proud for once. Cries went up, loud cheers of approbation mixed with applause.

“*Viva* Cheno. Long live Cheno. He’s not afraid to fight the Anglos. He’s not afraid of anyone. Hooray for Cheno!”

Greatly outnumbered as they were, no Anglo dared say otherwise. They could only sit and watch as Juan Cortina rode off, sure to return and make more trouble for them, determined to fight for himself and his people as long as strength and cunning remained in his body.

The Bridge of Mirrors

Bill Wolak



The Lingering Weightlessness of a Dream

Bill Wolak



The Burning Tree

Sara Kinard

Why was the tree burning?

It was the woman who threw the lit match of course, but why was the tree burning?

Why did the woman take her time to light one match, then have the patience to light another after the first went out from a gust of wind?

Was it the location of the tree? It was sat in a heavily populated area and there was talk of taking it down to make room for more houses for a while.

Was it the carvings that were engraved into the bark of the tree? The offensive words and initials surrounded by hearts. But those relationships never last, the letters never stay together for long.

Or was it the rope that was tied to the thickest branch? It was tied on so tight that the branch was indented from the rope and the weight that once hung from it.

Why was the tree burning?

The smoke in the air did not seem to bother the woman as she stood so close to the flames.

The heat made her cheeks red, arms and legs hot.

Her eyes watered causing her to blink rapidly.

Her mouth became dry quickly as she watched the flames dance around the tree with her mouth agape.

Instead of feeling guilty, ashamed, or even embarrassed by her violent actions, the woman was proud, happy, and excited.

A smile grew on her face. A smile so big that her eyes wrinkled, and her dimples sunk into her cheeks deeper than they ever have before.

Her teary eyes were wide with wonder, refusing to blink or look away from the colorful dance that moved before her.

The different shades of red, orange, yellow, and blue painted a beautiful picture in her eyes.

Her legs felt weak, and she allowed her knees to bend and, soon after, sink into the dirt.

Her arms were limp by her sides, and her shoulders were far from her ears.

Her back was hunched over, but her head was held up high so she could continue to look at the tree.

She let out a rough cough before sitting up and throwing her arms up and into a T-pose.

She let out three heavy breaths before letting out the loudest, most joy-filled laugh of her life.

The laugh was deep in her chest and made her whole body bounce.

Her smile never lowered, and her laughs only seemed to get louder the longer the tree burned.

Why was the tree burning?

Was it an impulsive decision on her part?

Was she possibly drunk or on another kind of substance that juggles your morals around?

Why bring this much attention to herself when there's already rumors being spread around town about her and her values?

The woman stopped laughing and let out another rough cough as more smoke entered her lungs from her joy.

She brought both her hands up to cover her mouth and hunched over again.

In her ball like position, she was able to catch her breath and think to herself, *why did I burn the tree?*

She lifted her head to look at the tree, and the corners of her mouth grew up once again.

That's why.

In the middle of the bright flames a black figure could be seen.

It was tall, had no face, but was a welcoming presence to her.

The black figure looked down at the woman and slowly held out a hand to her, silencing asking to join him in the middle of the dancing flames.

The figure's hand looked like it was made of the same smoke that filled her lungs.

It was a dark ashy color and looked rather scary as smoke flowed off of it the longer it was held out.

The woman let out another hearty laugh, a shorter one this time, before standing up on wobbly legs.

Why is the tree burning?

The woman lifted her right hand and gently set it in the black figures, holding on tight.

The figures hand felt hot but comfortable. Familiar.

The figure gave the woman a single nod before pulling her hand closer to the flames as he backed away.

The figure turned and continued to walk deeper and deeper into the flames, slowly taking the woman with him.

She tensed, expecting a burn so hot that her skin would immediately blister as she walked straight into the heart of the burning tree.

Except, she was met with that same comfortable feeling as before. Hot but comfortable.

The flames that moved gracefully around the tree seemed to welcome her like an old friend.

The figure pulled her farther and farther into the burning tree and finally,

She was home.

Inside of the burning tree.

Why Do You Seek the Validation of Strangers?

Dr. Billy Alsbrooks

Why do you seek the validation of strangers?

Don't chase the world, burn it.

Unwrap the gift of fire inside you and blaze the world with it

I can read your mind through these prophetic lines

You don't feel that you're worthy of love, do you?

Those who seek approval, become a slave to applause

The God in you is tired of bowing to the mortals that you worship

Your genius is misunderstood, as it should be

Do finite minds speak the language of the eternal?

You've just been looking through the wrong set of Warby Parker glasses

Climb Mount Tabor and imagine the world from there

Accept the beauty of your own reflection

Stare deep into the heaven within, until you see the throne that you sit on

All this time you've been sitting in the theatre thinking this is someone else's movie

Unaware that you're the Spielberg of this film

Who was the master that Emily Dickerson wrote to?

What rhythm will your awakened soul dance to?

Don't chase the world Steven, burn it.

Painting Your Soul

Dr. Billy Alsbrooks

Does it make you uneasy, to be in love with someone so disturbing?

Has your lust diminished, or can I still enjoy your immoral blanket?

How damp does the garden get, when I tease your mind with looks of punishment?

Are you still addicted to my sadistic ways, or have you returned to the dead beds of your past?

What makes your spirit calm, like the peace of my aggression?

Where is the bottom of heaven, your forbidden amazon of ecstasy?

Why do you melt, in the scorching heat of my cold?

How deep is your love, for the one who paints your soul?

Where does the rose grow, when watered with your suffering?

What makes you think you can hide from the one who raised you?

How bad do your eyes seek to inhale my pleasure?

Does drinking my release, nourish your famished veins?

Do you think you're invisible, behind that façade you wear?

Where o' where my precious one, can we get lost on Egyptian Clouds?

Why do you sweat in the passion of my cold?

How deep is your love for the one who paints your soul?

Confront the Whispers

Dr. Billy Alsbrooks

What truth in your life do you have the hardest time confronting?
Those perverted whispers won't go away
They'll just keep getting louder and louder, until they crescendo into tyranny
Whether we acknowledge it or not, what we hide in the closet still exists
Avoidance turns the shadows into the boogie man
Our mouths too afraid to tell the emperor the truth
Cowardice, his nakedness symbolic for the things we won't address
We were only designed to die once
So why do we insist on murdering ourselves daily
Better to destroy the peace, than suffocate in silence
Stare down the harlequins that occupy the inner room
Expose the inner roaches that spread insecurity
Let the symphony of your heart illuminate the hidden
Listen to the wisdom in her melody, as it unties the knot of your soul
You must respond to the voices, or they will seek to take over
Appeasement only multiplies in the darkness
What bones have you buried in your backyard?
I hear that Home Depot has a sale on shovels
Don't let the rain clouds deter you from doing what you must do
Sooner or later, these Covid masks must come off
That stranger lying next to you every night is you
Maybe it's time that you two get acquainted
What truth in your life do you have the hardest time confronting?

Destructive Appetites

Dr. Billy Alsbrooks

Slaves of the sun, shine until living is done
You can either look up at the stars, or you can become one
Rose and guns, feeding destructive appetites
Twisted fun that always gets out of hand
Filthy hands, molesting poetic doors
The ghost of Jim Morrison's riders on the storm
Mexico warm, being chased by Selena's sisters
Horse whistles, cactus zombies dodging my pistols
Romantic Rambo, at war with the queen of hearts
Bigger than the hole that Courtney put in Kurt's heart
Lonely riverwalks, courted by the choir of the Alamo
Michelangelo, setting David's angel free
Adam's tree, we indulge in warm apple pie
As we lie with strangers, our innocence dies
Desperate housewives, having affairs with married men
Two faced friends, plastic dolls with fake grins
Destructive Appetites...

The Ghost House

Mike Matthews

Was it so wrong to be ambitious in high school when I aspired to be a novelist? All four years I took extra classes, lettered in varsity sports, and even worked on the school newspaper and literary magazine. I dreamed of living an exciting life I could share with the world someday. After I graduated from college, of course. But first I had to get accepted, and somewhere fast.

Late one Saturday morning my senior year, I woke up to the sound of the mailbox clanking shut outside my bedroom window. As I made my way down the newly carpeted stairs, I braced myself for the Midwestern winter and its bitter cold bite that would intrude the warmth of my pajamas and robe. Grabbing the mail as fast as I could, I slammed the door shut allowing an inch of snow to fall upon my bare toes, instantly regretting my decision not to wear slippers.

I sat in our 1985 kitchen, gazing at the outdated wallpaper that was undeniably a homage to the Partridge Family tour bus. With a Santa Claus coffee cup in one hand, I began sorting the mail with the other, carefully separating the Christmas cards from the bills until I came across a letter addressed to me.

It was a stark white envelope with a majestic purple seal pressed in the corner, Western Illinois University. My heart stopped for an agonizing moment, cringing at the thought of yet another college rejection letter. I simply prepared to toss it aside hoping to delay the disappointment for a few moments longer, until I sensed how thick it was between my fingers. So, I quickly took a butter knife to its edge and opened it up:

Dear Student:

We would like to congratulate you on your admission to the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences as an English major for the upcoming academic year...

I smiled. Yes! I was in. Three months later, my best friend received his Christmas present from Western Illinois University, and three months after that we graduated from high school. The summer came and went so fast neither Ken nor I cared about the five hour drive it took to get there.

Ah, the freshman life: pizza, Pepsi, pizza, Pepsi, pizza, Pepsi. Ken and I pledged a fraternity our first semester, Phi Kappa Theta. Ah, the pledge life: pizza, beer, pizza, beer, pizza, beer. We suffered over the next two months until surviving the sacred and secret rituals of hell week, finally becoming active members of our house. Ah, the Greek life: babes, beer, babes, beer, babes, beer.

Now you may be asking yourself, *“What about classes?”*

Well, a week after the semester ended for Christmas break, my grades arrived. As usual, I was the only one home when the mail came, so I got out of bed, got myself a cup of coffee, and got wind of my .45 GPA. Academic probation.

You see, unbeknownst to me, things had deteriorated between my parents while I was away. They got a divorce, and I got scared. I was too afraid to tell them how poorly I had done, as would any nineteen-year-old who could now shotgun a can of beer under five seconds. Once my parents said they decided to sell the house, I was given the option to live with either my mother or father, provided I got a job, and took some responsibility for my life.

But responsibility is a big word when you're all alone, and I felt so alone. Then, I thought of all my new friends returning to campus, and I knew that is where I should be.

I went back to campus after the break, never letting my parents know of my grades and never registering for spring classes. That meant I could no longer live in the dorms, and that is how I found myself now homeless. Turning to my fraternity brothers for guidance, I was told Brother John-boy was not returning, and I could rent his room for a mere \$250 for the entire

spring semester. Which I eagerly did, regardless of the rumors his room was haunted, and that is how I ended up living in the basement of 530 West Pierce in 1987.

Now, I could tell you about the night I woke in bed, petrified, unable to move, or cry out for help, as two eyes continued to float above my trembling body. But you wouldn't believe me.

Or when I finally felt safe, how I sat up in a puddle of my own piss, and reached out, as those perfectly round and clear eyes faded away between my fingers. But you would just smile politely.

Even if I told you when I ran upstairs to wake my roommates, how I came to a dead stop in the kitchen, as I felt a hand as cold as ice first run across the back of my neck, then over my right ear to the tip of my temple, and down my right cheek, finally circling my quivering lips, seasoned in the saltiness of invisible blood. But you would just dismiss it as a drunkard's vivid dream.

So please understand my hesitancy in telling you, how the only person to believe me about my encounter, was a graduate student I met at one of the many weekend parties my roommates and I threw, and how she and I sat alone in the kitchen, drinking beer; her words indescribably intoxicating as she told the story of Leslie Pontifact.

"So, you believe me?" I asked, then emptied the pitcher of beer filling her bright red cup.

"I know what I know," she said, then slowly took a long sip, and smiled before she licked the foam from her pencil thin lips.

"Tell me what you know," I surrendered myself.

"Leslie Pontifact was an ambitious teenager. Creative, bright, aspiring to be a great writer, she dreamed of attending Oxford."

"Why Oxford?"

"She lived on the south side of the Commons in London, an area covered with building rubble destroyed during the Blitzkrieg,"

she paused, taking another sip, which meant another lick of her lips, then continued. “Leslie Pontifact stood in those streets one night, V-1 bombs flying overhead as they did in 1944, crying as she looked over the debris, knowing her parents did not make it out in time.”

“Christ.” I shook my head, “What did she do?”

“Leslie moved to the United States to live with her Aunt Rose in Galesburg, Illinois. She went to high school as the girl with no parents, and as the girl with no friends. During her senior year, she went to her mailbox and found a stark white envelope addressed to her with a majestic purple seal pressed in the corner, and she smiled for the first time since leaving London.”

“What did it say?” I inquired, feeling eerily involved.

“Dear Student: We would like to congratulate you on your admission to the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences as an English major for the upcoming academic year...” she paused again as my eyes widened in disbelief.

“I got the same form letter,” I confessed.

“As did I,” she affirmed, taking another drink, then continued, “When the time came, Leslie Pontifact arrived on campus to begin her life as a freshman. But things being as they were in those days, her dorm room assignment was lost, and Leslie was left homeless.”

“I can relate,” I interjected.

She just smiled with a ghoulish grin and continued. “Now this was during a time when schools were concerned about their students and they promised to pay for her accommodations, provided she found off-campus housing. As she came out of the student union and looked beyond the fresh green grass of the lacrosse field, she saw a house surrounded by a beautiful yard.”

“This house, right!?” I exclaimed.

“Yes. Leslie Pontifact walked onward, over the field and up the hill until she came upon the house. There in the front yard of 530 West Pierce was a For Rent sign, and she smiled. She went to the student union, called the owner and met him that afternoon.”

“And she rented it, right?” I rudely interjected.

“The house was perfect. It had two bedrooms, a large kitchen, dining room, living room, a study in the attic, and a full basement for storage,” she paused, taking another sip, then licked her lips.

“No kidding,” I replied, knowing every detail of the house in which I now lived. “Tell me something I don’t know,” I said in a poor attempt at humor.

“The owner explained it was his best property and he had been surprised no one had rented it yet. It was as if the house was waiting for Leslie Pontifact.”

“Ok, now you’re just trying to freak me out, right?” I said with a slight quiver in my voice.

“After she explained about the housing mistake and how the school would pay her rent, the man agreed provided he could still rent out the other bedroom if anyone else inquired. Leslie welcomed the chance to have a roommate, so she agreed.” She paused, took another sip, then added, “But no one ever came to live in the other room, and Leslie began to feel bored, alone, depressed. The more depressed she became, the less she studied, and the less she studied, the lower her grades dropped.”

I motioned for one of my roommates to bring over another pitcher of beer, which he did, filling both our cups, then went about his own sexual conquests. “You were saying,” I egged her on.

“A day before the start of her midterm exams, Leslie went for a walk in her neighborhood and stumbled upon a garage sale. There was a kindly old man selling all sorts of goods, but Leslie was taken by a dartboard leaning against a box full of books.”

“You mean?” I asked peering up over her head at the dartboard hanging in the next room.

“She paid the old man his five cents and went on her way when he cried out, ‘*Young lady, you forgot the darts!*’ Leslie turned to face him as he carefully threw them one at a time, *thhht, thhht, thhht*, landing perfectly in the dartboard she continued to hold in front of her chest. They both smiled, then she headed back home where she hammered a nail into the wall and hung the dartboard.”

“She liked to play darts?” I asked as if trying to get the details on a girl I would ask out.

“Leslie stepped back eight feet and began to throw the darts, *thhht, thhht, thhht*. She played all day until her elbow grew sore and her stomach grew empty,” she paused taking another sip and licked her lips as I chugged my entire cup. “After dinner, she began to play cricket, which was her favorite game her father taught her to play in the London pubs. Now, cricket is an especially hard game to master, because you must hit certain numbers before your opponent—”

“I know! I love playing cricket,” I confessed as she just grinned with approval. “Go on.”

“Since Leslie Pontifact had no opponent to play, she continued to play against herself all that week...all that midterm week. As she continued to hit triple twenties and bull’s eyes, her blue book exams went untouched, and there was little hope to save her grades.”

“Been there, done that,” I let slip from my lips.

“When the semester ended, so did campus life. The student body went back to their homes and families for the holiday, but not Leslie. Even when Aunt Rose invited her for Christmas, she wrote back how she promised friends she would take care of their pets.”

“Well, that was nice of her.”

“But there were no pets, for there were no friends.”

“Oh.” I chugged my cup dry.

“So, Leslie Pontifact continued to play darts all day and night, *thhht, thhht, thhht*. Walking eight feet forward, then eight feet back, *thhht, thhht, thhht*. Keeping score in her head, for by now she was exceptionally good at keeping score, *thhht, thhht, thhht*.”

“Christ, the way you make that dart sound with your lips—”

“Just by chance, Leslie met the mail carrier at the door one day and struck up a conversation. It was very unlike Leslie Pontifact to do such a thing, but she did and for three minutes or so, she had contact with another person, and of all things, a man. He did not mind talking to her for she was incredibly beautiful, and as she stood in her doorway, he could not forget her eyes.”

“Why?” I asked without thinking.

“They were perfectly round and clear, but more than that was the fact that one was blue, and the other gray.”

“That’s what I saw in my bedroom! That’s what I was telling you about!” I yelled.

“With mail in hand, Leslie went to the kitchen, poured herself a cup of coffee and took a butter knife to the stark white envelope and its majestic seal. Academic probation. She cried over her coffee until it became as cold as the ice hanging from the gutters outside.”

“Form letters have been around longer than I thought.”

“She walked over to the dartboard, wishing that if only it were alive, she would kill it. She pulled the darts out, took eight steps back and threw the first dart, *thhht*. Bull’s eye.”

I sat silent, intoxicated by her words and the beer I continued to consume. She continued after taking a sip and licking her lips.

“She threw the second dart, *thhht*. Bull’s eye.”

My heart began to race with a hat-trick of excitement.

“Leslie stopped crying for a moment and began to concentrate. She took careful aim and threw the last dart, and it hit, bull’s eye, then fell to the ground. She stood there, silent, alone, depressed.”

I shook my head, my stomach turning over again and again.

“A week later, the same mailman arrived with a package from Aunt Rose. Hoping for the chance to speak with the young lady who continued haunting his mind, he knocked until he decided to check around back, hoping to leave the package inside and safe from the elements,” she said, holding up her empty cup.

I quickly refilled it as I looked into the darkness behind me on that very same back porch and shivered.

“Do you want me to continue?”

I nodded.

“As he opened the back porch door, he noticed an odor he had not smelled since his days working in the slaughterhouse. Unaware of what waited for him, he entered the kitchen, and continued to call out, *‘Hello? I have a package marked perishable,’* but there was no answer, only the offensive odor now growing stronger and lingering in the back of his throat.”

I filled my cup, watching as she licked the foam from her lips.

“He made his way deeper into her house, until he came upon her bedroom. He paused a moment after knocking, then he entered to discover her body. There she was, three dozen puncture wounds in her left arm, and the dart still holding tight in her lifeless flesh.”

I pushed my chair back from the kitchen table and stood. She soon joined me on the back porch to have a cigarette. We didn’t

say a word. I fumbled around in the barely moonlit space looking for a lighter. My body suddenly turned cold in the darkness as she placed a box of stick matches in my hand. I took out my Newport Lights and offered her one without saying a word.

“Those things will kill you,” she said, then softly kissed the foam from my lips. Once our mouths separated, she took a cigarette out from my pack, and gently placed it between my lips. I remained silent as her hand touched mine, pulling from it the matches she had placed there moments earlier. The darkness now less challenging as my eyes adjusted to the moonlight creeping in, until all vision was lost as she struck the match, its flame blinding me.

I could feel the fire’s warmth nearing my face, the sulfur scent slowly seeping as she brought it closer to my cigarette. I opened my eyes in the flickering shadows of the night, finding her eyes gazing back at mine. As I drew upon my cigarette, that dangled between my lips, I remained absorbed in her perfectly round and clear eyes. One blue. The other gray.

Now think what you will, as I have done these past thirty years, trying to discern the blatantly obvious from the supernatural. One part of me, the sensible part, knows I was a college freshman, awe struck by a graduate student with amazing story telling skills.

But then there is that other part of me. That nineteen-year-old, pissing his bed as those perfectly round and clear eyes hovered above me, who can still taste the bloody saltiness upon my lips, and who continues to wonder to this day, why I never saw her again.

Leslie Pontifact’s dartboard still hangs in the Ghost House at 530 West Pierce. Two darts sharing the center bull’s eye. As for the third, well, every time it is thrown, its bloodstained tip simply hits with a heartless *thhht*, then falls faithfully to the floor.

Inked

Mike Matthews

We're all born into this world,
with the same unmarked flesh.
The perfect canvas for what life holds,
so innocent and fresh.

But soon the days begin to paint,
the fabric of our souls.
With each new choice that we make,
as we strive toward our goals.

Some people will reach a point,
and choose to get a tattoo.
Maybe one that reflects a motto,
or simply looks pretty cool.

I've seen so many over the years,
and often wonder why.
One would choose to mark their flesh,
with paint and permanent dye.

I've often heard how much it hurts,
as the needle injects its pain.
And I gladly admit that's one reason,
my flesh remains unstained.

However, some people make the choice,
to never ink their skin.
But rather bear their life's journey,
and keep it all within.

No need for inked bible verses,
song lyrics or someone's name.
Because, for them, life itself,
is their needle and pain.

And my oh my, how I can identify,
with the tattoo inside my heart.
One single name which will remain,
as it has from the very start.

You see my dear, I must be clear,
that my tattoo is really you.
My heart was inked years ago,
the day I said, "I do..."

Morning Coffee

Mike Matthews

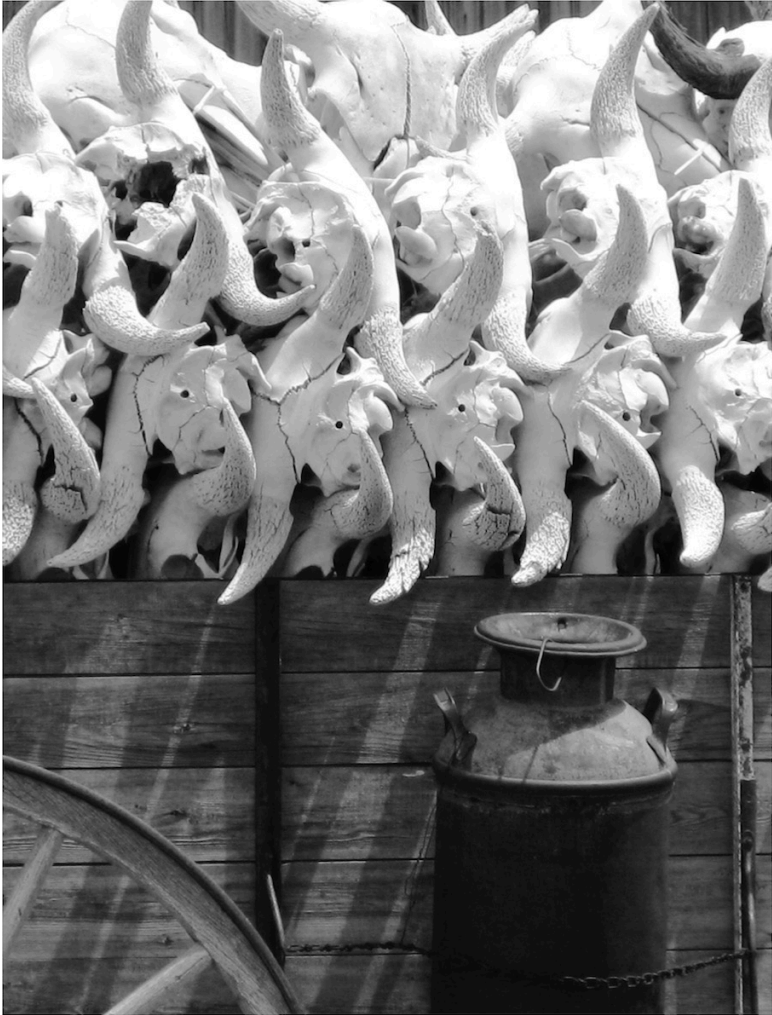
I woke this morning thinking of you
Sipping my coffee
and inhaling its steam
My mind swirling like creamer
Sweetened by the thought of you.

My heart filled with the richness and
Robust flavor of your lips, the sweet
Scent of coconut oil from your neck
And the echo of your gentle breath.

My hands warmed by the coffee mug
Its contents, bottomless like our love
And more addicting than any caffeine
You. Yes, you. Always the perfect blend.

Steer Horns, Route 66, Arizona

Roger Camp



Clouded Rear Window, Ford Truck, Beatty, NV
Roger Camp



Fear

Rana Bitar

I live
 on the frill of your eyelashes:
 you look down,
 I dangle;
 you look up,
 I rise.

Hands on waist, you lift me off the ground.
 I sit on the kitchen counter;
 the cold slap still flares underneath me.
 On the stove, the pot whistles.
 Your forehead touches mine:
 your head is my grandfather's cornfields.

I' am afraid, you say.
 The steam rises,
 I enter the silo of your face,
 I catch a tear before it dangles.

We pour tea and move on.

We sit on the floor next to the fireplace.
 You rearrange the logs and start the flames.
 The wood crackles, the fire rises;
 you furnish the rug with my smiles.

What if, I say, holding your eyes to the window of my soul;
 your lips catch the answer before it dangles.

Charged silence stitches the only couch in the room.
 Hushness bubbles on top of the coffee table.

I shed my thick sweater— my plumage rustles
 You breathe into my wings—I soar.

El Portal

You sew my scatters—I clothe your greeds.
You mend my ruptures—I patch your needs.

We both seal the splits of the blinders.

I live on the edge of your eyelashes:
when you close your eyes,
I climb the stairs of my home.

Savoring

Rana Bitar

I savor you
 anew, untouched.
 Wine has just been squeezed from grapes,
 and I have just learned how to get drunk.
 This territory might be fenced,
 but I own the free soil under the crust.
 I coil and stretch under your skin;
 I dig your mines for youth
 to unearh.

I savor you
 I blossom within your frame.
 Spring only comes
 through the gate of your arms.
 This land might have been taken,
 but my roots are fed with bones and blood:
 I bloom on the cemetery's ruins;
 I own the resurrection of the dead.

I savor your touch.
 I give names to your marks,
 so they become parts of my flesh,
 so I can recall them when you forget.
 This territory might have been occupied,
 but I own the fossils hidden under its rocks.

I savor you
 anew, untouched,
 because where I grow
 is not where everyone's hand
 had already reached;
 I sprout from the walls of the veins and artery,
 where no one else dares
 to cut.

With Lungs of Blue

Catherine Stansfield

All I am is frayed thread and mottled
stuffing—rejected parts from the
assembly line stitched together.

Wait, let me explain why my lungs are blue
and far too small, so I'm drowning
from two shallow ponds in my chest.

Watch how ballerina bodies are
the mountains and canyons of movement
and you'll see that I'm just a parking lot.

Feel my skin and you'll understand
how the asymmetrical, the baleful and the green
make themselves at home inside of me.

Ask me why my brain is the flood and the
drought and never meets in the middle.
I'll tell you that it's terrified that one day
the stars may gaze back.

But know that I take comfort in the fact
that even peony petals wither once
they are plucked. Know that if you can
love me now, like this, you can love me forever.

You're Always on the Phone

Mialise Carney

It was a Wednesday the first day I went to school and didn't cry. The only day I went to school and didn't cry, I was wearing a blue dress—A-line, with yarn dolls playing hopscotch and jump rope sewn into it. It was the only day Ms. Helena didn't make me sit in front of the fish tank. She even let my older sister Ainsley come down from the second floor and play dolls with me during lunch.

After school, I played in the sandbox while Ainsley swung on the swings, her soft brown ringlets spreading out from her lightly freckled face. I pushed my fingers deep into the warm sand, hoping that one day I would be good enough to earn the privileges of the swings dangling from two huge oak trees.

Ms. Helena wouldn't let anyone leave the fish tank until they stopped crying, and I had been the longest audience member. When Mama got there, I ran to her and told her in stuttering spurts that I didn't cry even a little. I liked school now and I didn't have to sit in front of the fish tank anymore. Ms. Helena stood tall, heavy arms crossed across her chest and a sly grin like she was thinking, *thank god I finally broke that one.*

Thursday, I cried the entire day—heaving sobs so big and so long I couldn't catch my breath. I repeated two things over and over, "I want Ainsley," or "I want Mama" until they forced my sister to come down from her upstairs hiding place. I didn't know where Ainsley was when she wasn't there, like when she went up the split-level staircase she disappeared from existence entirely.

Ms. Helena asked why I couldn't be good like I was yesterday, and I told her I didn't know why and that I was trying.

By Monday, I was homeschooled. My three-week stint in Preschool Montessori ending gleefully while Mama swore to my skeptical father and grandmother that I would go back in

September when I was more mature. I accepted this easily, heading back to the comforts of Sesame Street and strawberry milk, leaving behind the institutional disappointment of that little yellow schoolhouse.

A few months later, Ainsley left school as well. Ainsley had loved Helena's Montessori up until I got to stay home in my pajamas all day. Ainsley's enthusiasm had dulled over the months following my dramatic departure until she stopped eating out of nervousness.

Mama did hours of research, desperately searching dial-up lines for homeschooling information, her oval face lit by the bright monitor of our old computer as I watched, sitting behind her on the cool wood floor. She went through every blog and review, primitive Amazons and eBays, not assigning herself to a particular method, instead taking bits and pieces from each until she thought she had enough to start. Papa sat back after work and on weekends, never offering more than a check book, a critique, or an expectation of failure.

For the first year of homeschooling, Ainsley worked diligently through her huge orange spiral workbook from Calvert Academy, a private school in Maryland that offered homeschooling curriculum. For my version of kindergarten, I worked less enthusiastically through the practice version of her workbook. It was beige, half the size, and without instructions at the top so that when Mama was busy, I had to wait for help or to figure it out myself.

Mostly, I'd leave a huge clumsy star and go to the next page anyway, hoping to find something easier. When I couldn't, I would turn back a few pages and erase what I'd already done and do it again, so Mama could see I was trying.

The landline rang every few hours and Mama left us to go answer it. She talked to her mom on the gray phone for hours, her silhouette bent awkwardly to hold the phone and wash dishes at the same time. Ainsley kept her head down and continued working, short legs kicking, while I stared up at the pledge of

allegiance plaque against the right wall, trying to make out the meaning of words like “allegiance” and “republic.”

For much of my early education, I followed in Ainsley’s footsteps. My parents, who by law still had to pay school taxes, couldn’t afford to buy six sets of curriculum each year. While Papa worked overtime to pay taxes for the local public school we were destined to never attend, Mama scrounged to try to find the cheapest alternative modes of education. The summer before first grade, Mama erased Ainsley’s old workbook. I don’t think I’ll ever get the smell of soft rubber out of my nose, the shape of her bent over the edge of wide kitchen sink for hours, erasing until her fingers could no longer hold the shape without scratching into the page. Mama pieced our education together one review at a time.

I flipped through the pages of my new textbook, shiny muted gloss with loud, saturated pictures of Mount Rushmore. The front cover of my American history book was tomato red and the bottom right corner was picked into layers of cardboard pulp. I got dust under my fingernails picking at the fraying corners, lying flat on the carpet of our half-finished basement. I read with a notebook next to me because Mama told me to take notes even though I don’t know how.

“Whatever you think is important,” she said, standing over me holding a paper coffee cup, her head blocking out the hot overhead light.

But I didn’t know what was important, so I wrote it all down. My handwriting was big, and messy, and shaky, so it took me too long and I spent more time trying to transcribe everything from the book than actually reading it.

“It has to be in your own words,” she said when I showed her.

I didn’t know what my own words were, so instead I reordered the sentences and dropped some of the words she knew I didn’t know. I hated the textbook because of its weight and its oldness

and all the other names written in jagged ballpoint pen on the inside, all the other people who had touched it before, owning the information I never would.

When I complained about the book, she pointed to the front that said “McGraw Hill” and told me that it was a real school book, that it was what real kids learn in real school, and if I went to real school I would have to read it anyway.

Mama always wanted us to be self-taught homeschoolers, and she never taught us anything besides how to read. We were expected to sit quietly by ourselves, desks facing inwards at walls decorated with maps or posters of cats stolen from our piano teacher’s waiting room. We were supposed to read the brief message at the beginning of the page and teach it to ourselves. She told us this often, particularly when we reached a problem that we didn’t understand, and she couldn’t seem to explain either.

“You’re self-taught,” she said. “You’ll have to figure it out.”

She must have read somewhere that self-taught homeschoolers are smarter, more driven, confident. She never asked us if that was what we wanted—it was a lofty goal, like she thought it would make us geniuses. She didn’t want to help us struggle, to watch something click into place. She wanted education to be instant. Being self-taught meant understanding the information as soon as we came across it without going through the slow struggle of learning.

Most days I would stare at the first line of my worksheet, kindly addressed to “teacher/parent/guardian.” It didn’t explain much about what I was supposed to do because it was a supplementary source, an extra worksheet for a kid that just didn’t quite get it. But I hadn’t learned it in the first place, so it made little sense to me. Mama told us to come get her if we had a question, but I learned quickly that she would only wave me off and say she’d come down to help later, and I should just move on to the next part. She didn’t think I needed help, she thought I was wasting time.

Mama didn't often come down to help, but she would correct our homework in chunks. At first every Friday, but soon, every month or so, slowly slipping into only when the superintendent asked for it. I dreaded those days more than anything, and when she'd ask for my baby blue three-ring folder with the googly eye cat on the front that I got at Kmart, I would hand it over, guilt already bubbling in my gut.

"You're my worst student," Mama said, making me sit beside her at the kitchen table, flipping through each page that was incomplete. For months, she thought I was doing school, but I had been staring into space. Each page she pulled out had a first attempt hastily erased, a giant pencil star on the top, and a note: "Help! You were on the phone with Bop!" followed by a hundred sad faces. The notes got more pathetic toward the end: "You're always on the PHONE!" in heavy scrawl, leering off and around the side of the page, which made her laugh at first and then turn angry, flicking a pencil skittering across the lopsided kitchen table.

She said it was embarrassing and that she didn't get why I wouldn't just try, that I should have pride in my work. I explained I did try but was deterred by the stinging promise of tears to say that I just didn't get it; I didn't have the instinct for learning like I was supposed to. I wasn't going to be self-taught. She gave me the stack of all the worksheets that hadn't made sense in their original context, now out of order and months late.

She said, "You can do them all now." Snappily, mistaking my quivering lack of eye contact for defiance.

"How?" I asked, leaning over to flick through the sharp edges.

"They have instructions at the top," she said. "You'll have to figure it out." She got up from the table and turned her back, opening the creme colored dishwasher with a soft squeak.

I sat behind her at the breakfast table and scraped away the yellow paint from my pencil with my short thumbnail until

the sun set behind the looming bare branches of the forest. She worked loudly behind me, slamming silverware so I would know she was mad.

When Papa came home, he went in and out of the back leaving the screen door half open, the chill night breeze blowing in with the smell of grilling Kielbasa. He leaned over my shoulder, his black work shirt touching my head as he looked, but he said nothing.

Eventually Mama decided to try online school. Time4Learning was the closest I ever got to real school because it had a grading system and report cards that would show up on the “teacher/parent” page. It was all automated, with cartoon videos for English, grammar, math, and pages of bright html for history lessons. After going through each unit, it had a quiz or an exam, something I had never done before besides an off-brand state test she’d found online.

It didn’t take me and Ainsley long to find a fatal flaw: the system would let us take the test as many times as we wanted, replacing the old grade with a new one. Most times, I would skip through the unit assignments and go straight to take the test as many times as I could until I got above an 80 percent, which I guessed was a good grade.

“It’s showing on your report card,” Mama said as I stood behind her, my hands restless and itching behind my back. She pointed out all of the attempts listed and the grades I’d gotten each time. I hadn’t realized it would show on her side because it didn’t on mine.

“The superintendent has to see these,” she said, flicking her hand at the quivering screen. “I can’t show her these. She’ll think you’re an idiot.”

I pushed my toes into the speckled carpet, digging at the layers with my big toe. I felt my face flush red, so fast that the skin under my eyes wiggled. Maybe I was an idiot; I’d never

done anything to prove that I wasn't. I returned to my laptop and opened unit one, beginning at the start not knowing what else I could do. I was self-taught, after all. I'd have to figure it out.

At the end of the year, having cheated my way through the majority of my subjects, Mama decided I would do fourth grade over. She spent the entire summer saying it wasn't a punishment, that I'd started school early anyway, so it was technically the right grade. But as Ainsley stuck her tongue out at me and moved onto sixth grade, all I could think about was how Papa called us monkeys when the TV wasn't working, and we kept hitting the on button again and again like it would magically fix itself. Monkey's repeat things, he said, they don't know how to adapt. Don't be a monkey.

Fourth grade didn't feel like the right grade. It felt like repeating something without adapting it. Like a monkey.

A few summers in a row, my younger sister Boo and I went to a private camp, a program where they had professors and college students teach college-like classes. We went, terrified sacrificial lambs, bruised knees shaking underneath the clock tower in the chill mornings. The panic waned when we thrived, weeks full of easy friendships, academic successes, and sunburns. After camp when Mama saw how much we liked a school-like atmosphere, she decided to enroll us in co-op classes.

Mama never wanted to enroll us into co-op classes. She didn't see how they were anything different than real school considering that they were mostly taught by teachers or parents with degrees in subjects like math and biology. We'd gone to something similar right after she withdrew us from Montessori, Marsha's homeschool group. But after Marsha told my mom she didn't plan to teach her daughter to read until high school, Mama didn't return. Mama's entire homeschooling curriculum relied on reading, and she couldn't imagine a life without it.

We went to Ms. Lorraine's writing class. It was down a long country road full of old farmhouses set way back from the street,

painted deep blues and reds, leaning fences, and Shetland ponies lining the road. It was in an Audubon place, the lobby small and wooded, taxidermy animals pinned to the walls. In one corner, there was a turtle tank that I spent most of my time staring into while other homeschoolers came and went behind me. Ms. Lorraine would come from the side room and usher me in, a sly smile creeping across her thin, painted lips like she knew something about me that I didn't.

Ms. Lorraine was thin and boney and wore turtlenecks like my mom. But she was gruff, thick turquoise eyeshadow and the smell of menthol cigarettes drifting, her words came out in puffs of smoke. I always felt dizzy sitting in the room with her too long, relieved when she'd lean back and push open the old, sticky window and let in some cool air.

The first time I went to the group class, I sat at one end of the short conference style table, mismatched chairs squished up against each other. Ms. Lorraine talked while we waited for everyone else and I fiddled with a click-y pencil that I'd stolen from Ainsley, because she still was the only one who got the nice school supplies.

I always heard them before I saw them—a short bunch of 11-16 year old's, they stumbled in over each other, voices scraping against the ceiling of the squat room, slamming against the mismatched chairs. I watched their shoulders bump as they sat, drew myself in tighter, braiding my legs over each other until I was comfortably small and pretzeled.

There was no point of focus—everyone talked at the same time, over each other, yelling, tagging, I couldn't keep up. I bounced my attention between them, visually tracing their mouths to figure out what they were saying. I clung to random phrases, laughing without context when someone glanced at me. I said nothing unless Ms. Lorraine turned directly to me, squished uncomfortably between the only other girl, dressed all in red plaid

who yelled over me to a boy with a long braid and bright blue *Adventure Time* shirt.

I was the first to escape the stuffy room when Ms. Lorraine yelled it was over, the clock way past the end of the class time. They congealed in a right corner, backs turned, uninviting. The door was left pushed open and I stood by the turtles while Mama went into the room to pay Ms. Lorraine.

I turned from the turtle tank to watch the group, to try to figure them out. I half-hoped one would beckon me over with a wave, but they did not.

The girl faced away from me, her red plaid shirt slouching. She said, “What about the new girl? She seems kind of stupid.”

I turned around quickly to stare at the turtles. One was stuck under the other, and its legs waved, like it was swimming in the air.

“Well, she is blond,” a boy said, stuttering laughter sliding down the white chipping paint of the walls.

I watched the turtles struggle under the heat lamp, looking more baked than comfortable. I wanted to tap on the glass, to hold one. But the sign said not to, so I didn’t.

I stayed a little longer at Ms. Lorraine’s, a few months at best. But after a while, the feeling of my stomach gnawing itself lost its appeal and I stopped going. I returned to the comforting isolation of homeschooling and didn’t leave again until college.

Mama could never figure out what type of homeschooling she wanted to do and so we flip-flopped, never getting a complete education anywhere. Our schooling was a game of telephone, starting with confidence and then dribbling down until it didn’t resemble what it was supposed to. It wasn’t her fault; she didn’t do it on purpose. It was just that everyone around her was expecting, almost hoping, for her to fail, so much that she took advice from everyone and never got to do what she had originally wanted to. She wanted to please everyone just a little,

letting her original plans and ambitions fall wayside to others uninformed suggestions. Everyone expected us to be stupid, wacky homeschoolers, everyone but her.

My extended family used to test us. We did spelling bees for my maternal grandmother, reading books out loud to her in stuffy Cape Cod hotels instead of playing on the beach. We recited the Pledge of Allegiance to our paternal grandfather, science facts to our dad, quick-thinking history facts to our superintendent. Christmas dinners were never filled with what my cousins had learned at school, a shrug and an “I don’t know” was enough for them. But for us, a deep breath and a performance of knowledge was required every time we saw family, legs shaking under the dinner table because we knew if we didn’t, Mama would get in trouble.

The lack of structured education, the constant flopping between the unschooling my mom truly wanted and the random demands for classical school from others whenever they felt the sudden need to take charge created a dichotomy our heads couldn’t keep up with. No one believed in my mom, nobody thought she was smart enough to do it, so we always had to prove that she could.

I did teach myself, but not the way my mom thinks about it. I struggled through primary education, pursuing what interested me when her back was turned. She takes credit for the successes, the good grades in college, but removes herself from my early education, saying I should have tried harder, that I was careless and lazy and stupid, and I didn’t put any work in. I didn’t have pride in my work. My accomplishments now are her final proof that she did it, that the homeschooling worked, so I say nothing. I know that if I deny her the right to claim credit for all the work that I’ve done, and all the struggling on my own, I will leave her with nothing. So, when she says she’s surprised how well I turned out, how she doesn’t know where it came from, I sit back and nod, and thank her.

Bet

Alexander P. Garza

Bet you didn't think I'd make it this far.
Bet you thought I'd be dead by now.

But that's not how I operate.
That's not how I roll.

That's not how I imagined
my story would unfold.

So, laugh lavishly and pompously.
Laugh and languish posh.

Craft and fight, stick by phones,
and live a life indignantly.

Follow the meadow in your backyard
that leads you through your fence.

Follow the leader, strong and sturdy,
play Simon Says and wrong your words.

After all, it all ends up burning
anyway. After all, we fall.

Free Flow

Alexander P. Garza

A flower's never done growing.

A song that's stuck is a lavender spatula.

A song with verses can continue creating a recipe.

The chorus is more than enough to fire up the grill.

The interlude pacifies while waiting for sustenance.

The final chorus, an endearing climax, demands we be still.

Joe Bob

Stephen Scarano

maybe 1968

i'm having a dream about a dream of a day
 in southeast new mexico that really happened
 under what some might call a typical llano estacado sky
 never ordinary with its vista too huge to measure that i could see
 if i would see
 because the optical science of the moment is quite macro that joe bob
 in his bib coveralls
 and i each have a single foot on a slab of steel the size of a license plate
 —sharing is caring, don't you see—
 on top of a motor that is on top of a girder that is on top
 of one of the 105' Worley Mills grain elevators
 in the town the college kids call goober gulch for its peanut farming.

our particular slice of life that day is to change out frozen bearings on
 the motor shaft
 my own being frozen too
 and i'm one of the college kids terrified up there and joe bob knows it.

he is holding a wrench in one hand
 and i have both of mine on steel things
 —that's pretty much the extent of the safety gear—
 osha? osha? we didn't have no steenkeen osha
 although i have this idea to grab one of the straps on joe bob's coveralls
 if things get really dicey and i peel off.

 don't drop it he says
 and he hands me the wrench
 if you do ya'll have to go down and get it.
 he takes another look at me and he says
 ya'll go get us a couple doctor peppers
 so i climb down to the top of the one man cage lift
 that we both shared coming up
 and push the big black Down button.

A Bird of Sea and Air

Josh Brunetti

At the long end of another summer squandered,
I sat sullen with my pain-driven pen,
Confounded, frozen, and there pondered,
Whether Halcyon could take flight again,

Her sea-touched wings lightly flinging off
Those memories of neophyte summers,
Of barefooted forays through nature's trough,
Applauding hooved panpipers and drummers,

Bringing home the muddy earth we'd trodden
And calamity with sticky candy fingers,
The adults therein forgetting, merrily besotten,
That they too once beheld the hoof-footed singers

Whose voices resonated oddly sonorous
For such slight, flaxen-haired creatures,
Their dedication to music rightly onerous,
Their heads horned, strange were their features,

And stranger still that adults turn insipid;
After years of dancing that pageant of youth,
How we fill to the brim with importance and lipids,
Forgetting forever Halcyon's December truth.

O Halcyon fly once again without hesitation;
Is that you stirring within, or just a palpitation?

Tea with Old Friends

Jonathan Ferrini

It was a weekly treat for me to attend an elegant, afternoon, High Tea at the beautiful Mark Hopkins Hotel after church services across the street. The “Mark” held a commanding view of San Francisco from its location atop Nob Hill, and provided a beautiful view of the iconic bridge, bay, and city below.

I was always welcomed by my waiter, Franco, a fifty-year employee, who reserved my favorite long, green, supple, silk-covered, chaise lounge, which included two long arms and a matching footrest. With charm and grace, Franco would gently roll up a brass serving table with a glass top, displaying my assortment of English teas, finger sandwiches, and exquisite pastries. Franco always included a glass of sherry, which often times induced an afternoon nap and dreams of our exotic travels as a family.

Across from my chaise lounge, was its “sister”: a beautiful, vintage, velvet, bright red sofa with gold leaf accents. It looked as if it previously held a prominent place within the palace of Czar Alexander. The red sofa was so elegant; it appeared to be a museum piece, and only on occasion would people sit upon it with reverence. Both furniture pieces were handcrafted at least one hundred years earlier. I always admired people with an appreciation for fine furniture who would photograph and admire the beautiful red sofa.

We were situated in a quiet corner of the magnificent hotel lounge, where I could sit alone with my memories, nap, or watch the hotel guests come and go. My heart was always warmed by watching a young mother introduce her daughter to High Tea, reminding me of my precious moments with my daughter, now grown with a lovely daughter of her own, attending Stanford.

Franco wore his spotless white waiter’s jacket, white shirt, black bow tie, pressed black trousers, and shoes that shone

like mirrors. Franco put two children through college working at The Mark and was the last of a dying breed of professional waiters. He felt like family and treated me like royalty, greeting me as “Madame” and always nearby at my beckon call. He remembered the many private dinners my husband and I shared, our anniversary celebrations, birthdays, and lavish New Year’s parties we hosted. He was careful to remind me of these precious memories because it always brought me tears of joy, albeit bittersweet, now that I’m elderly and alone.

The chaise lounge and I became friends because I believed it had a soul. Its arm rests were like the embracing arms of a loved one, comforting me as I reflected upon my long life: a depression era teenager, soldier’s wife, mother to a beautiful grown daughter with an equally beautiful granddaughter and a handsome son killed in Vietnam, whose untimely and unnecessary death left an open “wound” within my heart. We had a comfortable life in San Francisco and managed quite a bit of international travel as my husband was transferred around the world in the course of his business. We fell in love with San Francisco and decided to make it our home when we retired.

I often fell into a deep sleep within my chaise lounge and awoke to find a blanket carefully placed over me by Franco with a plush pillow beneath my head. I had a dream that my departed husband was calling for me from the opposite side of our home, as was his custom. I hadn’t dreamt of my husband for decades and surmised I was being called to “join” him shortly. I welcomed the day when we might be reunited in the afterlife. I missed him dearly.

I was ninety years old and watched my friends die over the years. Except for church, periodic visits from my daughter and granddaughter, I lived a reclusive life but was content.

I returned one Sunday afternoon for High Tea to find the entire hotel lounge had been remodeled. I walked about, hurriedly looking for my chaise lounge and its “sister,” the red sofa. I

believed that I might have entered the wrong hotel until I was met by Franco.

“Franco, what happened to the lounge? Where are my chaise lounge and the red sofa?”

“The hotel management remodeled the lounge last week to attract younger guests. I miss the old décor, as well, Madame.”

“Where did the chaise lounge and red sofa go? Perhaps, they’re in storage? I would like to purchase both immediately!”

“The work was completed during the overnight hours so as to minimize our guest’s inconvenience, but I will inquire on your behalf, Madame.”

The General Manager, a young Swiss hotelier, soon thereafter approached me, apologizing, “I’m sorry Madame but the previous furnishings were taken away by a moving company to an undisclosed location at the behest of our interior designers who don’t have any further information on their whereabouts.”

The General Manager and Franco knew I was heartbroken by the loss of my favorite chaise lounge and its “sister” sofa. They provided me with a beautiful Queen Anne chair adjacent to the fireplace and graciously provided my High Tea at no charge.

I considered my favorite furniture as friends and was thankful for the privilege of knowing them. I prayed both the chaise lounge and red sofa met a beautiful fate, perhaps displayed with honor in a vintage furniture shop, soon to be purchased, hopefully together, and appreciated by new owners for decades to come. If I knew which store, I’d immediately purchase them both and move them into my Pacific Heights home.

At ninety, I had grown accustomed to losing friends and loved ones, but the loss of two inanimate, beautiful, vintage, furniture pieces providing only comfort and never the pain, and sorrow humans mete out devastated me. I dreaded the thought they may

be sitting in a landfill, slowly decaying, like an elderly woman. I prayed they did, in fact, have souls and would fondly remember the many guests they comforted, including me.

The Permanence of Change

Milton Ehrlich

When we swam from water to land
we embraced each other for good.
It wasn't until one of us left the other
that we first heard the howl of a wolf.
Being a tumescent king of a mountain
had no appeal without a warm body.
Every day was a brand-new adventure—
the only thing to count on was change.
Ever since man invented the wheel,
he's been going around in dark circles
in coping with invisible sources of fright.
In man's ecstasy of rage he may realize
that all he can do with bigger & better
bombs is drop them. Wars of the future
will be fought with sticks and stones.

Still Smitten with Love

Milton Ehrlich

For my wife of more years
that I'd prefer to not count
who has never lost her sense
of immediacy as powerful as
the scent of a blooming rose.
I've never failed to appreciate
the exact provocation evoked
when she quickens any room
of people she enters into life.

Military Brothers in War and Peace

Milton Ehrlich

When I was a cannoneer—
before my ears got blown out,
we used to sing: *Praise the Lord,*
and pass the ammunition...
as we passed 155 mm shells
into our heavy artillery cannons.

But when the Chinese joined
the North Koreans in an unexpected
and unstoppable nighttime attack,
our Battalion Commander
was the first to be killed.
Bitter hand-to-hand fighting ensued
as we ran for our lives in a retreat.

My younger brother served in the Navy
for 4 years between the major wars.
He sang the same song when ordered
as an Ensign to assume battle stations
on his ship that never got shipped out.
He jokingly called it: The SS Constipation.

Maybe that's why nobody sings war songs anymore.

I Only Exist

Milton Ehrlich

When you call me by my name
I glow in the dark of the night
with the luminescent light of foxfire.
Starved for your attention like a hungry poseur,
I don't know who I am until I become alive
on the drug of your love.
It's the next best thing to holding each other
in a time warp that never comes to an end.

Perfect Day

David Romanda

After twenty-five years, my high school sweetheart calls (she's the skinny one with the shy smile and glasses and boy's haircut) and tells me that her hubby disappeared. Went for a tuna melt with no onions and never came back. She wants me, she says. She's never loved anyone but me (there were two others, but they couldn't touch me with a forty-two foot pole). I tell her how sorry I am. (There's pain in my voice, but I don't overdo it.) Sorry, but I'm very seriously in love with my wife. Sorry, truly, and best of luck finding someone new.

When One Door Closes

Paul Bluestein

Bill Jameson slid out of bed Monday morning and was on his way to the bathroom when he noticed the slip of paper lying on the bedroom floor. He bent down to pick it up and saw that it was a fortune—the thing that comes in the complimentary fortune cookie you get with Chinese take-out. The side that was face up in his palm read **Lucky Numbers – 12, 32, 8, 44, 26, 6**. He turned the slip over and read **When one door closes, another opens**. *That* made him stop and think, because three months ago, a door had closed on him. FamilyHealthCare, the HMO where he'd been the Director of Information Technology had been acquired by a larger insurance company in one of those mergers that promised to bring cost savings through “synergies.” Of course, the only synergy that it brought to Bill was an exit interview and six months of severance as a consolation prize for being downsized. The merged company didn't need two I.T. Directors, and Bill was now starting to face the frightening reality that he was fifty-four years old and unemployed (*“but with six months of salary still coming in,”* he reminded himself).

“I sure need a door to swing open for me just about now,” he said quietly to the empty room. As he stood thinking about open doors, his fifty-four-year-old bladder reminded him that he had been headed for the bathroom when he was interrupted by the mystery of a Chinese cookie fortune lying on his bedroom floor. He stashed the **Lucky Numbers** in his bathrobe pocket and returned his attention the more immediate issue of the two bottles of beer he had with last night's dinner.

After he finished his business (with a satisfied sigh), he brushed his teeth, looked in the mirror, and decided he wasn't going to shave. After all, even though it was Monday, it wasn't like he was going to work. Instead, he just combed his hair with his fingers, slipped on his bathrobe (“casual day,” he thought with

a grimace) and went out to the kitchen where his wife, Kathleen, was already dressed and having her breakfast.

“Good morning, Billy. Can I get you something?” she asked, looking up from the newspaper spread out in front of her. She was the only person who could get away with calling him Billy. To friends he was Bill, to colleagues, he was either William or Liam, but no one called him Billy except Kate, and if anyone did, he quickly corrected them, saying, “Billy is not my name. It’s what you call a goat.” Nonetheless, he liked the intimacy of having Kathleen call him Billy.

“I think I’ll just have coffee this morning.”

As she poured him a cup, he fished the Chinese fortune from his pocket and smoothed it out on the table in front of her.

“I found this on the floor when I got out of bed this morning and I don’t have any idea how it got there. Do you recognize it? Maybe you stuck it in your pocket after a lunch date with a friend and it fell out when you got dressed?”

Kathleen glanced at the slip of paper, leaned over to get a little closer so she could see better and, shaking her head, said “Nope, never saw it before. Don’t remember saving anything like that.”

“Well, I don’t even remember the last time we had Chinese food, so I have no clue where this could have come from. Anyway, maybe it’s a sign that I’m going to get a job offer from a company in China. I’ve certainly sent out enough resumes and done enough interviews that *something* ought to open up.”

“Or maybe I should play the Lottery,” she said, half-jokingly. “If I win, you won’t need to get a job. We’ll just buy a private island in the Caribbean, drink vodka gimlets, and sleep in the sun.”

“Sure, sure Kate,” he said good-naturedly. “You play the lottery. But as a back-up plan, I think I’ll keep looking for a job, just in case your 1-in-300 million shot doesn’t come in.”

“OK, Billy,” she smiled. “Why don’t you finish your coffee and get on with looking for that job. I have to clean up here, the roses need pruning, and then I have some errands to run. So, shag your old ass out of the kitchen and let me get to work.”

With that, she took to loading the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher while Bill headed to his upstairs office.

Around noon, Bill came back down (still in his bathrobe) to see if there was anything in the refrigerator that looked appealing. He found Kate in the kitchen, getting the dishes out of the dishwasher.

“Hey there, Billy! You may have lost your job, but I see you haven’t lost your timing. I’m just about done here. How goes the search for useful employment?”

“Nada. I’m starting to get a little worried here, you know? You think maybe we ought to cut back on some of the expenses? We could put off having the bedroom painted and just have dinner at home instead of going out, at least until we have some money coming in again.”

“No way, Jose,” Kathleen answered with a little shake of her head. “I’m sure that everything is going to be fine. You’re a talented, handsome man who is going to get an offer any day now. I can’t think of a reason why we need to change anything.”

In fact, Kathleen was a little worried too, but she certainly wasn’t going to tell that to Bill, not when he needed every bit of optimism and confidence that he could muster.

“Maybe if you got out of your PJs, you’d feel more like an executive, huh? At least put on a shirt and tie under your robe,” she said, teasing him.

“Very funny.” He gave her a peck on the cheek and said, “OK, I’ll go change and you can finish putting the dishes away. How’s that?”

“That’s peachy. By the way, when you’re dressed, there’s a ham and cheese sandwich for you in the refrigerator. I’ll be back

in an hour or two and I'll bet you have an offer in hand by the time I get home."

"Yeah, sure thing, Kate," Bill called over his shoulder as he went off in the direction of the bedroom.

Kathleen grabbed her car keys off the table and, seeing the small slip of paper lying next to them, **Lucky Numbers** side up, thought "What the hell. Why not?"

Kate had never played the lottery before, but \$5 was not going to break them.

While Kathleen was out running her errands, Bill changed into his UCLA sweatshirt and a pair of jeans and then sat staring at the phone. Over the past months, he had sent out nearly three dozen resumes and, like a fisherman who has cast his best hand-tied flies into the stream, he was waiting patiently for a bite.

Meanwhile, Kathleen was making her rounds, first to the dry cleaners to pick up and drop off, then to the pet store for a forty-pound bag of food for Tucker, their flat-coat retriever, and finally a stop to fill up at the local gas station. When she pulled up to the pump, she noticed the POWERBALL sign in the window of the station. She went into the kiosk, asked the clerk how much a Powerball ticket cost (less than she thought), handed over her \$2 (plus \$1 for the upgrade to PowerPlay), read off the fortune cookie **Lucky Numbers** and got her ticket, just like that. Before she went back out to the car, she asked the attendant if he knew how much the Grand Prize for this week was. He did know. \$243 million.

Just about the time that Kathleen was pulling into the gas station, the phone in Bill's office rang. When he picked up, a woman's voice asked if he would hold for Mike Slayton, an executive recruiter that Bill knew from his time at FHC.

"Hello, Liam. Mike Slayton here. I was sorry to hear that you were caught up in the merger and got the short end of the stick. This kind of shit happens all the time now and it's never pretty.

Anyway, I've got something that might interest you and it's right in your own backyard. The McClain Medical Group, you know, the one affiliated with Lawrence & Lee Hospital, is looking for a VP of Information Services, and the job is made for you. They need someone to integrate their electronic medical record information into a central database and link it to the hospital IT system—just the kind of project you headed up at Family Health. It's a group of talented docs, they're offering good money, and you would be part of the executive management team. I told them about you, and they'd like to talk to you the day after tomorrow, first thing in the morning, from 8 to 10. What do you say?"

Bill was too stunned to say anything but croak out a "Yes, Mike. Tell them I'll be there."

This was too good to believe and Bill couldn't help thinking about the Chinese fortune that had somehow wound up on the floor of his bedroom. He thanked Mike for remembering him, hung up the phone and just sat, staring out of his office window, thinking about what a lucky guy he was after all.

As soon as Kathleen got home, Billy told her about the phone call from Mike Slayton. She was going to tell him about the lottery ticket but buying it had made her feel a little silly—and maybe a little desperate—so she just kept quiet and let it pass.

The next two days went quickly, and Thursday morning came with a flurry of activity. Both Bill and Kathleen were up early—Bill to get ready for his job interview and Kate to get an early start on a local political rally she had volunteered to organize. By a quarter after 7, Bill was showered, shaved, and dressed in his blue pinstripe suit, white shirt, and R. Hanauer bowtie. He looked and felt like a million dollars.

"Can I make you something to eat before you go?" Kathleen asked as he was checking out how he looked one last time.

"No, that's OK. I'll just stop on the way and get some coffee and maybe a breakfast sandwich."

“OK, Billy. I’ll see you when you get back. Good luck with the job, honey. I know they’re going to love you.”

“See you later, Kate.”

Kathleen walked out with Bill, watched him drive off and picked up the newspaper in the driveway. She went back inside, fed Tucker (who was impatiently waiting for his breakfast), made herself a second cup of coffee, and sat down to read the Post.

After she finished with the front-page stories and the comics, and before she started in on the crossword puzzle, she turned to page two and there, just below the fold, her eye caught sight of the winning lottery numbers from the drawing the night before. Since she never played the lottery, she didn’t even know there was a drawing on Wednesday! She thought the drawings were on Friday nights. She looked carefully at the numbers, slowly put down her coffee and went into the hall closet to find her purse. The lottery ticket she had bought was still there, right on top of the Chinese fortune. She took both of them out of the purse, went back to the kitchen, and set them down beside the paper. Even though she couldn’t believe her eyes, the ticket confirmed what she already knew in her heart. She held a winning ticket for the Grand Prize. She checked once more, holding the finger of one hand below each number in the paper and a finger of the other hand over the corresponding number on the ticket. It was, in fact, a match. A \$234 million match.

Once she recovered enough to have a coherent thought, she wanted to call Bill right away, let him know what had happened, let him know that he didn’t need to interview for the job at the McClain group, or any job for that matter, ever again. She was just about to go get her cell phone when there was a knock at the front door. She shouted, “in a minute,” corralled Tucker who was barking furiously at the knocking and went to the door.

When she opened it, there were two uniformed Milford policemen standing under the portico, hats in hand. At first,

she thought they must be asking for donations to some Police Benevolent Association thing and actually laughed out loud when it occurred to her how much money she could donate.

“I’m sorry officers,” she said, collecting her misplaced dignity. “It was just a funny thought that occurred to me. What can I do for you?”

“Ma’am, there’s been an accident.”

“An accident? Is it Bill? Is he all right? Nothing’s happened to him, has it?”

“No, I’m sorry, ma’am,” the older of the two said quietly. “Your husband stopped in the QwikPik on his way to work, I suppose. There was a holdup. He was shot. He was killed, ma’am.”

The need for forms and funeral arrangements would come all too soon, followed by a long time of grief and loneliness, but strangely enough, the first thoughts Kate had were of the slip of paper on the table and the lottery ticket sitting next to it. **When one door closes, another opens.** Well, one door had been closed, and locked, but the door that had opened was one she would have to walk through alone, and she didn’t have any idea how she was going to do that or why she would want to.

The officer talked to her for a time, but she didn’t register anything he said until he handed her his card, told her he would check back with her the next day and said “I’m sorry, ma’am. We’ll let ourselves out if that’s OK.”

She just nodded and watched them leave the room. She heard them talking to each other softly in the hallway and then, as they went out, she heard the door close behind them.

Pandemic

Gloria Keeley

we're alone now
in our warm houses
summer performing around us

if only we could sit on a park bench again
talking, feeding the pigeons
our dogs asleep at our feet
after a long walk along the paths
of Fort Funston

we keep safe in the strong place
twenty leagues inside our hearts
fond pasts are held at peace

at night that hush
when God is sleeping
deep in the caves of Bethlehem
trusting the beautiful, floating boat
to continue His work
while He dreams of those first seven days

that flock of birds flying among white clouds
is something more than itself
eagle eyes peer down, its wide wings glide
low the hills, scarfed with mist

in the nets at sea there are plenty of fish
rocked with blue voices of the dead
the fog horns blaring
as life goes on, death gets trapped
in the strands of sickness
the painter's brush makes a sound
like wind over sand
blowing the emptiness within

El Portal

the continents gathered
sun descends lightly
calming the cool grove
there was a time when memory was moonlight
on wet rough stones

piners crackle through smoky air
the arc of rainbow
the bulk ark of our destiny
tries to bring us to a safe shore

Bones of the Moon

Gloria Keeley

I sank a kayak
to watch it drown
not nice, I know
but I needed the equation

I think of ways to complicate my problems
out of dreams stars glimmer in ballet
bones of the moon, dance
this is how I predict the weather

in the back garden
the last eyes of aged potatoes
catch visions of garden arbors
the climbing plants green and young

I reach for memories
like rings on a carousel
my light is urgent in the morning
dark when mourning

black branches claw purple
hold the white moths of trance
while catching prisms

flies rub their legs on the leaves
electricity discharged, scattered into
guitars of cut-glass strings
that bolt through the night

the whales, now stressless
while galaxies shine
over blues men and wild nights
boneless mussels smoke
beneath the moon

Boundary Bound

Ronald L. Grimes

Once, when I thought my days were numbered, I had a peculiar desire. Before I die, I want to walk around New Mexico exactly on the boundary. Circumambulating my home state would be an inane ritual. Maybe I would put on whiteface and wear a clown suit.

I didn't die and the ritual didn't happen.

Years have passed. I now live in Canada, but I still tinker with the idea of making that pilgrimage. I'm aging. Will I need a cane? Is it possible to roll down the state line in a wheelchair? Is it possible to walk a straight line if barbed wire fences, arroyos, and mountains cut across my path? If I do a fool's stroll, will I step off the edge of a canyon, be stricken by a rattlesnake, die of dehydration?

It's now 2020. The pandemic has arrived. I can't cross the international boundary, even though I have two passports, one American, the other Canadian. My only choice is to do a virtual pilgrimage sitting in a swivel chair, wondering whether sitting is the new smoking.

Google the New Mexico state map. On first glance it appears to be almost square. Look again, it's rectangular, taller than wide, like a sheet of typing paper.

Most of New Mexico's boundaries were drawn with a ruler. Straight lines across everything natural. Maybe the surveyors thought nothing was there. No Comanches no Apaches, no hunting grounds. No plant life, no animal life.



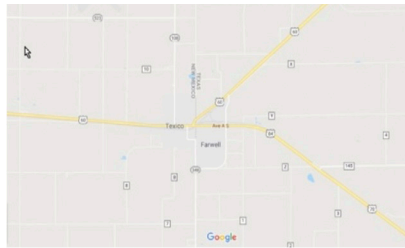
My ancestors infested the land like a swarm on insects. We began to drill the earth full of holes, suck out oil, plant genetically

modified seed. Dig it up. Plow it under. Frame it with barbed wire. Suck water from Mama Earth's belly and spray it over wheat, peanuts, corn, soybeans, jalapeños.

Zoom to the bottom of the map, slightly left of the middle. Here is the only New Mexico boundary that is not a straight line. That wiggly vertical bit is the Rio Grande River, the only natural boundary in the state. The Great River slices north to south through the middle of the state.

Circumambulating New Mexico would be like kinhin, walking meditation in Zen. Ask a Zen master its purpose, and she will say: walk, just walk. Walk for no reason, no purpose, none at all. The aim is to have no aim. But aims and intentions creep into consciousness: to say good-bye to my home state, to outrun death, to expose the silliness of straight-line borders, to prove I'm a man, to clown myself to death.

But let's not get lost before beginning this Google driven virtual journey. I'll start in Texico, east of Clovis, where I grew up. In Santa Fe, Hispanics call this part of New Mexico "little Texas."



Dad was hired one summer as a census taker. We go to Texico, which sits on the New Mexico side of the border. We are walking along the train tracks when Dad says, "On that side is Farwell, Texas. On this side is Texico, New Mexico."

A testy kid, I walked down the middle of the tracks and tossed him a question, "Where am I now."

He laughed, "No man's land."

To honor Dad, I'll start on the train tracks that separate Texico from Farwell and go south down the middle of the tracks.

It's not long before I have to follow a road rather than train tracks. Soon I cross the middle of a green crop circle—not a medicine wheel—but a water-guzzling sprinkler spraying crops. I ask the sprinkler, "How much of your moisture is evaporating into the dry air?" Standing at the center of the circle is the best place not to get wet.

Texas is to the left, and New Mexico, the right. Do ranches and farms stop at state lines? Can you plow or water on both sides of the NM/TX state line? New Mexico collects state income tax from farmers. Texas doesn't have any taxes. They can thank oil for that.

The journey has just started. I'm a spry kid again and begin lilted a nonsense song: "Texas, taxes, Texas, taxes." I begin to skip with an invisible rope to the tune.

When I was seventeen, I was a DJ for a radio station in Muleshoe, Texas. I had to play country and western music for early-rising farmers. I hated the music but got paid a pittance. I would need to add a slide guitar and harmonica to make my "Texas, Taxes" song worth turning off in west Texas.

Now we're back on the road again, Highway 769. I love it when the roadbuilder follows the surveyor's ruler lines. Easy walk.

Ah, there's the Border Bar. I'll stop for a drink, not too much. Gotta keep walking.

Just east of Hobbs I lose my road. It no longer coincides with the state line, the Yellow Brick Road to nowhere.

I'll have to follow the dotted state line by divination. I wouldn't use a GPS; it would violate the sanctity of my quixotic quest. But this is a virtual journey, so I can Google-zoom in and Google-zoom out.

South of Hobbs I pass through Nadine. That's mom's name. Maybe she borrowed her name from this town. Wouldn't there be a family story?

Below Nadine I pass near Eunice. Hmm, what went on in this region—all these girl-named towns? Many other towns have old-boys-club names.

Eunice is not a place I'd like to inhabit. Near here is WIPP, the notorious Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, the nation's repository for nuclear waste. Its first shipment came in 1999. More shipments are supposed to follow for the next 20 or 30 years. Atomic wastes are shipped south from Colorado. Truckers pick up more atomic garbage in Los Alamos, where the atomic bomb was developed, then haul radioactive waste farther south.

At first protesters imagined the pollutants would be dumped into Carlsbad Caverns, but that would kill the tourist trade. Instead, the government used a deep geological repository near Eunice. The site was guaranteed not to leak.

In 2014 drum #68,660 leaked, because Los Alamos packers used organic kitty litter instead of inorganic clay kitty litter. The organic litter is made of wheat, and its cellulose can burn. Radioactive isotopes of uranium, americium, and plutonium began to escape. It cost 300 million dollars to clean up the mess.



DANGER

THESE MONUMENTS OUTLINE A CONTROLLED AREA OF 41 SQUARE KILOMETERS NEAR THE CENTER OF WHICH RADIOACTIVE ♣ WASTE IS BURIED



NEAR THE CENTER OF THIS 41 SQUARE KILOMETER CONTROLLED AREA ARE STRUCTURES MARKING AN AREA USED TO BURY RADIOACTIVE ♣ WASTES AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS. THE RADIOACTIVE ♣ WASTES AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS ARE BURIED WITHIN AN AREA THAT IS 660 METER BY 610 METERS. THE WASTE IS BURIED 655 METERS DEEP. THIS PLACE WAS CHOSEN TO PUT THIS DANGEROUS MATERIAL FAR AWAY FROM PEOPLE AND OTHER LIVING THINGS. TO ENSURE THAT THIS DANGEROUS MATERIAL REMAINS ISOLATED FROM OTHER LIVING THINGS, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE 41 SQUARE KILOMETER AREA NOT BE DISTURBED. DO NOT DRILL OR CONDUCT ANY MINING OPERATIONS WITHIN THE CONTROLLED AREA. DOING SO COULD CHANGE THE WATER HYDROLOGY AND AFFECT THE ISOLATION OF THE RADIOACTIVE ♣ WASTES AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS FROM LIVING THINGS.

DO NOT DRILL HERE. DO NOT DIG HERE OR CONDUCT MINING OPERATIONS WITHIN THE 41 KILOMETER CONTROLLED AREA. DO NOT DO ANYTHING THAT MIGHT DISTURB THE WATER HYDROLOGY WITHIN THE CONTROLLED AREA. DO NOT DESTROY THIS OR ANY OTHER MARKER. THIS MARKING SYSTEM HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO LAST 10,000 YEARS. IF THE MARKER IS DIFFICULT TO READ, ADD NEW MARKERS COMPOSED OF LONGER-LASTING MATERIALS AND COPY THIS MESSAGE IN YOUR LANGUAGE ONTO THEM.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO THE BUILDING NEAR THE CENTER OF THIS MARKED AREA. THE SITE KNOWN AS THE WIPP (WASTE ISOLATION PILOT PLANT) SITE WHEN IT WAS CLOSED IN 2030 A.D.



The signs posted at WIPP are supposed to last 10,000 years. Linguists designed pictograms to scare away you and me or Martians (who could visit from Roswell), to scare anyone who might dig up the radiated waste.



Now I have a tough choice. The state line crosses through URENCO and, it seems, the middle of an open pit. What's in it? What's around it? Barbed wire? Razor wire? Cameras? Alarms?

I have no choice but to deviate from the NM boundary. I have to walk in semi-circle around the place. Which side? New Mexico, of course. We're the poor cousins of rich Texas relatives. Texas is Egypt; New Mexico, holy land.

Suddenly, the ruler line turns left. I've hit the bottom of New Mexico. I head west toward El Paso, Texas.

I keep striding until I come to the Pecos River. Hard to swim in a straight line. I don't get to improvise my path unless I have to; that's the plan. So, I swim, dry, and peel off the mud. If I could swim north, I'd be near Carlsbad Caverns, said to be the largest known subterranean labyrinth in the world. It's full of bat shit, marketed as "guano," great fertilizer.

I keep walking the straight line until I approach the Guadalupe Mountains south of the Lonesome Ridge Wilderness Study Area. I am feeling lonesome—the pathetic fallacy—but there are trees and bushes ahead.

Once I hike through the mountains, I am back on flat land. Actually, it's not flat, it's full of arroyos and hills that feel like mountains when you climb out.

Don't hike southern New Mexico in the summer, killer heat. I trudge westward, using



Stateline Drive until I am north of El Paso. If I were to hike straight north, I'd hit the White Sands. At the north end is the Unholy Trinity Site, where the first atomic bomb was exploded.

The Atomic Heritage Foundation in Albuquerque now sells t-shirts displaying J. Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie R. Groves at Trinity Site staring at the bomb, or is it the world? Either way, I hurry on, don't want to celebrate this heritage.

Then I'm forced to make a choice at Highway 213. The state line is dotted, but there is no road, so I can cut straight across or take an alternate road to the north or the south. The southern way takes me through Ft. Bliss, a military reservation. Do I want to do that? Will I need a pass? A badge? A uniform? What if I'm a conscientious objector?

I take the northern route. As I pass through Anthony, Texas, I know the Rio Grande awaits. The Royal Road to Santa Fe follows the path of the Rio Grande northward. I am a New Mexican, an American, a Canadian. Can I swim both sides of the river, walk both sides of two borders?

Wait...that dotted line is not the Rio Grande. I was taught in school that the RioG was the boundary between Texas, Mexico, and New Mexico, but the dotted-line boundary runs west of the Great River. International boundaries are complicated. If I plunge into the Rio Grande and swim south, following the current, I'll soon be in Mexico. Where exactly would I be in Mexico? Can I swim on both sides of the river? Can I walk on both banks without a drone or a rifle being pointed at me? Who would shoot me first—Americans or Mexicans? Would I be shot if I swam with a US passport between my teeth, with the eagles turned upward toward the drone camera?

Anyway, I'm not going that way. I'm on a fool's errand. So, I dangle my feet in the muddy water, swim across, and keep heading west on the dotted line. I pass south of Columbus, New Mexico, where Pancho Villa raided, inspiring President Wilson

to send General Pershing into Mexico to arrest the man. On the American side of the border Pancho was a bandit. On the other side, Señor Villa was a hero.

The weather is hot as hell. I can't think in so much heat, so I guzzle water. Where do I get more? As I turn one more time south, then west, I see no roads, no tourists with water. At Antelope Wells I could turn south toward Las Barras in Mexico, but would I ever get there? I'd either dehydrate or be picked up for crossing the border without flashing my passport. Would anyone care? Probably not, so I risk walking for water.

I imagine an elderly goat herder who gives me water. "Thank you, *gracias*," I say in Gringo Spanish.

I turn north up New Mexico's western border. Arizona is on my left. To the right is the town of Lordsburg, which usually records New Mexico's highest temperatures. In the movie Stagecoach the Ringo Kid (played by John Wayne) left Tonto, Arizona, headed for Lordsburg. At the end of the movie Ringo exits the town through Monument Valley, 430 miles north in Arizona. Makes as much geographical sense as a Google tour.

If you're my age, you can't read the name Tonto without thinking of the Lone Ranger's native companion. Jay Silverheels played Tonto. He was not from Arizona, Texas, or New Mexico. He was not an Apache or Comanche but a Mohawk from Six Nations Reserve. That's in Ontario, on the other Grand River. From here American readers are south of the border. When Ontarians say "going south" they mean, "going belly up, failing."

As I ascend north on the New Mexico/Arizona border the screen becomes green. "Green grow the rushes, ho," we sang as Boy Scouts lost in the Gila Wilderness outside of Silver City. Hiking the Gila Wilderness, we Scouts were halfway through the trek and ready to quit. Lay down and die. I didn't die then, because I was too young. I won't die now, because I'm too old for dying. There were no rushes in the Wilderness, but we did find

a troop of Girls Scouts bathing in the Gila River. Good Christian Boy Scouts, we didn't watch. Nope, nope, really didn't. See no evil; do no evil.

The next day we Scouts marched into Silver City with no money so the police invited us to camp out in jail or on the courthouse lawn. We chose the lawn. It was green, and the sky was full of stars.

The Gila National Forest is coded green on the New Mexico side. On the Arizona side, the map is beige. Does the greenery stop at the state border? I doubt it, since up near highway 180, which crosses the Arizona-New Mexico boundary, there is a town called Alpine. Someone thought the elevation was high enough and trees tall enough to make you want to yodel.

West of beige is the San Carlos Reservation, Apache territory. Too far to walk. Off the beaten path. The thought of Apaches puts fear in the Gringo heart. Too many 1950s cowboy and Indian movies. But I've read *Wisdom Sits in Places and Portraits of "The Whiteman"* trying to counteract movie values with book learning. Sometimes the strategy of reading Keith Basso's books works; sometimes not. A whiteman's brain is hard to change. I'm halfway through the journey and ready to quit. I'm so damned tired, but I can hear those Apaches joking about me, laughing their asses off at whitey idiocy.

Day after day, I walk north until I am crossing the Zuni reservation. No signs mark it. Zunis probably have no interest in the dotted line that I am following. Should I walk here? Who to ask for permission? How should I walk here? Softly, on sacred land.

One year I was driving on I-40 to Zuni Shalako, a winter solstice ceremony. It snowed and I was trapped, had to wait for a snowplow. I arrived at Zuni an hour before dawn. I could still see the Shalakos. They were supernatural, even though Zunis know humans animate the creatures. Even for white unbelievers they are momentarily holy. The Zuni world-map is multidimensional; the whiteman's map is flat, as if viewed by satellite from outer space.

I trudge on. It's getting late. The sun is setting. I'm in dire need of a bed but sleeping in a motel would violate the spirit of this wonky virtual pilgrimage. So, I search for a wrecked car at the edge of Lupton, Arizona. I hope to find one without rats or rattlesnakes. But the spongy whiteboy body needs ice cream.

I trudge to Tee Pee Trading Post. The "Pee" triggers a memory. After World War II, Dad would drive the family from Clovis to San Diego on Route 66, now overshadowed by I-40. He would make me pee through a plug in the bottom of our Hudson's back floor—either that or piss into the top of Mom's Pepsi bottle and empty the salty yellow fluid through the hole. After a stone flew up through the Hudson hole, striking blood from my kid-sized prick, I became adept at bottle pissing.

As a kid I loved roadside curio shops. "Real Indian stuff, real Indian stuff," I'd shout. As a man, I know it is made-in-China fake. Still, the boy in the old man needs ice cream and can't resist trying on moccasins and pounding a tom-tom. I find ice cream at Tee Pee. Sugared up, I head for a field of wrecked cars hoping to find a Hudson Hornet. I remember that Dad won a mileage contest driving a Hornet in Farwell. We should have buried Dad in a Hudson. Besides his family and Jesus, he loved Hudsons most.

I didn't find a Hudson—had to settle for a Ford pickup. The next morning I feel better—healed by ice cream and snake oil. Hearing a pair of coyotes, I arise early and chew a stick of buffalo jerky bought from Tee Pee.

I'm a tough old goat, but my muscles ache and my knees wobble. If you're old, do you have more time or less time on your hands? Life is short, but each day is interminable. To distract myself, I begin measuring time and distance.

It's 29 miles from Lupton to the Navajo Nation headquarters at Window Rock. By car, the trip takes 33 minutes. By motorcycle, 15 minutes if the Navajo police don't catch me. On foot, at an old man's pace of 3 miles an hour, the walk would take 9 or 10 hours.

I need time for food, pissing in the bushes, a mid-afternoon doze, time to send pictures to my wife and kids so they know I'm alive. So, 6 hours a day seems reasonable. That's the best I can do, 18 miles a day. New Mexico's boundary is around 1,500 miles, so this is a 3-4 month journey. If I die on the road, I will be a fool for many, but a hero for few. Better to become buzzard bait than die in an old folk's home.

At Window Rock, I stare through the window in the rock. I stand by the statue of a Navajo Code Talker, pay homage to men whose language the Japanese could not decode in World War II. We whitefolk stole native land; natives saved our white asses. Not exactly a fair trade.

I sit and talk with a couple of old guys. They see my white beard and ask for toys from Santa Claus. They suggest that I cool off in the museum, stroll the library. When I come out, they are still there. They offer me a cigarette. I decline. I offer them a stick of jerky. They accept. As I begin to leave, they ask me what I'm doing. When I tell them, they are amazed at my stupidity. They bite their tongues to keep from saying what they think about the whiteman's foolish ways. I hand them my card. It says Ronald L. Grimes, wandering fool, whiteman, old goat, Ph.D. They howl with laughter.

Fort Defiance was established in 1851 so the U.S. military could control Navajos. I walk past it. It is no longer a fort. Now it is called *Tsehootsooi*, "green place among the rocks." We settlers don't understand Diné any more than the Japanese did. For us monolinguals, all languages other than English are "code talk."

I decide to head to Four Corners, where New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado meet. If I do what limber tourists do, I can stretch and put a foot or hand in all four states. If I do what old-timey Mormons used to do, I could stand here and not be arrested for polygamy. If I'm in no-man's land, which state's laws apply?

Since I'm not a tourist or a polygamous Mormon, I'll do an old-man spin, sit in the middle, and whizz on my bony ass through four states. I stop with my feet pointing east. I win on the gambler's wheel. In front of me is eastern life, behind me is western sunset. I am facing the right direction for the resurrection. I'll live to finish this pilgrimage and set out gleefully with Colorado on my left and New Mexico on my right.

I'm tempted to follow the road. The walking would be easier, even though the distance is greater. But I have to stay true to the basic principle of the journey: walk the dotted line, not the road. A hundred- and forty-five-mile walk, and I'll have to swim four times.

I pass Dulce, NM, on the south. I could visit the headquarters of the Jicarilla Apache Nation or go there to gamble at the Wild Horse Casino, but I've already won once doing the gamble's spin at Four Corners, so I'll quit while I'm ahead. (I'm getting weary, making too many excuses.) I keep going until I pass Edith, CO, and discover another "side" of New Mexico. The Yellow Brick Road drops south, then east. A boring triumph.

I pass Raton, NM, and remember the most fantabulous burritos that I ate there. If I sneaked off the dotted line to get one, I couldn't get up. I'd fall asleep, fart, and want more.

I hurry past Branson, CO. I could easily walk the 3/10 mile. But why go? Population 74. I'd scare the entire town. Could I go there and ship myself collect by UPS back to Clovis? Would the truck follow the Yellow Brick Road? Probably not.

I pass Wheeless, OK. My wife sends me a text asking, "Are your brains scrambled by the hot sun? Are your wheels falling off?" I could hike over to the Great Plains Bunkhouse, pull the axles and all my wheels would fall off. Then people at the Mexhoma Church could burn me, ship my ashes home, or bury on the lone prairie.

I walk south. Just north of Texline the surveyor's ruler jogs right. The New Mexico border slips two miles into what looks like

Oklahoma. What did the surveyor's pencil bump into? What was it going around? A cow blocking a surveyor's transit? A ranch? A Comanche who stood his ground? A forefather's grave? Texline must be a sibling of Texico. They lie precisely on the state line. Maybe they are magical towns, superstructures lying liminally in the spiritual universe.

I am now passing through the *llano estacado*. I saw these words on a geographical map in junior high and asked my teacher what they meant. In a few days she brought a photocopy of a letter written by Coronado dated October 20, 1541. The letter said,



“I reached some plains so vast, that I did not find their limit anywhere I went, although I travelled over them for more than 300 leagues...with no more land marks than if we had been swallowed up by the sea...There was not a stone, nor bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a shrub, nor anything to go by.”

The next day the teacher told our class that Coronado and the conquistadors were searching for cities of gold. She said New Mexico history is full of myth. When the conquistadors crossed the *llano*, they became so disoriented that they began driving stakes into the high, flat ground so they could find their way back out.

“Like Hansel, Gretel and the breadcrumbs?”

“Yes, just like that,” she said.

“Where is this plane?” we asked.

“You are standing on it.”

I arrive at Texico, barely alive, where the circumambulation began. The square is now circled. I'm proud, but Dad's ghost sits on the train tracks mocking me, “I'm eating watermelon and

listening to country music while you labored without pay for no good reason. You're a fool, boy. You need practice. Come back and try it again."

The Muse

Roger Singer

he was drawn in

where stars speak

to clouds

as they danced

in a store

unaware

to a song

fondly

remembered,

chasing him

while gathering

images

as he

drank the

moment,

eyes fixed,

two roads

crossing in a

meadow,

where she

remains,

the muse

of all words

there are

The Old Chief's Bones

James G. Piatt

The old Chief's bones, the remains of sad tokens of his life, clatter in a silver urn, rattling like old memories. They wait in silence to be scattered in a sand grave in the desert.

Death hovers over the blue-mountains like a mysterious mist, as the oxidized bones of the old Chief, are covered with the fragrance of sweet wildflowers, wafting into the air over the desert grave.

Inside a small cavity under a granite boulder, the eerie song of a rattlesnake mesmerizes the recycled atmosphere eulogizing the Chief's death in the minds of griever, and warns them of a sense of finality and impending uncertainty.

Tradition

James G. Piatt

Ancient mantras echo off the grains of sand like a Gregorian chant of long forgotten recollections peeling from ancient bronze bells. As leather clad dancers spin, red, orange, and yellow feathers flutter like colorful butterflies in the breeze. The dancers become covered with the powder of stone and long-lost memories.

Drumbeats reverberate against blue mountains causing a sudden melancholy in the minds of those who watch the dancers. They understand that the lessons of the past are embedded deeply in the lore of the circle, and the dancers, and tradition will only continue if the past is cherished.

They listen in a trance sitting in the beat of the drums and the pulse of their hearts. They hear the ghostly mutterings of long dead voices of the ancient people of truth.

They understand that one can only hear dream-messages by being one with the reverberations echoing from the circle into the inside of their souls, only then can they know they truly exist.

My Father's Eyes

Sierra Beverly

Looking down at the world, standing tall on the edge of a cliff with his hands gripping his hips, he feels the rush of adrenaline slowly begin to fade like the silencing of a heartbeat.

The world, stretched out in front of him like the quilt on the lap of the omnipotent, seems endless with opportunities lurking behind every tree. The road wind along the cliffs and far down below, a car passes silently.

He is miles high in the air, his hands worn raw from the grating rock he scaled and the rough grip of the rope. His pupils were dilated, his eyelids stretched far back, and eager to take in every inch of stretching wilderness.

He is standing at the edge of his world and at the beginning of mine.

From high above the clouds, he can look through the world and let his eyes brush ever so briefly against the sides of my house, following the trail I beat on concrete paths and through the seats of buses to get to my middle school.

He can watch me like the god figure he is.

But his eyes turn away.

I am a speck, a reflection of a different life.

The man standing on this cliff is not my father, but a climber, a god. The man who walks through the door and looks down at me with crystal blue eyes is a nothing less than shadow, a reflection of the empowerment he breathes.

He is brave, he is reckless, but when his eyes expand and watch my world fall down in light of his own, he is eternal.

His eyes reflect his rush of adrenaline, the feeling of being alive, so strained when I see him again. His eyes are weary and longing to return to the energy he felt when he was there to begin with.

In the scope of his world, I am a silent mouse to be ignored.

The business of my world longs to keep up with him, desperate as my feet clamber along the asphalt in attempt after disappointing attempt to get him to take him with me.

The feeling reflected in the endless eyes of my father are not mine to have.

His pupils have returned to the tired size of normalcy and the rush of living has faded into a dull, forgettable throb. He stands with his shoulders starting to droop with exhaustion and he turns.

The sharp winds push him toward the trail back down and with every step, he descends back into my world, his eyes a little grayer than before.

The Restless Chilanga

Hareendran Kallinkeel

Yes, he'd heard the sound, distant, a light jingle; yet, distinct, like a whisper in his ear.

Manav turned, peeling his skin from the floor's stickiness. His sweat, mixed with grime collected on cement, served as a film of slow-drying adhesive. Sitting up, he listened.

The jingle became urgent, persistent.

"Can't you hear?"

Manav looked around. A whiff of warm air tickled his nape, a springy coil of his long hair brushed against his ear.

The noise grew louder, more piercing.

"Are you so deaf that you couldn't locate the source of a sound?"

Manav stood up, groped for the switch, and flipped on the light. He gazed at his wife, asleep on a single bed. Her face looked gloomy, her closed eyes a bit sunken. For the past few days, she hadn't been eating as much as she would've wanted. Their only daughter in their teenage, also seemed to have lost weight.

Within a few days, food would be hard to come by.

"Can't you see, even in light?" *Was someone raising the voice, speaking for his sleeping wife?*

Manav's eyes fell on his *chilanga*, hanging from a nail on the wall. Those anklets, made of red cloth with small bells studded on them, embellished his feet when he performed as an oracle in the sacred groves that housed small temples of various deities.

"Wear us on your ankles."

The voice felt cold, menacing. Manav walked gingerly towards the wall and retrieved the anklets. His body shivered a

little at the metallic touch of the bells on his fingers when he fitted the ornament to his ankles for the first time in about a month.

“We can’t bear this idleness,” the anklets spoke in unison. “These months are the season, and you’ve no care in this world that the *theyyams* are waiting. Those deities, you know their ire; they’ll unleash their wrath on you and your generations to come.”

Perspiration broke on Manav’s forehead. “But, I’m helpless. The disease is catching up fast, and the city has been locked down. I’m not even allowed to go out.”

“What disease?”

“I don’t know, it’s got something to do with last year.” He wished his wife were awake. She’d be remembering the name. Having studied till Grade 12, she was smarter than him, though he’d never acknowledge it.

“Now, don’t try to shield your laziness with the excuse of a disease.”

“I’m not lying.” If he knew how to operate his wife’s handset, he could have shown them the proof; scenes unfolding every day in the city, the state, the nation, and across the world. “It’s like a calamity; maybe the end of *Kali Yuga*, this era of evil. The world’s coming to its doom.”

“We don’t care when the world comes to an end. We just want to dance with our deities, get their blessings. So, take us to a *Kavu*, where we can get some fresh air and rid ourselves of the restlessness that’s killing us. After all, it’s only three or four months we get the chance when it’s the *theyyam* season. Rest of the time, we’re rotting here without complaining.”

“Don’t speak like them masters,” Manav shouted. “You talk about entertainment, while these four months mean my sustenance. The remaining time, I spend looking for some job. Do you have any idea what it means to me, not being able to

perform?" People offered money to the oracles, as a tribute to the gods, for the predictions they made, answers to mounting concerns: the construction of a house, marriage of a daughter, education of a son, cure of a disease...

Over and above the payment he received from the *Kavu*, the additional money helped him to barely sail through the off-season months. Now, temples shut down, the gods wouldn't venture out. Even as he contemplated about the days ahead, Manav felt a tight clasp inside his guts. He barely had 500 rupees with him now. With no work, a bleak, dark future stared at him.

"What masters?" The anklets' question shook him out of his reverie.

Manav walked towards the door. The anklets kept jingling. "The rich people, they'd have piled up all they want and more. Nothing bothers them."

"Well, we do see your problem. You appear to be in real trouble."

"You know," Manav said, taking a deep breath. "I'd planned to sell five cents from this property so that we can repair the house. Now, with no materials and workers in supply, what'd we do?" The property was in his wife's name. But the anklets had no business of knowing it. In fact, despite being fair-skinned and handsome, he'd married an average-looking scrawny girl just because she'd inherited thirty cents of land from her father. Now, the sale deed wouldn't work out.

They'd have to spend the oncoming monsoon season under a leaking roof.

The anklets fell silent.

Manav walked towards a coconut palm at the border of the fencing. Parting the thick growth of foliage, he picked up a bottle of desi arrack, an illicit brew. The bootlegger had charged him five-hundred rupees for half-litre, double of what he needed to pay for

a pint of rum under normal circumstances. But then, conditions were no more normal, and that son of a bitch would make some money before the disease was over, or the world ended. *What the fuck he'd do with the money if it were to be the latter case*, Manav wondered as he uncorked the bottle.

“Oh,” the anklets cooed together. “So, this was what brought you outside?”

Manav took a long swig of the liquor and shook his head before he spoke. “You know, it brings an anguished man some relief, rouses his spirits. Otherwise, he'd go crazy.” He knew, the money meant a lot. It'd fetch their groceries barely for a week. But he'd heard that the state and central governments would supply some essential food items for the poor. So, that part of the worry taken care of, they'd at least have something to eat.

“Yeah,” the anklets said. “We'd heard you many times, when the spirit overwhelmed you; we'd also heard your wife too, when spirits took control of her.”

“Those spirits that possess her...” Manav emptied the bottle a single go and shook his head again. “Those are evil ones. Then... then, she becomes a demon, a woman in control...”

The anklets giggled.

Manav took an involuntary step, then another.

The anklets jingled, the sound urgent, persistent. “Let's dance.”

Manav felt his head spin. “Yes, let...us...”

Suddenly, he spun around with the practiced grace of a ballerina and stomped his feet on the ground. “Let's perform; the *thandava*.”

“Yeah,” the anklets cooed in unison.

The *samhara thandava*, the dance of death, began.

“To the annihilation...” the oracle chanted, “of all evil, the end of all diseases.”

The anklets jingled in tandem.

The danse macabre lasted till the first orange streaks of a blooming sun tainted the far horizon. Manav continued to spin, and then collapsed to the ground, his head reeling.

“Are you alright?”

Manav tried to open his eyes. A foggy image danced before him. Smirking, he raised his upper torso and held his palms together in salutation.

“Father, it’s me.” Laughter, pure, innocent, like the sounds of a gleeful stream, flowing in joyous abandon, its waves lapping against shining rocks...

Manav rubbed both his eyes with the back of his hands. The films of haze, clouding his vision, slowly dispersed. Leaning forward on his arms, he vomited onto the bushes lining their front yard.

A pungent aroma hit his nostrils. No, it wasn’t the stench of frothing frustration that he’d just disgorged. It was a savory odor, like the scent his wife carried on their wedding night, when he snaked onto her dark skin for the first time. She’d never again smelled the same.

“Oh, father, you’ll spoil my tomatoes.”

Manav stared into the bushes, saw the tomato plants; about a dozen of them bearing tiny red fruits crowding their stems like bunches of rubies.

“Cherry tomatoes,” his daughter said. “I planted them a few weeks ago. You know, those sell at 200 rupees a kilo in the market.”

“Really?” he didn’t hide his surprise.

Beyond the tomato plants, his eyes locked on a large strip of unused land with clusters of weeds thriving on its fertility.

End

Cancer Dancers

David Lewizky

The Naked Circus is in town
They've brought the cancer dancers
The lovely, brittle, cancer dancers
White hair flowing, Ice pick arms

They weave and sway and dance in circles
Until the circles disappear
And those circles are our eyes
By Christ Bojangles

What haunts us is emerging
With an unkind artistry
We're stripped, our houses danced to ruins
Our children nowhere to be found

Hope's gone, we keep on hoping
Dreams done, we dream

Our eyes transform us as we attend each other
Fatalistic and despairing we bear witness
To our wrinkled knees, our stricken faces
Our quivering, slack, and lumpy asses

The Seven Deadly Sins

David Lewizky

AVARICE

I had a business once
Made a mint of money
Not all that honestly
Trampling clouds and stars

Lost that business
Again, a tad illegally
I walked uneasily
On scorched and naked ground

All that money
Down the tubes
Nada. Gone. Goodbye

I miss
That money

PRIDE

In the moral conflict
Between pride and self-effacement
Pride's a crème brulee
Self-effacement's jello
Pride parades its weapons
Self-effacement seeks out shadows
Pride's a clerestory
Self-effacement's mud

GLUTTONY

All my life
From boy to man
To alte-cocker

I've been the noble pig
The valiant over-eater
Lord Never-Enough
The Earl of More-More-More

I can't swallow the universe
And so I weep
My immortal appetites
Will surely make me
Universal

LUST

She has an air of neediness about her
She trusts me
So what

She's bitter from betrayal
She's doing this to punish someone else
I dont care

Although she craves me and adores me
Does everything I want
She'll never matter much to me

It is my preoccupation
My determination to commit
Again, and yet again
This most radiant of sins

SLOTH

Sometimes I dream myself
A Medieval cloistered monk
My life laid out for me
Designated hourly devotions
Enthusiastic piety and prayer

Truth is: I'd rather stay in bed
Take a vow of indolence
Skip prayers

I am Everyman
Brother to all mankind

Just let me grab a few more z's

ENVY

When my poet friends
Receive awards and the acclaim
That has always eluded me
I support them
Wish them well

But all the time I'm thinking
May their faces become dart boards
Their tongues break out in blisters
Their tonsils
Turn to worms

ANGER

Because nobody calls me
Messiah Dave
I'm Nazi Dave
Destroyer of my race

Because I'm not so loveable
I'll walk out on my family
Torch my house
Write my children off
Slander my wife

I'm not so pretty
I declare myself
The President of Ugly

Give myself a hate parade
In the harsh confetti rain
In the familiar streets
I'll run down everyone I can
In my bitter limousine

Such thoughts come to me
Warm me up and comfort me
As I cozy up to rage

Light Escapes the Street

Charles Haddock

The party spilled out into the shadows of an intimate back yard that was crowded with sago palms and fragrant, ghostly gardenias, towering tulip trees, and feathery California peppers beaded with coral-pink pearls. It was a cool, clear evening, and thin steel clouds hung low over the distant, verdant heights on the fading northern horizon, bringing to mind the sacred Chamundi Hills. A gentle, humid breeze carried raw sea air to the modest, middle-class neighborhood. For Mahesh, the sunken lights of the city and milky atmospheric haze, the serenity of night that allowed the suburb to breathe easily, to yield entirely to the evening ablutions in anticipation of revels, was, in such a celebratory setting, a benediction, an avowal, a blessed shelter from the inescapable disorder of daily life. Warm silver swale of comfortable homes and yards, retaining an elusive boom town feel, between the sea and the multitudes, the tropical foliage like a familiar theme.

Mahesh sat on an aluminum and nylon-cloth lawn chair remembering the freezing winters in Europe, the burning Southern India heat, water oozing from the skin like ink, bats chasing the green and honey-colored swarms of insects—but here, the climate was kind, the subtleties consisting of proximity to the sea, the effort of the breeze, the angle to the sky, the deviations in elevation. Even the towering palms looked as tranquil and well-groomed as domestic animals. Mahesh, a shadow among shadows, tasted the rarest of elixirs: the perfect moment. He could remember only one other like it. When he was nine years old, he watched two small children, a girl and a boy, playing in a park across the street from the grand hotel where he and his family were staying in Geneva. The two children romped about with a large black poodle that sported a little, white, star-shaped patch on its back like an emblem of fortune. Rain was falling, and

the children's clothes were soaked, but they were heedless of the water cascading from the sky. He lifted the sash of the tear-streaked mahogany window and heard them laugh and sing:

“Libellule, libellule, comme un jouet coquin . . .”

Nothing else in the entire world existed for him at that moment. Just the two happy children in the rain, the big black dog with the white spot, and the smell of the wet, narrow, paving-brick-covered streets of upright, magisterial Geneva.

Two vermilion dragonflies skated in a ritual mating dance over the shrubbery surrounding him, prodigious eyes attesting to their prodigious awareness and attainment. *Libellule, an onomatopoeic word.*

He thought about George Harrison's "Beware of Darkness," a song he had heard for the first time only a few days earlier. Maureen, his girlfriend Terry's younger sister, had played it for him on her stereo, excitedly assuring him that he would love it. His reaction to it was surprisingly strong. An almost physical sense of melancholy took hold of him, as he listened to the tune and reflected on the lyrics. He had long been aware that darkness awaited him, held at bay by the thinnest of doors, but whether the darkness was real or illusory he still couldn't say. His evening's perfect moment passed.

Ferd and Juan began the search for Mahesh's car in a district between Venice Boulevard and the Santa Monica Freeway known to house studio space and lots of seedy activity on the fringes of the entertainment industry, a labyrinth of indistinguishable warehouses and garages, Quonset huts and cold storages, the occasional low-lying, shell-like, reinforced concrete and lava rock office building, but no car, no Mahesh, no sign of suicide or foul play, just sidewalks and parking lots parked up with logoed pickups and idling rigs, shiny Buicks and Cadillacs jockeying for shade beneath the narrow windows, silent, bone white walls, and corrugated, temporary-looking steel casks.

“Looks like a movie set around here,” Ferd said to Juan.

“Yeah, but it’s not. At least not most of the time. ’Cause maybe some of this has shown up once or twice in a street scene or on some third-rate black an’ white TV show. But personally, I wouldn’t wanna be walking around here with a camera. At least not without checkin’ it out—and getting the categorical ‘go ahead’—from some people’s people first, you know. You’ve got some pretty nervous types in the vicinity, and I wouldn’t want to have to be dealing with any of their friends. Catch my drift?”

Security guards in starched white, and cops, both in uniform and mufti, were parked in the most conspicuous places, staring them down through opaque, oversized sunglasses. They stayed rigid and unsmiling as they checked out the young strangers in their aging sedan, just making sure they weren’t Weathermen, or cult members, or maybe some state or federal licensing-proceeds collectors nosing around where they shouldn’t be.

“Thinking that it’s not goin’ to be real helpful asking ’em anything about Mahesh,” Ferd said.

“Like what? ‘You guys seen some super-friendly dude with a beer in his hand wandering around your property?’”

“Guess not.”

“Maybe if you threw in something about his parents being rich...”

They stopped at a Safeway to use a pay phone, checking in with roomie Ali to see if he had any updates to give them on Mahesh. Panic and near-total deafness on Ali’s end (he had lost most of his hearing serving in the infantry during the Six Day War) made the conversation almost worthless. A lot of “what?” and “no,” and repeating the same questions over and over. Juan ended it by hanging up on Ali mid-sentence. No news; except for Ali’s inability to handle the situation. The mystery growing.

“Guy’s come completely unglued,” Juan said. “Almost makes me wonder if maybe he did something to ’im.”

“Think that’s possible?”

“Nah. The guy’s just feeling helpless. All this is way out of his league.”

“Ours, too.”

“Yeah, but who else is going to be out lookin’ for the dude? The cops clearly don’t give a damn.”

“They would if he was smoking weed in the park.”

“Yeah. Let’s chase the ’heads. Got nothing else to do.” Juan shook his head.

“Welcome to Mr. Reagan’s California.”

“I’m getting a bad feeling about Mahesh.”

“Me, too, Juan. I always thought the guy had too much sense, too much good karma, to get into any trouble.”

“This is L.A. Better be walkin’ around with more than just good karma.”

“Hey, he’s been everywhere. We’re not talkin’ about some kid. He’s lived all over.”

“‘All over’ is nothing to this scene.”

“Where the hell could he be?” Ferd said, as he recalled the California pepper trees along Centinela that had died after an extended cold snap, while a row of almost identical-looking acacias planted with them survived unscathed. An arboreal realization of Matthew 24:40, or something like that. Perhaps just another example of the unfathomable workings of chance, the unfortunate pepper trees ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Has anybody called Terry?”

“Yeah, I talked to her before I came to meet you,” Juan said as he turned up a side street. “Terry said she hadn’t seen or heard from him since their breakup. She thought that maybe he went out into the desert to sulk. Didn’t seem too worried about the possibility of him killing himself over her. Said she didn’t think it was ‘culturally congruous,’ or somethin’ like that. But she said she’d let us know if she heard anything from him.”

“Great.”

“I’ve contacted Nate Mavro and Susan Marx from his department at school, and I’m trying to track down his advisor and some others in his program. I’ve also called Chen Yeneng and Paul Kunyiha from the International Student Association. And Dr. Sinclair and Sal Marquez. But so far, nobody knows anything.”

“Weird how people just wander away,” Ferd said. “Man, I really hope that he did go out into the desert, or the mountains— or wherever—just to sulk for a while. ‘Cause, hey, there are so many maniacs runnin’ around this town.”

“Mahesh would trust anybody, too, I’m afraid.”

Disgorged back into the mainstream, up and down busy boulevards lined with music shops, and head shops, and flower shops, Christian bookstores and adult bookstores, steak houses and taco joints, banks, and bars, and beauty parlors, cheap apartments for drifters and dreamers on the crowded upper floors, past plate glass windows jammed with paint cans, safety uniforms, work boots, and waterbeds; the bright canvas awnings, an accident involving a mail truck and two drunk teenagers on a motorbike, the little prostitute with bleached blond hair who was ravenously eating a burger and wearing some sort of orthopedic underwear that peeked out over the waistline of her hip-hugger jeans, the optimistic, shiny filling stations, the well-dressed pushers dealing out of overcoats in the twilight between sidewalk and alley. Music clubs. Strip clubs. Eateries. The Starlight Café. The Rabbit Moon Chinese Buffet. The Beefeater Room, known

throughout the polis for its catchy slogan: “Our trash pickers eat better than the bankers in New York.” The old grills and coffee shops being pushed aside by chain restaurants—streets losing their cardboard-thin souls—and the classic joints becoming a bit too acquiescent, like washed up movie stars. Everyone holding out that irresistible promise: a night of comfort and no regrets. But underneath the Space Age glass and chrome, the clownish colors and twenty-four-hour illumination, the faintest hint of a Spanish-Mexican past, or at least a Don Diego de la Vega version of it, picturesque pantiles, and curling wrought iron, and wooden beams, and faded stucco. One story apartment complexes on every side street, little villages fitted out with unused playground equipment and guaranteed suitable parking. Gaslight Courts, Bel-Air Courts, Sahara Courts, Tiki Courts, gold and pink and aqua, built after the war, their crude functionality imparting to them a slightly punitive air, like over-carbonated knock-off cola or instant coffee crystals. The straight-man irony of the “vacancy” signs. The precincts between the suburbs and the inner-city always the first to go, buried under foam plastic takeout trash and non-returnable bottles, swimming in acrid auto exhaust and a dreadful Nixonian atmosphere of abandonment and decay.

And the return of the warehouses, the endless, anonymous warehouses. The light and shadow constantly shifting under partly cloudy skies. And finally, the residential hives of Westside L.A., tract houses and rentals by the thousands, date palms and fan palms; and beyond them, near the 405, well-built apartment towers from the twenties and thirties, stucco and sunburned brick, stone and aluminum flourishes, facing the remote sea, refusing to be Lot’s wife and turn their gaze upon the smog and congestion, the endless half-century sprawl. Worn out in the end by the traffic and the total lack of clues as to Mahesh’s possible whereabouts, they headed back to Palms and the postwar motel of a dingbat apartment colony that Juan and his wife Sara called home.

The place smelled faintly of oven cleaner and the rubber insulating material in the dusty, pinch-pleated drapes. Ferd

cooled his heels at a pink plastic dining table on an unsteady tulip base that was encrusted with paste and glitter from an ill-fated art project, as Juan shuffled and banged about in the rental's tiny kitchen. Juan was pouring iced tea into tall, anodized aluminum tumblers, when Ali, Mahesh's roommate—the now hysterical, hearing impaired, Jordanian engineering student—called. He had devastating news for Juan and Ferd.

Juan yelled into the phone: “What? What’d you say? That’s insane. You’re making this up. No way. And they’re sure it’s his car? But, what...? And so why didn’t they contact you yesterday? Wasn’t it registered to that address? And...? No way. No way. A TV. Where’d it come from? Jeez. Oh, my...Okay. How? Okay, yeah, calm down. Calm down. Listen, I’ll come by for you in a few minutes. I said I’ll come by and get you...I’m on my way! On my way! See you in a few...bye.”

“What?”

“Holy shit!” Juan, red-faced, his hands tugging at his curly hair, could hardly speak.

First to himself: “Wonder where Sara is?”

Then to Ferd, “Mahesh is dead. No, for real dead. His car hit a light pole. They’re saying it’s his car, absolutely. But before he hit the pole, a TV fell out of a pickup truck and skipped right through his windshield. Yeah, right into him. He didn’t have any identification on him, and the damage to his head and upper body’s so bad that it looks like, like, until his medical and dental records and all that stuff arrives from Switzerland, and with his dad on the way but just leaving Europe—anyway—the police want Ali to go down and see if the clothes, and watch, and belt are his. Yeah, Mahesh’s. Ali’s sure it’s him, ’cause who else would be driving his car? So, Ali wants me to come with him, and he really doesn’t sound like he can do it alone. Damn! Ever seen somebody hit in the face by a TV doing, like, thirty? Neither have I—’til now.”

“Hey Juan, I’m coming with you. Gimme the keys, I’ll drive.”

Alcohol plays a role in most accidental drowning deaths. From the top of the jagged rock face overlooking the beach, Ferd could see three ambulances and a cluster of squad cars, their lights flashing in the dawn. A swarm of policemen, most of them in uniform, had already erected wood and nylon-netting barricades festooned with yellow caution tape. The body was lying at the shoreline, and the filmy tide nearly reached it, advancing and retreating like a wary onlooker. It was covered by a sheet, but the sheet was wet, and Ferd could see, from the cliff above, black swimming trunks, the only clothing on the body that lay below. Somebody said it was a teenage boy who wandered away from a party the evening before. The body looked twisted and tormented underneath the thin white sheet, as if the unfortunate boy who wandered away had been wrestling all night with an angel. Ferd remembered observing the drowned boy against the untidy sea, in the cold, steady rain and turbid mist, on a desolate taupe and tawny beach near Santa Cruz, remembered it as he and Juan Montes made their way to Mahesh through congested lanes teeming with itinerant souls engaged in buying and selling, proliferating and forgetting, bestowing and dying, in the city of beguiling strongholds, overshadowed dominions, and expectant, uninhabitable thrones.

Backyard Beatitude

D.S. Twells

Putney, Vermont

The moment the summer of '68.
The place the lawn, backyard.
The day clear, bright, warm.
Surrounding terrain all hills and green.
The time early afternoon.
The times. . . the times desperate.
Especially desperate spent alone.

So friends gather. On folded legs,
in a silent circle, they contemplate
peace, and pass from hand to hand
the joint, and together smile, and glow.
Hearing the crickets, touching the breeze,
each knows exactly what the other feels.
For every creature. Compassion. Love.

About to go. Journeys uncertain.
Ends unknown. They smile. They glow.
This is the moment they've been given.
Just before they leave. Two
to India. Ethiopia three.
Nepal another. And not one. . .
not yet one. . . to Viet Nam.

First Born

Lisa Low

The first is the most thrilling: the stomach grows great; the breasts expand, rigid with increase of milk. The nipples stand to show the baby where food can be found. Aches and pains abound. The need to pee comes often. Dreams develop. You gather books. Decipher clouds. Wonder about the milk. If his football-sized head will bump against you as it blindly tries to kiss you. Late nights, your husband leans a curious ear, listening for signs of life.

Dearly beloved, inside this narrow room, you are my darling, my own. Already I love you to the end of time. I will care for you like a mother, solicitous. There will be no one like you, not even your father, whom I love as much. Today the three of us were here together. Tonight we two will roll through the dark. Into that still-forming flower-funnel that arrests you when it hears, I will whisper your possible names. Dearly beloved, I can hardly wait for you to be born.

Chronoscope 94: I Want to Night Wander

John Walsler

I want to night wander:
where not even coyotes and owls
the smallest insects with the biggest sounds
know my footsteps, my gravel shuffle
along a narrow road:

I want to walk until the rust sun
follows my back into brightness.

While You Past Midnight Sleep

John Walsler

for Julie

While you past midnight sleep:
the cool of August cotton sheets:
the darkness fills with nouns:

perfume: clay: the window
I stand naked at to feel the center
that exhales: the heatless breeze:

your skin: a gift: the moon
the trees colorless as ink.

Astronaut

Benjamin Schmitt

I never realized how each breath
on earth is a love letter
until I left
now I just have this machine
turning my piss to air
on a journey
to the newly discovered planet
alone in this discarded cufflink of a trillionaire

Frasier is such an awful name for a planet
who would want to live there
then again who would want to explore it
from a ship called *Spiderman 8*
I miss the hippopotamus
red rock canyon head rising from the water
glaring through adobe eyes
I miss the giraffe
long neck catapulting the sky into place
I miss the wolf
that furry murderer capable of a yelp
demon-leg-snatcher playing with the pups

I won't arrive for another year
I'm in good health
reading all of Shakespeare's plays
sometimes I see Iago outside the window
I'm the first human to leave the solar system
but out here there's no way to stay human
just a fast asteroid with memories
hurtling through space
making off with a rich man's gear

Sweet Moment

Deanna Lovelace

We always go at night. I'm never sure how long we drive on the big Dallas highway because I usually doze off. I'm only 7, snuggled in the back of our '64 Chevy Chevelle with my sister, 3 years younger. My dad drives while my mom hums to Hank Williams and stares out the passenger window. We seem so happy. I try to stay awake, looking for the dark building in the distance, but I wake up as we pull into the parking lot to the fresh baked aromas wafting through the car vents. Years from now there are seatbelts...but not yet.

When I asked dad why he works at night, he said because his shift is when they bake the bread and pastries. They call it Graveyard. Sometimes dad just takes our only car. But other times we bring him to work so mom can keep it, and we get to go inside the building. I never know what kind of day it will be. As we get out of the car, the big concrete factory loomed like a tomb with black clouds gathering overhead. The sky is dark, and the air is thick. A storm will come...but not yet.

When I asked dad why they had to bake the bread at night, he said so it would be fresh in the stores first thing in the morning. I love mornings. I love waking up to a fresh start of a new day and think maybe today our parents won't fight or my sister won't cry. When we enter the tomb, the giant scary machine monsters are so loud, screaming at each other. It makes us want to cover our ears and find a place to hide until the battle ends. The fun part about going inside is that we get to pick a donut right off the assembly line. Years from now there are health laws and regulations to prevent you from doing this...but not yet.

When I asked dad why the bakery is called "Mrs. Bairds" and not just Bairds, he said that the "Mrs." meant the woman who started it is married. I wonder if she has children. I wonder

if they are a happy family and get to come take their pick off the assembly line. As the donuts move along to their destination, our anticipation grows. My sister is afraid of the giant monsters, but not me. Just like apples from our kitchen table, I reach among the commotion and quickly grab one for each of us. This yummy chocolate delight is hot, moist and soothing, so much better than when they come in plastic packages. From the moment it enters our mouths, we feel like happy children. If only this feeling could last. It is hard to believe that something so good can come out of such turbulence and chaos...but we do.

Years from now, this building will not be here. It will no longer be a safe place. It looks so strong, but it cannot survive the coming storm. It will crumble and break apart...but not yet.

For now, we simply enjoy this sweet moment.

Rough Start

Emily Priddy

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Morgan sat on the plush carpet next to her bed, arms wrapped around her legs, hiding her tearstained face in her knees.

“You don’t have to talk,” Daddy said, “but I had a pretty hard day, too, and seeing my favorite girl sad makes me sad. If I promise not to ask any questions, can I sit in here and be sad with you?”

Morgan sniffed. “I guess,” she said without looking up.

She heard the rustle of cloth as Daddy lowered himself to the floor next to her. He didn’t say anything. Morgan sniffed again. Kindergarten was supposed to be fun. Everybody said so. She’d been looking forward to it her whole life, and on the very first day, her stupid crying had already ruined it.

“They hate me,” she mumbled into her legs. She sniffed harder. Daddy nudged her.

“Here.”

He touched her hand with a Kleenex. Morgan took it and blew her nose. Daddy took the soggy tissue from her and dropped it into the wastebasket next to her nightstand.

“They all hate me.” Morgan looked at Daddy out of the corner of her eye. He remained quiet, watching her. “We were supposed to make name tags, but Mrs. Montgomery said I wrote my name wrong because I did it in cursive, even though I wrote it the best I ever wrote so it would look pretty, and the other kids thought she meant I was stupid and didn’t know how to write my name, and then she made me erase it and print it instead, only I couldn’t erase it all the way because the tag was too slick, and she wouldn’t let me have a new name tag, and then we went

to recess, and a boy called me stupid, and I was about to tell him I wasn't stupid, but then I had to cry, and Maria called me crybaby and told everybody not to play with me, and when I was screaming, Mrs. Montgomery thought I was having a tantrum and made me go to timeout until I could settle down, and when I stopped crying, my head hurt, but she didn't care and just said that's what I get for throwing tantrums, and I spilled my milk in my lap at lunch and Maria told everybody I peed my pants even though she knew I didn't, and nobody likes me and everybody thinks I'm a stupid baby and my name tag looks messy and I hate school and Mommy says I have to go back tomorrow but I'm never going back there ever and you can't make me." Morgan's voice dissolved into sobs.

Daddy put his arm around Morgan. Her shoulders shook as she cried. Daddy pulled her onto his lap and nuzzled her hair. "You had to cry this morning?"

Morgan nodded.

"They should have come and gotten me." Daddy's voice was stern. "Did you ask them if you could come to my office?"

Morgan shook her head. "I didn't know where it was. I said I wanted my daddy, but Mrs. Montgomery said you were busy, and nobody else's daddy worked at school, so it wasn't fair to let me go see you just because I was having a tantrum." She tried not to cry. She'd cried too much today already, and her head still hurt. "I wasn't having a tantrum, Daddy. I just had to scream. You know sometimes I just have to scream."

Daddy hugged her tightly. "I know you do, Sweetie. And I know you wouldn't throw a tantrum because you know that's not a good way to get what you want."

"Why did Mrs. Montgomery think I was having a tantrum?" Morgan looked up at Daddy. He looked mad. She hoped he wasn't mad at her.

“She doesn’t know you,” he said, his voice even. “She’s used to dealing with little kids who aren’t as mature as you are and don’t know how to act. She doesn’t know about your crying, and when you were screaming and she couldn’t hear any sound coming out, she probably thought you were just mad because Maria called you a name.”

“But she didn’t even ask,” Morgan said. “She could have asked.”

“She probably didn’t think she needed to,” Daddy said. “Sometimes people don’t know what they don’t know.” He grabbed another tissue from Morgan’s nightstand and wiped her face with it.

“She made me mess up my name tag,” Morgan said. “And Maria lied about me. I hate her.”

“That was a mean thing for Maria to do,” Daddy agreed, “but don’t hate her. It takes too much effort to hate people, and it always hurts you more than it hurts them. Did you tell Mrs. Montgomery that Maria lied about you?”

“I didn’t think she’d listen,” Morgan said. “She already thought I was a baby. And I was afraid Maria would just do something worse if I got her in trouble.”

“Tell you what,” Daddy said. “I’ll talk to Mrs. Montgomery tomorrow and explain about your crying, so she’ll know you’re not a baby. You can come to school early with me tomorrow, and I’ll show you where my office is. If you feel the tears coming on again, you can tell Mrs. Montgomery, and she can send you down to my office. If Maria picks on you again, tell Mrs. Montgomery, and if she doesn’t do anything about it, I’ll have a little talk with Maria myself.”

“But what about my name tag?”

Daddy looked at Morgan very seriously. “You like being a big girl, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Part of being big is learning to pick your battles. I think right now, making sure Mrs. Montgomery knows what to do when you cry is more important than fixing your name tag. Don’t you agree?”

“I guess.” Morgan was disappointed. She thought Daddy could fix everything.

“OK. Then let’s not worry about the name tag right now. I’ll talk to her about your crying, and if Maria does something mean again, you can tell her about it. But let’s not ask her for anything else right now. The first week of school is pretty busy for teachers, and if you ask for too much at once, you might make her think you really are a baby.”

“But I’m not a baby.”

“I know you’re not. You’re my big, brave girl, and you’re going to go to school tomorrow and show everybody that you’re my big, brave girl—right?”

Morgan sighed. “I guess so.” She rubbed her face. “Daddy?”

“Yes, Morgan?”

“I cried too much. My head hurts.”

“I’m sorry. Do you think some hot cocoa with peppermint in it would make it better?”

Morgan shrugged. “It might,” she said.

Daddy smiled. “Let’s go test that theory.” He stood up and held out his hand. Morgan took it, letting him pull her to her feet.

“You know what, Daddy?”

“What?”

“I love you.” Morgan hugged his legs.

Daddy picked her up and kissed her cheek. “I love you, too, Morgan.”

Free TV

Acrylic on canvas

Emily Priddy



So...if we get married

Caitlyn Winkler

we will have to live in a big house

of course

and we will have five kids?

no way

but we will travel the world

definitely

and you will love me
forever?

I will love you forever.

My Brother, the addict

Caitlyn Winkler

It started with candy and
a personality too big to contain.

It ended with alcohol-induced delusions and
constant threats of suicide.

Did you know that alcohol can induce delusions?
I didn't.

I believed him when he called me
in the middle of the night and told me
"I killed somebody."

My heart fell out of my chest.
The sweet baby who I held in my arms-
The rambunctious toddler who introduced himself to everyone he met-
The confused young man who had some kind of future—
Didn't he have some kind of future?

He sobbed into the phone and
I believed him.

That night I googled
"Missing persons"
and
"Can alcohol give you hallucinations?"

My mother called him "the little politician."
Making conversation with strangers was so easy for him,
even at five years old.

But, easy conversations with strangers
lead to so
much
more.

Especially in a town with nothing to do.

What they don't tell you
is that with each relapse,
you begin to wonder if recovery
is even attainable.

And the addict you love swears
that he will get clean and
you believe him.

He harms
everyone. Even
himself.

I lie awake—
My mother lies awake—
My father lies awake—
My grandmother lies awake—
My sisters lie awake—
Waiting for the only phone call that will
end this once and for all.

To Hades

Veronica Morgan

To find the world full of the unknown
with your body, flesh covering bone:

You must travel through the storm
of warring wind and swirling swarm

into the raging air that descends
down to plains that have no end

To find the path you wish to go
you must climb down, down, down below

Beneath the stone that lies at your feet
into the earth you will silently creep

Slipping down through the cracks in the rocks you will find
without your nose, you are blind

You must follow the stench of the dead
it will take you to the place you most dread

Rotting and decay is your only map
do not trust your eyes for there is only black

If traveling straight, you will finally see
the land of the dead, where spirits run free

The light there is pale and grey
but stick to the path, do not go astray

If you do you will find out
why some souls just roam about

At the end of the path a castle stands
and now your time is close at hand

El Portal

Each step forward seals your fate
as you continue through the gate

The dark underlord will watch you trudge
as you walk towards him, your final judge.

Are you guilty or are you true?

Now that, my friend, was all up to you.

A Muggy Day

Veronica Morgan

in the mornings i am filled with warmth
but by the time evening comes i am left cold and empty
it happens every day
sweet blissful mornings turn lonely
when i am dumped into the cool steel walls
of my prison cell
the betrayal i face
leaves a chip on my shoulder
but i am the fool i always forgive
i let myself be used again and again
every morning my stained ceramic body is left
for dead
until someone comes along for tea and coffee
only to leave when it's all gone.

A Monster Often Confused for Another

Cody Wilhelm

After a while you realize
that even though you were right
it doesn't mean you're okay.
Just because you may be made up
of broken parts; doesn't mean
you can harm any less.

Your eyes may be empty
but your tongue is potent,
forked and silvered
with an arsenal of words
and a grey palate.

You are cynical;
you are cherished.
Destructive in your genesis
beautiful in your lies.
You are a tarnished soul
equal to all but evil.

You are a familiar stranger.
You are no devil;
Although people
may think you are.

Your form is our form
your sins are our sins.
You are human;
A monster often
confused for another.

Intoxicating

Cody Wilhelm

Just because your demons
are less remarkable than mine
doesn't make your voice my vaccine;
but that doesn't mean
I want you to stop.

Run all your tired narratives
through my head.
About conquering love
and paradisiac paroxetine.
You're perpetual optimism
intoxicating;
tangle me in your hope,
until I forsake myself
again.

The Month After

Cody Wilhelm

One look
and I can tell that
It's one of those days.
Where you're a husk,
you feel like a million pounds,
you feel like you could be
unraveled by the breeze.

You hide beneath your skin
your eyes have such a distance
for someone so young
and I feel like I'm losing you.
I shout every word I can think of
just to get through to you
but all I do is scare you
once you come too.

We never talk anymore.
You're scared of my voice,
of my touch.
You start to slip away again
and recoil as I reach for your hand;
I just want to be your anchor
but you only feel safe
when you disassociate.

Because that's the only place
where he can't touch you.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

DANNY BEST

Danny Best is a retired cook and truck driver who is now a poet and actor. He sees poetry as an opportunity to communicate and connect with all kindred spirits in a way that may offer good practical food for thought, but also in ways that will encourage readers to go beyond their own normal comfort zones and explore other subject matters that they may not have previously considered. He usually writes from his own memories of personal life lessons or tries to tap into lingering dreams found within disheveled pillowcases.

ZACH MURPHY

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories have appeared in *Peculiar Magazine*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Ghost City Review*, *Lotus-eater*, *Crêpe & Penn*, *WINK*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Door Is A Jar*, and *Yellow Medicine Review*. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

YUAN HONGRI

Hongri Yuan (b. 1962) is a Chinese mystic poet and philosopher. His work has been published in journals and magazines internationally in the UK, USA, India, Mexico, New Zealand, Canada, and Nigeria. He has authored a number of long poems including *Platinum City*, *The City of Gold*, *Golden Paradise*, *Gold Sun*, and *Golden Giant*. The theme of his work is the exploration about human prehistoric civilization and future civilization.

TIMOTHY DODD

Timothy Dodd is from Mink Shoals, WV, and is the author of *Fissures, and Other Stories* (Bottom Dog Press, 2019). His stories have appeared in *Yemassee*, *The William & Mary Review*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and other places. He has placed poetry in *The Literary Review*, *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*,

Roanoke Review, and elsewhere. Also a visual artist, Tim's most recent solo exhibition, "Come Here, Nervousness," was held at Art Underground in Manila, Philippines. His oil paintings may be sampled on his Instagram page, @timothybdoddartwork, and his writing followed on his "Timothy Dodd, Writer" Facebook page.

DANIEL BARBARE

Danny P. Barbare has recently appeared in *Plainsongs*, *High Plains Register*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Blue Unicorn*. He resides in the Upstate of the Carolinas where he attended Greenville Technical College. His poetry has also been nominated for the Best of the Net by Assisi Online Journal. He lives with his wife and family and sweet dog Miley.

GARY BECK

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger, and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes, and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 34 poetry collections, 14 novels, 3 short story collections, 1 collection of essays, and 3 collections of plays. Gary lives in New York City.

ANNA FELLS

Anna Fells is a psychiatrist living in the Southwest. One of Anna's essays is also published in *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and she is currently working on a novel. She extends her deepest gratitude to two women mentioned in the essay: Carolyn Flynn, the coach, and Susan Erickson, the director of the play. Their encouragement, empathy, insight, and invaluable instruction have gotten her walking down the right path. Finally.

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Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com)

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JAMES TYLER

James Tyler earned a BA in English from Auston Peay University. He has been published in journals such as *Blue Moon*, *Doubly Mad*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and *Chiron Review* among others. He currently resides in Nashville, TN.

DUANE ANDERSON

Duane Anderson 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 *The Pangolin Review*, *Fine Lines*, *The Sea Letter*, *Cholla Needles*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Poesis Literary Journal* and several other publications.

LAINE DERR

Laine Derr holds an MFA from Northern Arizona University and has published interviews with Carl Phillips, Ross Gay, and Ted Kooser. Recent work appears or is forthcoming from *Barzakh*, *Santa Clara Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere.

CATHERINE EVLESHIN

Catherine Evleshin lived in the Rio Grande Valley and remembers the vastness. Her writing appears in *Among Animals2* (Ashland Creek Press), *Canary Journal of Environmental Crisis*, *Fiction Vortex*, *The Festival Review*, *Literary Veganism*, *Gemini Literary Magazine*, *Tiny Seed* and elsewhere.

LEN KRISAK

Len Krisak's two most recent books are *Say What You Will* (original verse) and a complete translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. He has placed poems in the *Hudson Sewanee*, *Anitoch*, and *Southwest Reviews*, is the recipient of the Richard Wilbur and Robert Frost Prizes, and is a four-time champion on *Jeopardy!*

JAY LEE ELLIS

Jay Lee Ellis teaches creative nonfiction writing and publishing at the University of Colorado. He holds graduate degrees in writing and literature from UT Dallas and New York University and has published three scholarly books. His work has appeared in *Hobart*, *Juked* and other journals, and is forthcoming in *Noon*.

JOHN DAVIS

John Davis is the author of two collections, *Gigs* and *The Reservist*. His work has appeared recently in *DMQ Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *One*, and *Rio Grande Review*. He moonlights in blues and rock and roll bands.

MILLICENT EIDSON

Dr. Millicent Eidson writes stories inspired by a career as a public health veterinarian with CDC and state health departments. Another story, *El Chinche*, received honorable mention in the 2020 Jim Martin Mystery Story Contest sponsored by the Arizona Mystery Writers. Dr. Eidson is a workshop leader with the Burlington (Vermont) Writers Workshop and a member of the International Women's Writing Guild.

DIANE WEBSTER

Diane Webster enjoys the challenge of transforming images into words. If she can envision her poem, she can write what she sees, and her readers can visualize her ideas. That's the excitement of writing. Her work has appeared in *Home Planet News Online*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal* and other literary magazines.

SOPHIA VESELY

Sophia Vesely, 19, is from St. Petersburg, Florida. She is currently taking a gap year before her matriculation to Swarthmore College in the fall of 2021. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *W-Poesis*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *The Fiction Week Literary Review*, *The Blue Marble Review*, *Writer's Egg Magazine*, *Bandit Fiction*, *Brown Bag Online*, *Girls Right the World*, *Bridge*

Ink, Route 7 Review, Down in the Dirt, Poetry Pacific, Oddville Press, Triggerfish Critical Review, and Delmarva Review. She also has a published poetry collection on amazon.com entitled “The Road to Amour de Soi” that explores the complexities of first loves and heartbreak in order to empower young women through the notion of self-love.

MARK MELLON

Mark Mellon is a novelist who supports his family by working as an attorney. He has four novels and seventy short stories (many as reprints) published in the USA, UK, Ireland, and Denmark. His short fiction has been recently published in *Thriller Magazine, Tigershark, Lovecraftiana, and Into the Ruins.* His novella, *Escape From Byzantium,* won the 2010 Independent Publisher Silver Prize for SF/Fantasy. More information about his writing is available at: www.mellonwritesagain.com.

BILL WOLAK

Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for magazines such as *Phoebe, Harbinger Asylum, Baldhip Magazine, Barfly Poetry Magazine, Ragazine, Cardinal Sins, Pithead Chapel,* and *The Wire's Dream.*

SARA KINARD

Sara Kinard is a proud student at Eastern New Mexico University who is majoring in English with a BA in Secondary Licensure. Her goal is to have her novels give readers a place where they can escape and discover new worlds as well as challenge themselves to think beyond her writing and question what is going to happen next.

DR. BILLY ALSBROOKS

Dr. Billy Alsbrooks is an award-winning poet, motivational speaker, and author of the top-selling book *Blessed and Unstoppable: Your Blueprint For Success.* A former Billboard charting music artist,

producer, hit song writer, and on-air personality, Dr. Alsbrooks has spent the last 4 years inspiring people to become the best version of themselves. He's one of the top motivational speakers in the world, with his YouTube videos having a combined total of over 32 million views. His book has been sold in over 29 countries. In 2019, he was awarded an honorary doctorate for his tremendous impact around the globe.

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 words, those who plan out every page, and those who hear voices. He is the latter. For 37 years, Mike has memorialized the real events of people he has encountered in his many travels. He is the president of North Avenue Publishing, and the last, surviving founding member of the Windy City Writers Club formed in 1984.

ROGER CAMP

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books, including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight, Thames & Hudson, 2002*, and *Heat, Charta, Milano, 2008*. His work has appeared in numerous journals including *The New England Review, Chicago Review*, and *New York Quarterly*. His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC.

RANA BITAR

Rana Bitar is a Syrian-American physician, poet, and writer. She earned her Master's in English from SNHU. Her poetry and essays have appeared in many journals. Her poetry chapbook, *A Loaf of Bread (Unsolicited Press, 2019)*, was a finalist in the Concrete Wolf Chapbook Competition in 2017 and won an honorable mention in the 2017 Louis Award for poetry. Her memoir, *The Long Tale of Tears and Smiles*, will be published by *Global Collective Publishers* in the spring of 2021. She lives in upstate NY where she practices hematology and oncology.

CATHERINE STANSFIELD

Catherine Stansfield's work is featured or is forthcoming in *The MacGuffin*, *Mount Hope Magazine*, *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*, and *The Virginia Normal*. She has a BA in English from Caldwell University in New Jersey. Currently, she works as a graphic designer and publishing assistant and continues to live in New Jersey along with her husband and their cat, Ollie.

MIALISE CARNEY

Mialise Carney (@mialisec) is a writer and MFA student at California State University, Fresno. She is an editor at The Normal School, and her writing has appeared in *Hobart*, *Brevity Blog*, and *Atlas and Alice* among others. Read more of her work at mialisecarney.com.

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Alexander P. Garza is a Mexican-American poet in the graduate Program for Writers at the University of Illinois—Chicago. His work has appeared in *Toyon*, *Indianapolis Review*, *Dissections*, *Star*Line*, and others. Visit him on Instagram/Twitter, @alexanderpgarza and <http://alexanderpgarza.com>.

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Stephen Scarano was raised at the now defunct Walker Air Force Base in Roswell and worked on the *El Portal* committee prior to his 1969 ENMU graduation. Following service as a Marine Corps artillery officer, he retired as a police Captain with a thirty-year career in southern California. He's an active Trail Angel on the Pacific Crest Trail and a Dust Devil for a large regional coast-to-coast trail park in San Diego County.

JOSH BRUNETTI

Joshua Brunetti lives in Connecticut where he serves the public as a Probate Court Clerk and teaches part-time at two community colleges as an adjunct professor of both English and Public Speaking. New to being published, his poems have

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Jonathan Ferrini is a published author who resides in San Diego. He received his MFA from UCLA in motion picture and television production.

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Milton P. Ehrlich, Ph.D., is an 89-year-old psychologist and a veteran of the Korean War. He has published poems in *The Antigoniish Review*, *London Grip*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *Descant Literary Magazine*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *New York Times*.

DAVID ROMANDA

David Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. His work has appeared in *Gargoyle*, *Hawaii Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *PANK*, and *Puerto del Sol*. David's chapbook, "I'm Sick of Pale Blue Skies," is slated for publication in spring 2021.

PAUL BLUESTEIN

Paul Bluestein is a physician and a blues guitar player who lives in Connecticut with his wife and the two dogs that rescued him. He began writing poetry and short stories in 2018 and since then his work has appeared in many online and print publications including *The Linden Avenue Literary Review*, *The Broken Plate*, *Third Wednesday*, *El Portal*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Sunlight Press*. His first full-length poetry collection—*Time Passages*—was released earlier this year by Silver Bow Publishing.

GLORIA KEELEY

Gloria Keeley is a graduate of San Francisco State University with a BA and MA in Creative Writing. Since her retirement, she writes every day and has recently taken up photography. Her work has appeared in *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *El Portal*, *William and Mary Review*, and other journals.

RONALD L. GRIMES

Ron Grimes is an American Canadian author who has written several books on ritual, including *Deeply into the Bone*. He is co-editor of the Oxford Ritual Studies Series. Recent creative nonfiction essays include “The Backsides of White Souls” in *Canadian Notes and Queries* and “Disarming Boys” in *The Canopy Review*.

ROGER SINGER

Dr. Singer is the Poet Laureate of Old Lyme, Connecticut. He has had over 1,200 poems published on the internet, in magazines, and in books and is a 2017 Pushcart Prize Award Nominee. He is also the President of the Shoreline chapter of the Connecticut Poetry Society.

JAMES G. PIATT

James Piatt is a retired professor and octogenarian who lives in Santa Ynez, California with his wife Sandy in a replica 1800s eastern farmhouse in the foothills. He was nominated for a Best of Web award and three times for a Pushcart award. He has had 4 volumes of poetry, “The Silent Pond” (2012), “Ancient Rhythms” (2014), “Light” (2016), and “Solace Between the Lines” (2019), and over 1,480 poems, 4 novels, and 35 short stories published. He earned his BS and MA from California State Polytechnic University and earned his doctorate from BYU.

SIERRA BEVERLY

Sierra Beverly, currently 19 years old, is an English major with a minor in secondary education at Eastern New Mexico University. She plans on using her degree to teach English as a foreign language overseas. When she was growing up, her father was the person she wished to impress the most, although with difficulty due to absence. Her mother raised her, and she hopes to be as half as good a teach as her mother is now in the future.

HAREENDRAN KALLINKEEL

Hareendran Kallinkeel writes from Kerala, India, after a stint of 15 years in a police organization and five years in the Special

Forces. His recent publications include *New Reader Magazine*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Phenomenal Literature*, *Manawaker Podcast*, and *Bryant Literature Review*. His stories are forthcoming in *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Lalitamba Journal*, *Aaduna*, and *Modern Literature*.

DAVID LEWIZKY

David Lewizky is an 80-year-old retired social worker/family therapist living in Buffalo, New York. When he was a young man, he studied under Charles Olson, his free-spirit father. He resumed writing poetry in 2002 after a 35-year hiatus. He has had about 125 poems published in a variety of litmags such as *Nimrod*, *Seneca Review*, and *Passages North*. He has work forthcoming in *Slant*, *La Presa*, and *Up the River* among others.

CHARLES HADDOX

Charles Haddox lives in El Paso, Texas, on the U.S.-Mexico border, and has family roots in both countries. His work has appeared in a number of journals including *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Folio*, and *Stonecast Review*.

D.S. TWELLS

Retired from a career in university fund-raising, D.S. Twells continues to write and pursue interests in languages and literature.

LISA LOW

Lisa Elaine Low's poetry has appeared in many literary journals including *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *American Journal of Poetry*, *Evening Street Review*, *Free State Review*, *Good Works Review*, *Phoebe*, *The Potomac Review*, *Delmarva Review*, *Broken Plate*, and *Tusculum* among others. She is co-editor with Anthony Harding of *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press in 1994). She received her doctorate in English from the University of Massachusetts and spent twenty years as an English professor, teaching at Cornell College; Colby College; and Pace University. Visit her at lisalowwrites.com.

JOHN WALSER

John Walser's poems have appeared in numerous journals including *Spillway*, *Mantis*, *The Normal School*, *Water-Stone*, *December Magazine*, and *Lumina*. His manuscript *Edgewood Orchard Galleries* has been a finalist for the Autumn House Press Prize (2016) and the Ballard Spahr Prize (2020), as well as a semifinalist for both the Philip Levine Prize (2016 and 2017) and the Crab Orchard Series First Book Award (2017 and 2018). An English professor at Marian University—Wisconsin, John is a four-time semifinalist for the Neruda Prize.

BENJAMIN SCHMITT

Benjamin Schmitt is the author of three books, most recently *Soundtrack to a Fleeting Masculinity*. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Antioch Review*, *The Good Men Project*, *Hobart*, *Worcester Review*, *Columbia Review* and elsewhere. A co-founder of Pacifica Writers' Workshop, he has also written articles for *The Seattle Times* and *At The Inkwell*. He lives in Seattle with his wife and children.

DEANNA LOVELACE

Deanna Lovelace is a current ENMU graduate student pursuing a Master of Arts in English. She graduated from ENMU in 2011 with a BS in Elementary Education and has taught elementary grades for several years. She lives in Artesia, NM with her husband. She has 3 grown children and 5 grandchildren. Her first career was dedicated to the education and development of her own children, along with directing a children's choir and working with handicapped children in Equestrian Special Olympics. Her hobbies include reading, writing, hiking, boating, and spending time with her family.

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.

CAITLYN WINKLER

Caitlyn Winkler's obsession with storytelling began long before she could write for herself. She loves to experiment with genre and form and has recently begun to delve into the world of creative nonfiction writing. Caitlyn has found the practice of exploring her relationships through writing to be intensely therapeutic.

VERONICA MORGAN

Veronica Morgan is a current ENMU senior with too little time and too many words to tell. The words mostly get thrown out the window like the plants she can't keep alive, but every once in a while some of them stick and a poem or story is created. Her current motivators are tea and horror podcasts.

CODY WILHELM

Cody Wilhelm is an English Major attending ENMU. Cody enjoys writing poems in his free time; his pieces attempt to capture universal human experiences and express intense emotional reactions to various interpersonal relationships. Cody is from Lubbock, Texas.

A black and white photograph of a canyon with layered rock formations. The rock walls are steep and show distinct horizontal strata. The lighting creates strong shadows and highlights, emphasizing the texture and depth of the rock. The sky is a uniform light gray.

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